

HYPERALLERGIC

May 13, 2019

Initial Thoughts and Highlights from the 2019 Whitney Biennial

by Zachary Small

What not to miss at this year's edition of America's most important survey of contemporary art.



Jeffrey Gibson's "PEOPLE LIKE US" (2019) in front of an installation of photographs by Elle Pérez (photo by Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

The 2019 Whitney Biennial is about the state of American culture and how contemporary artists are responding to the conditions of living in a country with increasingly inequitable social stratifications.

Curators Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley have overrun the Whitney Museum with an exhibition of archaeological proportions; history has become the artist's primary medium. The past is an anchor excavated, polished, and re-presented as something startlingly new. The triumph of Trumpianism has forced artists to reexamine their own estrangement from broader culture. And although postmodern pedagogy often demands that we displace dominant narratives or overturn them completely, artists today are finding their way back to center in a reassertion of their control over this country's peripatetic sense of self.



Martine Syms, “People Who Aren’t Friends or Lovers or Exes” (2019) (photo by Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

Humor is an important tactic for the artist’s insurrection, allowing them to destabilize hierarchies of power without becoming as combative as the institutions they seek to dismantle. Prominently featured on the sixth floor, Martine Syms leads the charge with an installation called “People Who Aren’t Friends or Lovers or Exes” (2019), which includes her video “Intro to Threat Modeling” (2017). Narrating through emails, screengrabs, and a digital avatar, the artist outlines the concept of “threat modeling” — a process of identifying risks to determine the utmost threat to one’s own security. The Los Angeles-based artist’s work often takes aim at Black stereotypes and how people of color relate to them, sussing out the psycho- mechanics of these interactions through a conceptual framework. Here, she approaches the topic with comedic zest, roleplaying into some of these tropes to show how ridiculous they are.

The sculptor Ilana Harris-Babou is another standout artist at the biennial, where the Brooklyn native is showing a trio of satirical films exploring the relationship between race, politics, and consumerism. “Reparation Hardware” (2018) is a delightfully smarmy sendup of the luxury furniture brand Restoration Hardware. Onscreen, a cow urinates as the artist describes searching the land for America’s most authentic histories. Harris-Babou paws a weathered piece of wood, saying that she admires how it can be a physical marker of the past. Later, she speaks about 40 acres and a mule, asking what reparations would actually look like as she smashes nails into a plank with a clay-clodded hammer.

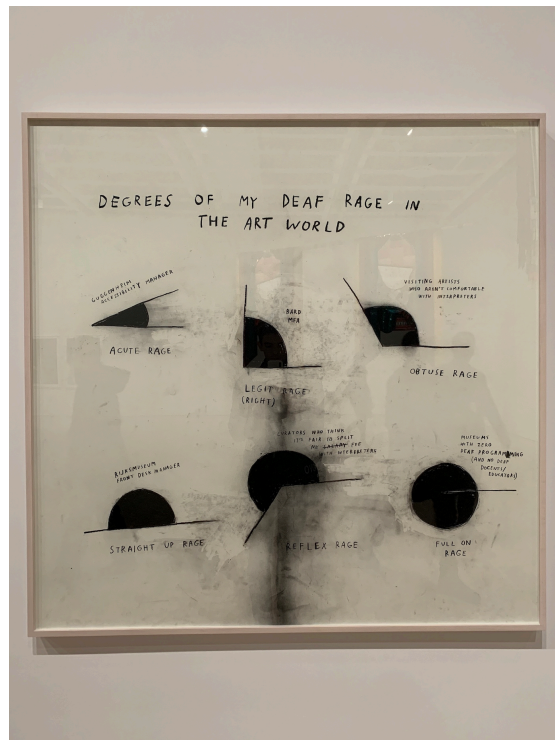


Nicole Eisenman, "Procession" (2019) (photo by Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)



Detail view of Nicole Eisenman's "Procession" (2019) (photo by Zachary Small/Hyperallergic)

