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10 Art Works You Must See At The 2017 Whitney Biennial

Adam Lehrer – MAR 14, 2017 @ 12:00 PM

Ajay Kurian, *Childermass*



“Something gets so close to not being, that’s when it becomes radically powerful and evocative. When a shape is just about to take form or when it is just about to disappear, it becomes beautiful,” once said Baltimore-born, Brooklyn-based artist Ajay Kurian. That quote makes sense when viewing Kurian’s Biennial contribution *Childermass*, an installation of humanoid sculptures that currently are assembled alongside the rails in-between The Whitney’s spiral staircase as if climbing up the building itself. Kurian worked as a curator before he started exhibiting his own work in 2011, and brings that curator’s sensibility to the way he assembles these pieces. He adorns his menacing and surreal characters, including children who are part animal and part machine, moon men, and a chrome chameleon (that Kurian views as ‘open, changeable, and tyrannical’), in a variety of subtext imbued pop cultural objects. The objects look akin to the subjects of Francis Bacon paintings placed in a contemporary setting; grotesque and mutated figurines adorned in streetwear. One such character wears Nike sneakers and a white t-shirt, key markers of laid-back American streetwise cool. A matronly female character

wears sweatpants capris, much like the ones you see worn by alcoholics in rehab. Somewhere up this chain of figures, a loose and incommunicable narrative is formed. For some reason, while looking at this installation I found myself wondering that if a nuclear bomb went off or a chemical weapon was released that altered our bodies, would our belongings remain the same? Perhaps I'm way off base in my reading, but I enjoy art that leaves me with such off-putting responses.