

The New York Times

Picturing America in the Selfie Age, at the Whitney

By Holland Cotter
April 28, 2016

A year ago, the Whitney Museum of American Art inaugurated its new downtown home with a permanent-collection showcase called “America Is Hard to See.” Its successor, the even more immediately engaging “Human Interest: Portraits From the Whitney’s Collection,” is now on view. Astutely geared to the selfie age, it might well have been subtitled “Americans Are Strange to Look At,” which, in the 250 images here, we sure are: funny-strange, beautiful-strange, crazy-strange, dangerous-strange, inscrutable-strange.

Spread over two floors, the display of paintings, photographs and drawings reconfirms the richness — and the geographical limitations — of the Whitney’s holdings. And while pointing up the built-in unwieldiness of big shows on broad themes, it demonstrates the ways in which skillful curators — in this case, Scott Rothkopf and Dana Miller, working with Mia Curran, Jennie Goldstein and Sasha Nicholas — can organize work in porous modules that have a manageable logic of their own.

Right off the seventh-floor elevator, you get a sense of the variety to come. Henry Taylor’s near-life-size 2007 painting of Huey P. Newton, a Black Panther founder seated in militant majesty, hangs near Laurie Simmons’s fantastical photograph of a camera with dancer’s legs, a 1987 tribute to a treasured fellow artist, Jimmy DeSana. The suave, white-suited man named Steve in Barkley L. Hendricks’s 1976 painting of that name, radiates every bit as much star-power as Elvis Presley does in a double-panel Warhol homage, and he’s treated with a lot more respect than is the busty, grinning title figure in Willem de Kooning’s “Woman and Bicycle” from the early 1950s.

The de Kooning is a tipoff that the seventh floor has the show’s older material, with a concentration of it inside the first gallery. Robert Henri’s 1916 painting of a lounging-but-alert Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the museum’s founder, is here, as is a late-1920s self-portrait by Edward Hopper, one of the museum’s foundational artists, looking rakish in a battered fedora and a shirt that matches his azure eyes. He seems far less chipper wrapped in the embrace of his wife, Josephine, in a 1933 photo by Louise Dahl-Wolfe, one of dozens of small works in this space, most hung salon-style on a central wall. Cecilia Beaux’s 1902 charcoal sketch of the matinee-idol violinist Jan Kubelik is one of the earliest and finds its match in refined, smoldering ardor in Paul Cadmus’s 1937 ink likeness of the ballet dancer José Martinez.

For sheer theatricality, though, a 1929 Toyo Miyatake photograph of the Japanese dancer-choreographer Michio Ito, staring balefully from behind long bangs, stands out. It gains particular intensity when it is remembered that Ito, who had a successful career in the United States, would be arrested within 24 hours of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, falsely accused of espionage, and interned for two years before being shipped back to Japan.

Celebrity couldn’t prevent this artist’s downfall, though it has elevated far lesser talents and is enough of an American obsession to warrant including two galleries devoted to it in this exhibition. The one on the seventh floor presents the phenomenon in formation, notably in Edward Steichen’s movie-star close-ups of Marlene Dietrich and Dolores del Rio, and Carl Van Vechten’s 1934 studio shots of the African-American performers — all, interestingly, unnamed — from the cast of the Gertrude Stein-Virgil Thomson opera “Four Saints in Three Acts.”

Downstairs on the sixth floor, in a gallery labeled “Price of Fame,” glamour gets updated and starts to run underground, with everyone wearing and living some version of drag, from the transgender performer Candy Darling, dying of cancer and vamping in a hospital bed for Peter Hujar’s camera in 1973, to a defiant Amy Winehouse in Rachel Harrison’s posthumous 2012 colored-pencil drawings. An extraordinary 2013 figurative sculpture called “No Sex, No City: Miranda,” by the young New York artist Stewart Uoo, incorporates dead flies, maggot cocoons and dust into an image of disintegration that is also a virtuosic star turn.

