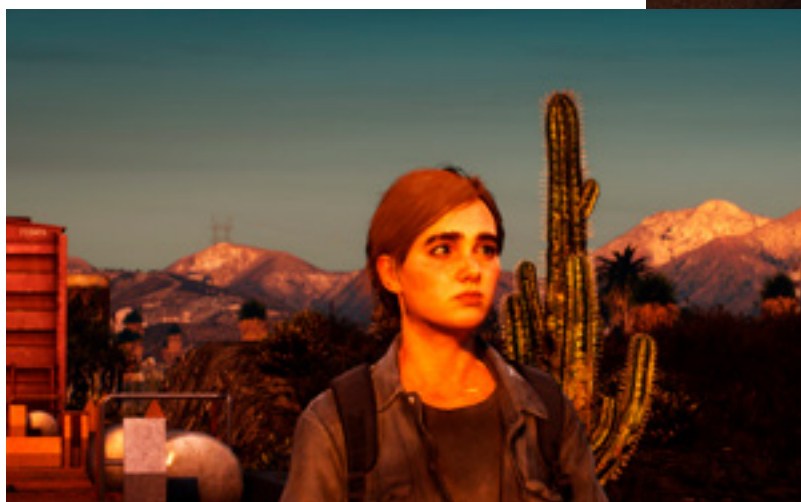
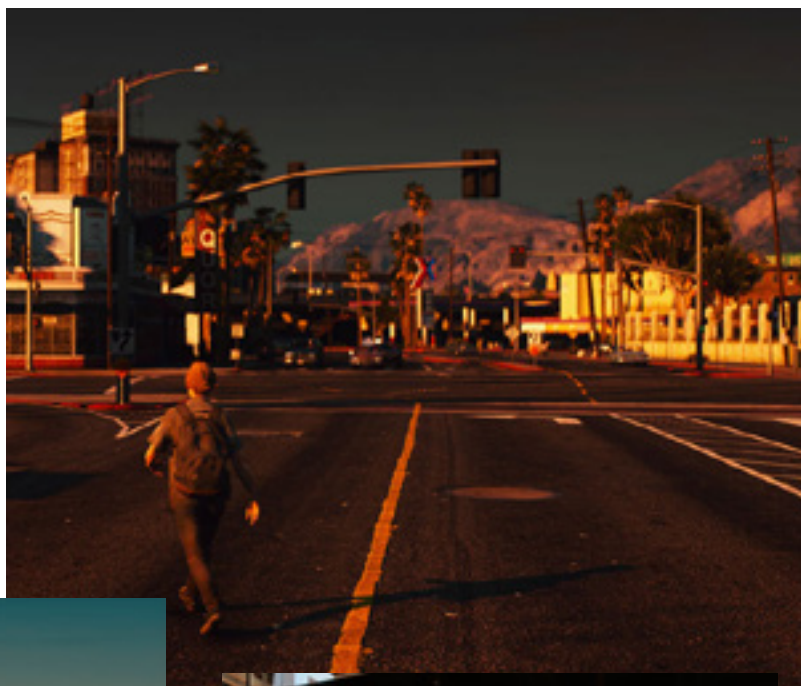


## Whitney Biennial, 2022

Three years ago in [my 2019 review](#) of the Whitney's 2019 Biennial (the 2021 Biennial was skipped because of Covid) I commented on the near complete lack of digital artwork in that show and how very “un-contemporary” that curatorial decision was. By contrast, this year's biennial includes a number of works done digitally, with some of them being quite, quite strong. Not all the work in the show is digital, of course, and not all the best work is digital, but it is reassuring to see this year's curators conscious of the prevalence, especially among younger artists, of digital approaches and digital artwork.

One of the most powerful works in the show is Jacky Connolly's *Descent Into Hell*, a four-screen video made with gaming software and imagery. (1) The work is creepy in a positive way — some uncomfortable place between realistic and obviously fabricated, what the Japanese thinker, Masahiro Mori, wonderfully labeled the “uncanny valley”. The lack of realism is a result of Connolly's use of gaming technology and actual gaming imagery and animation. The realism results from motion capture used in the games to capture extremely natural and detailed human motion. *Descent Into Hell* includes very little dialogue and only intermittent sound effects. Much of the time the characters and the scenes are silent. Frequently a character stares off into space, as if looking at something we don't



1. Full disclosure: Jacky Connolly was a student at Pratt Institute's Dept. of Digital Arts while I was a professor there.



see. The installation is configured as four large monitors facing each other within a square area of about 15'x15', so indeed sometimes the characters *are* watching something — directly across from them on another screen. The videos of each screen play back asynchronously: at one point we are watching an event on one screen, a moment later it appears, sometimes from a different camera angle, on another screen. It is left to us to piece together a narrative — or to fabricate one.

Though much of the imagery is based on the very violent *Grand Theft Auto V* game, there is no physical violence visible in this artwork. The violence we see and sense is emotional — a perpetual *ennui*, sexual seductions and unfulfilled desires, silent glances that may or may not be threatening, the uncomfortable emptiness of a deserted street at night.