Nicole Eisenman brings her oddball comedy to the Whitney's terrace, where a parade of downtrodden cartoons mope across the city skyline. "Procession" (2019) includes a variety of sculptures languishing in the outdoor elements. Some are made of yarn and burlap; others consist of cotton duck, butcher's wax, and sand. The cohort includes a lazy bald eagle lounging in a crate and a character that the wall text simply describes as a "Man at the Center



Christine Sun Kim, "Degrees of Deaf Rage in the Art World" (2018) (photo by Zachary Small/Hyperallergic)

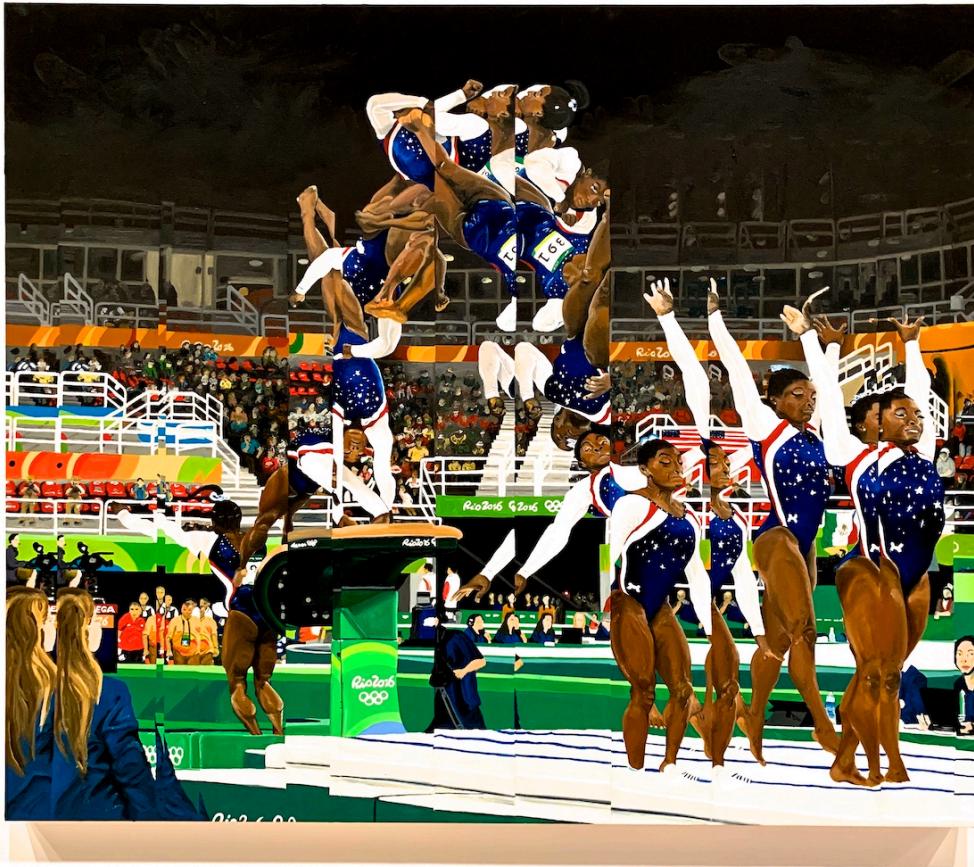
of Men" (2019).

Elsewhere, Jeffrey Gibson has hung large textiles from the ceiling with text on them stating “stand your ground” and “people like us.” The Native American artist pulls from his heritage in his works, combining a variety of aesthetics and fabrics (sequins, quilts, fringes, etc.) into whimsical celebrations of solidarity. Nearby, the artist Christine Sun Kim displays a variety of charcoal drawings representing the different degrees to which she experiences “deaf rage,” the frustration of a deaf person who must navigate through a world that privileges able-bodied individuals.