The city itself, ever falling apart and resurrecting, takes a bow. A seventh floor gallery called “Street Life,” has us walking its sidewalks with Diane Arbus, Helen Levitt and Jamel Shabazz, and riding the subway with sneak picture-snapper Walker Evans. In an adjacent section called “New York Portrait,” we move

indoors, with a 1940 Hopper sketch of a male office worker and a secretary sharing a tense, possibly steamy evening of overtime and a 1978 photo of Cindy Sherman impersonating a perky gal Friday whose only obvious eccentricity is wearing blackout glasses while she types.

In a terrific 2015 painting by Leidy Churchman called “Tallest Residential Building in the Western Hemisphere,” we’re high above the fray, seeing the urban skyline rise like a mirage over the edge of a big pink bathtub framed by a floor-to-ceiling window in an apparently empty apartment. Like many things in the show, this picture translates to multiple thematic contexts. It would fit perfectly in the gallery called “Portraits Without People,” which treats likeness as a form of still life. There the photographer Dorothy Norman evokes the personality of Alfred Stieglitz, her lover, in a shot of his hat and coat. A modest-size Robert Rauschenberg collage — the show’s single loan piece — packs lost lives into its shockingly deteriorated layers of newspaper clippings, photographs and fabrics. In a large-format 2011 photograph by Leslie Hewitt, a book, lying on the floor in an empty room, carries entire American histories in the single visible word of its title: “protest.”

On both floors, the show ends with politically loaded installations. The final section on seven, “Cracked Mirror,” includes bizarre portraits and portraittlike images of vulnerability and mortality dating from the A-bomb era of the early 1950s and painted by artists now too-seldom looked at: John D. Graham, Stephen Greene and John Wilde. The concluding section on six, “Institutional Complex,” is about an American culture of violence in the present.

This is directly addressed in Robert Beck’s poster-size photographs of teenage mass killers, and indirectly in Gary Simmons’s now-classic 1993 sculpture of a police lineup platform equipped with a row of gold-plated basketball shoes. (More of Mr. Simmons’s work is in the not-be-missed group show, “March Madness,” organized by Hank Willis Thomas and Adam Shopkorn and on view through Sunday at a new gallery, Fort Gansevoort, nearby at 5 Ninth Avenue.)

Finally, the Beck and Simmons works surround a 1995 sculpture by Mike Kelley, a tabletop architectural model that combines features of every educational institution — kindergarten through art school — that he ever attended. He implies that he considered himself the product of this vast prisonlike complex, and the show pushes his reasoning further to suggest that the cultural impulse to violence is institutionally inculcated, nurtured and encouraged.

That’s my reading of the installation, anyway; you’ll have your own, just as you’ll have your favorite images from this cornucopian exhibition. Mine include Lyle Ashton Harris’s sublime self-portrait as Billie Holiday; Yvonne Rainer’s video of a ballet performed entirely by her right hand; Saul Leiter’s 1950s photograph of a shoeshine boy’s worn-down shoes; and Nicole Eisenman’s mocking self-portrait drawing titled “You’re Only ½ the Artist You Could Be! And a Little Less Than ½ as Weird as You Think You Are!”

Fittingly, a show that’s big on weird and basically all about ego, ends with a shrewdly monumental example of both: a larger-than-life wax portrait of the artist Julian Schnabel by Urs Fischer. You’ll find it on the sixth floor, near the terrace. There Mr. Schnabel stands, hands in pockets, dressed in painter’s duds, regarding his own reflection, along with that of Manhattan behind him, in an enormous mirror. Easy to miss at first is the small flame, a real one, burning atop his head. The spark of inspiration? The fire of genius? The sculpture, it turns out, is a giant candle, lighted daily, and slowly melting. Before this collection show finishes its run, comes down and is replaced by another, the portrait will be, if not entirely gone, melted beyond recognition, like a selfie snapped in bad light. So much, the piece seems to say, for the power of personality and the permanence of art, and its fashions and values, which is a healthy message for the Whitney to deliver in its new home.

Correction: April 30, 2016

An art review on Friday about “Human Interest: Portraits From the Whitney’s Collection” at the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan, which includes a sculpture by Gary Simmons, omitted an organizer of the group show “March Madness” at the nearby Fort Gansevoort gallery, where more of Mr. Simmons’s work can be seen. Besides Hank Willis Thomas, Adam Shopkorn also organized it.