In one particularly disturbing scene, a young woman in what appears to be a large basement bathroom watches a large-screen TV on which appears — at the front door of her house? — a prosti-

tute. The young woman in the basement is rendered and animated in the simplified style of video games. The prostitute, by contrast, is rendered and moves exceeding realistically, to a point where we sometimes think, with some consternation, that perhaps she is a live-action actress rather than an animation? But then we notice this or that detail



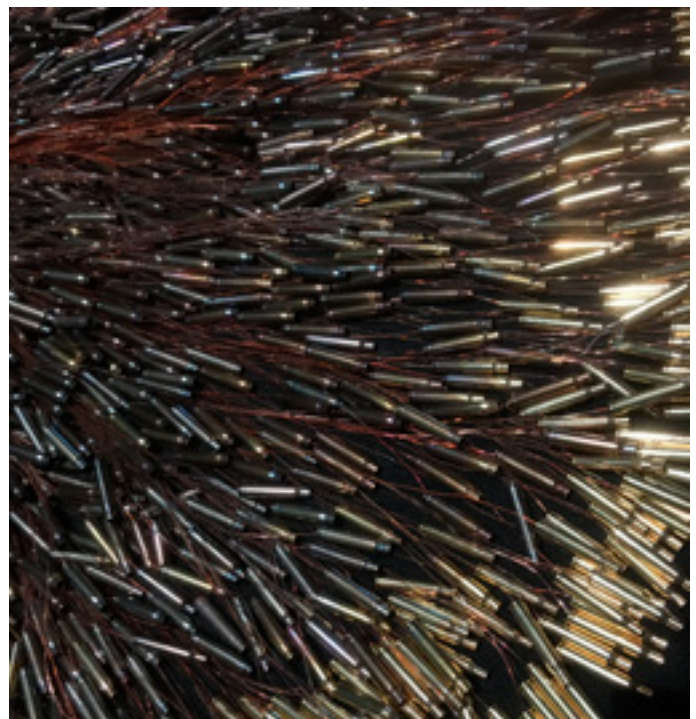


and are creeped out to be reminded it is animation. While we and the girl watch the prostitute on the screen, we (and the girl) hear dialogue, in fully natural voicing, between the prostitute and a man (the young woman's father?) who has answered the door. It is very disturbing to see and react to the blatant and very realistic sexual seductions of the prostitute and to know all the while it is an animation. It is then doubly (or triply?) disturbing to think of the young, and less realistic, girl secretly watching her father react to and invite into their home (upstairs?) this prostitute. Further, the contrast between the young woman's plain and unsexy sweat-clothes garb and the skimpy, skin-tight, clinging and extremely provocative dress of the prostitute further rubs in the offensiveness of the scene.

Connolly's *Descent Into Hell* is a very powerful artwork. It is the antithesis of splashy or flamboyant. In spite of that, or because of it, *Descent Into Hell* merits time spent carefully and patiently looking and listening and thinking.

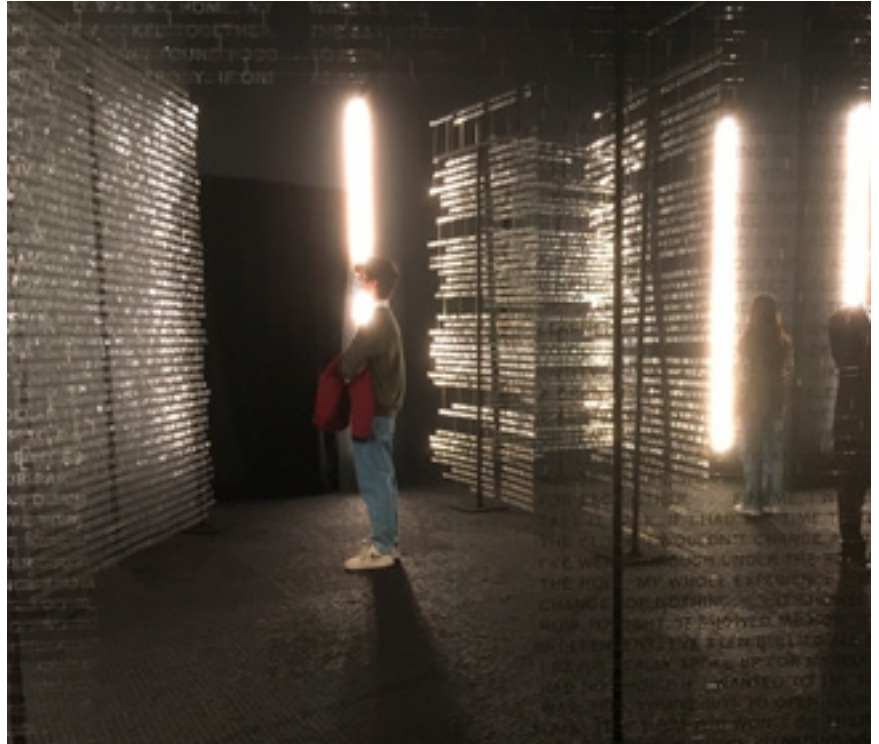
The big crowd pleaser of the Biennial when I was there was Alex Da Corte's *ROY G BIV*, a very slickly produced movie which left me largely uninterested. Mr. Da Corte, heavily made up through much of the movie to look like an aged Marcel Duchamp or the Jack Nicholson version of Batman's Joker, moves in exaggerated and slow mime-like gestures, variously embracing and caressing replicas of several Constantin Brancusi sculptures, or picking up two identical painted beer cans à la Jasper Johns and opening one and drinking from it. The film struck me as self-consciously "artsy", but many visitors choose to sit in the seats facing the large video screen and watch for extended periods.

