

Whitney Biennial, 2019

Interesting in ways I didn't expect — and profoundly uninteresting in other ways. The surprise for me was how very *traditional* the work tended to be, with no examples of anything significantly digital. Most of the work was “wallwork” — static pictures of one sort or another — painting, photograph, drawing — hung on the wall. There was also a lot of sculpture — again, traditionally static objects constructed of this for that. There were apparently quite a number of videos as well, but for some reason (!) the screening theater was closed when I was there. In short, almost all the work was done with very, very traditional approaches to art making — pictures, sculptures, video.



Most astonishingly, I saw no work at all that made significant use of computer technology — no interactive installations, no code-based work, no virtual reality, no augmented reality, no gaming, only one (very weak) 3-D rendered print. This absence of digital work was stunning. For an exhibition which purports to showcase “what’s happening in art today” and “the latest developments in American art”, the Whitney curators completely overlooked the significance and the prevalence — yes, the *prevalence* — of digitally driven artwork. This was a curatorial decision. There is *tons* of digital artwork out there. The digital is what young people are making and are reacting to. There were some very strong artworks in the show (see below), but this exhibition could have been mounted twenty years ago in a pre-digital envi-

ronmenet, and only a handful of the artworks exhibited here wouldn't have been impossible.

The most significant thing the curators did toward contemporaneity was an emphasis on race and racial issues. But an emphasis on social issues is in no way new or specific to our time. Witness the very socially conscious artwork of feminists of the 70s, of the Guerrilla Girls, of Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger,....

All that said, there were indeed a few very strong pieces. It is, of course, possible to make extremely strong artwork using traditional technologies and approaches and we see some of that here at the Whitney. One example is Nicole Eisenman's *Procession*, a collection of sculptural figures installed on one of the Whitney's outdoor terraces. Several of the figures were striking. A large 14' dark figure laboring to walk forward, its left arm slowly raising and

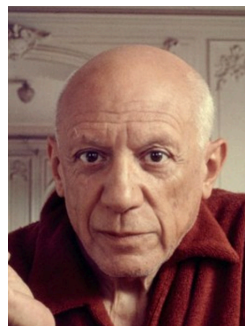


lowering a cable (like a George Rieck kinetic sculpture of the 1960s), the cable tied to a cart with square wheels and on that cart another similarly sized figure. Looking closely at the dark pulling figure, we see that its right foot has bubble gum stuck to its heel, the bubble gum (here, plastic) forever stretching between its heel and the floor and slowing it down.

The cart he is pulling has on it a large kneeling figure in a submissive posture with its head bent downward and with feathers growing out of its back and rump. Every several minutes a large cloud of smoke emits silently from his anus.



Beside this is another dark figure pulling a cable, this one's load being two figures, one crawling on its hands and knees, the other sitting astride the first. The second figure is modeled in white plaster (or something that looks like plaster) and is done in a very Picasso-esque style. Not only is it modeled in a Picasso-esque style, the head of the figure bears a resemblance to Pablo P. himself.



Pablo Picasso. *Warrior*, plaster sculpture by Picasso.

With all these figures and their interactions there is a lot being said about dominance

and submission, both social and sexual, as well as about our previous art traditions, and all of the above is done simultaneously very seriously and very tongue in cheek.

Another powerful work, again without deviating from established techniques or aesthetic, is Jennifer Packer's large oil on unframed canvas, *A Lesson in Longing*. With an emphasis on composition the any Formalist would approve of, the image divides itself into three vertical areas, with two partially painted concealed human figures flanking the central section. Pinks and pale reds dominate and are offset by three bursts of complementary greens. The three greens are arranged in a triangular pattern.



Jennifer Packer. *A Lesson in Longing*. Oil on canvas.

But the principle power of this painting resides in its rendering of the human figures, which

are vividly detailed in certain features (the eyes of one, the foot of another) but washed out and vague in others.



The whole is reminiscent of Matisse's room paintings, with their extraordinarily careful compositions of color, line, and interior space and with their emphasis on indistinct but uncannily real human figures. I think, for example, of his *The Piano Lesson*. Packer's painting is stunning. Interestingly and unfortunately, on the Whitney's website the image the museum chose to represent Packer's work is a far, far weaker sketch of a solitary figure, an unimpressive study. By contrast, her *A Lesson in Longing* is masterful.



One final powerful work for me was the animation, *National Anthem*. Set to a hauntingly beautiful rendition of that song, it shows, quite simply, various football players and football teams taking a knee in protest. The graphic style is extremely simplified. (The Whitney notes say it was done with watercolors, but it looks to me like it was done digitally with a watercolor brush, or at a minimum scanned digitally. Did the Whitney and the artist deliberately downplay any digital contribution?) The graphic simplicity causes us to see this as a gen-



eral representation rather than specific, and even famous, people, thereby emphasizing the gesture and the significance of the gesture. The action throughout the animation is minimal with the kneeling and standing figures nearly all stationary as the camera pans over them. Only an occasional TV cameraman or reporter moves noticeably throughout the frame. The animation is short, just the length of the song, but it is quite powerful.