Installation view of three works by Elle Pérez (photo by Zachary Small/Hyperallergic)

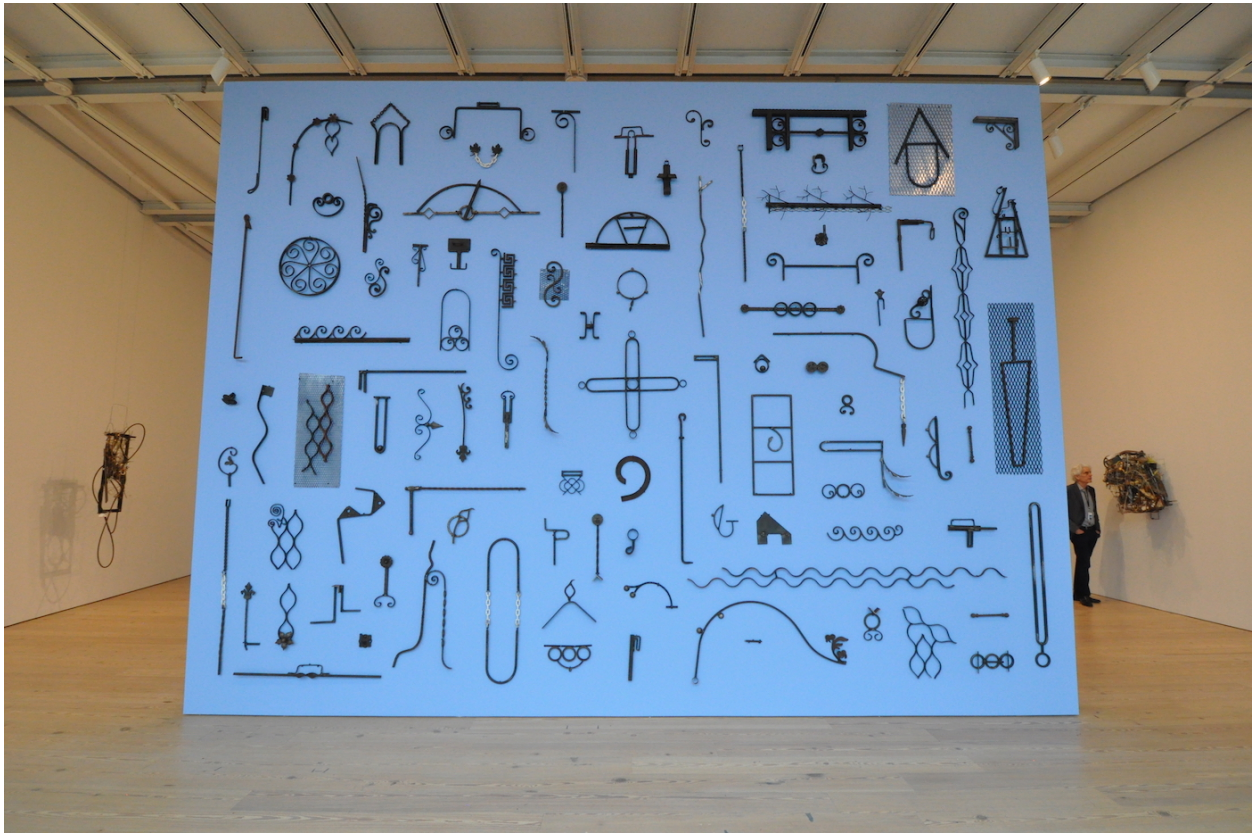
Alongside their admirable (and successful) efforts to diversify the biennial’s roster of artists, the curators have also chosen works that strengthen the lineage between younger artists in the cohort and more established artists. The dramatic and confrontational tone apparent in Elle Pérez’s photographs resembles the aesthetic approach of earlier artists like Sarah Lucas. One of their works, “Dahlia and David (fag with a scar that says dyke)” (2019), looks like a direct reference to Catherine Opie’s famous 1993 “Self portrait/Cutting” photography.