More interesting to me was the visually simpler but emotionally far more powerful *Ishkode* of Rebecca Belmore. Here we see a human-like figure formed of what appears to be a sleeping bag wrapped to resemble a standing human with its arms enfolded around itself. At the figure's feet are thousands of bullet shell casings, glistening and shining in a variety of beautiful hues. The contrast



between the lethal associations and origins of the casings and their visual beauty is quite disturbing. A weakness of this piece in my view is that the human figure was fabricated by casting into clay a sleeping bag wrapped around a form, rather than using the sleeping bag itself. Was the casting into clay to achieve more permanence? Saleability? For me using the actual sleeping bag directly, with the fabric's immediacy, softness, and implications of fragility, would have been emotionally and conceptually stronger.

Another powerful artwork was *An Introduction to Nameless Love* by Jonathan Berger. This installation consisted on many walls of lettering, with each tin letter cut individually and suspended. Some of the text was redacted, with the individual letters replaced by small tin rectangles. Walking through the space of these hanging words created a sense of peace in me. On reading the lettering, one sees that the text speaks of love, of non-sexual, non-physical love, in some very beautiful ways. A puzzling weakness of this piece for me was that the flooring was made of small 1-inch chunks of charcoal tiles. Within two days of the show's opening, these pieces of charcoal were breaking and falling apart. Was that the intention? If so, it emphasizes the ephemerality of love, but

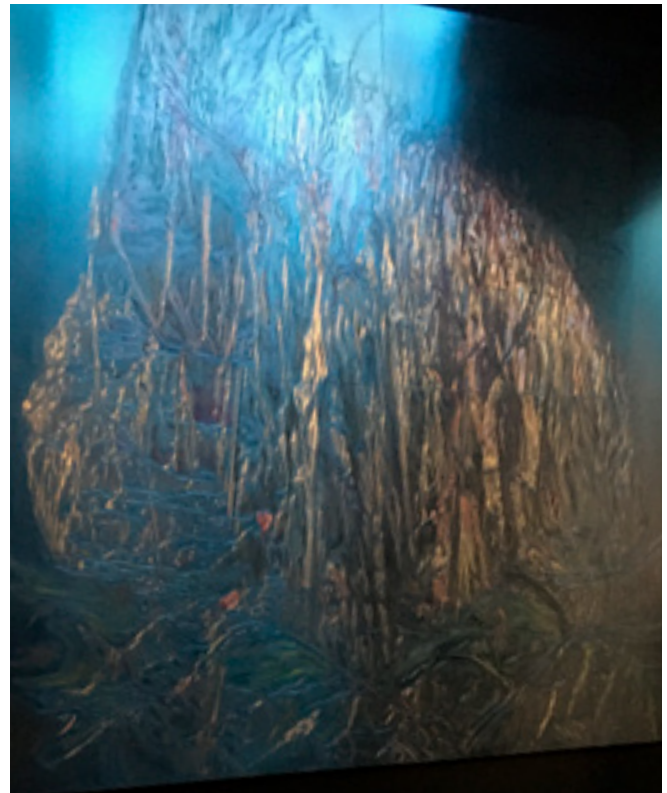


*An Introduction to Nameless Love*,  
by Jonathan Berger



for me does so in a way that distracts from rather than enhances the effect of the hanging words.

A final piece worth mentioning, one which unfortunately received very little attention from viewers when I was there, is *Isle of Vitr:.ous* by WangShui. This installation consists of two large paintings displayed on opposing walls at right angles to each other, plus a large video screen overhead. The paintings are done with oil on aluminum, which results in a very low relief set of monochrome lines and squiggles on the surfaces of the paintings. These surfaces have little or no color unto themselves, but they are reflective and the large video screen suspended on the ceiling above is bursting with slowly moving and colorful abstract imagery. The colors of the video are reflected, but subtly so, on the surfaces of the paintings below. The effect is quite, quite beautiful. Perhaps it has not received much attention from either viewers or critics precisely because it is subtle and requires some slow and careful looking, first to even notice the color changes on the paintings, then to appreciate their beauty. Most of the viewers I observed looked quickly at the installation, then up at the video, then moved on, without having noticed at all the reflections on the metallic surfaces of the paintings.



WangShui's three-part *Isle of Vitr:.ous*

As in any such exhibition, much of the artwork on display in the 2022 Whitney Biennial may not be engaging for many viewers, and much of it was not engaging for me. But overall this Whitney Biennial is a strong show with some very strong, even powerful, artwork. It is well worth a visit.