Jeanette Mundt, "Born Athlete American: Simone Biles I" (2017) (photo by Zachary Small/Hyperallergic)

There were also attempts to wade into the cultural zeitgeist. Jeanette Mundt's paintings focus on the gymnastic achievements of Olympians like Simone Biles, Aly Raisman, and Laurie Hernandez. Fractured into glitchy segments like a television monitor on the fritz, Mundt captures the elastic movements of her subjects and the media fracas that surrounded them during the international athletic competition and after. Aesthetically, the works reference Eadweard Muybridge's nineteenth-century motion photographs and Marcel Duchamp's pioneering "Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2" (1912). Emotionally, Mundt's paintings are an expression of all the mitigating circumstances these young women athletes have faced — nationalist, sexist, and technocratic obstacles that underpin the very sport they represent.

There's so much more to say about the 2019 Whitney Biennial, which will be covered in a full review at some point in the near future. Artists are hitting their stride with video works and innovating with new technologies and crafting materials. Performance has officially gone from a genre on the periphery to the forefront of the cultural conversation. And as expected, the Kanders controversy has impacted the tone and content of the show. It's clear that artists are awakening to their dual roles in society — not just as cultural interpreters but as interlocutors of political discourse.



Maia Ruth Lee "LABYRINTH" (2019) (photo by Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)



Installation view of Gala Porras-Kim (photo by Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)



Installation view with a glimpse of Brendan Fernandes's "The Master and Form" (2018-2019) performance, which is part of the Whitney Biennial (photo by Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)



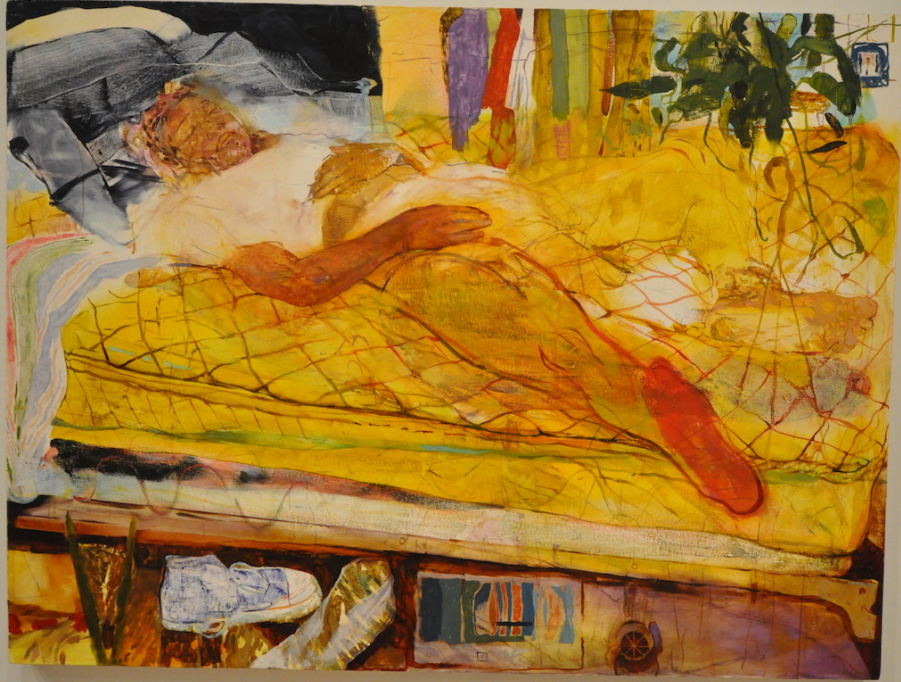
Janiva Ellis, "Uh Oh, Look Who Got Wet" (2019) (photo by Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)



Installation view (photo by Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)



Installation view of Ragen Moss's work (photo by Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)



Jennifer Packer, "Untitled" (2019) (photo by Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

