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The Whitney Biennial Called. How Will They Answer? Rising to the Challenge Of the Whitney Biennial

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Todd Gray in his Los Angeles studio with a Biennial work.

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Art

Rising to the Challenge Of the Whitney Biennial

How eight artists showing at the exhibition for the first time answered the call. Many are making their cultural points subtly.

By SIDDHARTHA MITTER

When Tiona Nekkia McClodden, a Philadelphia-based filmmaker and installation artist, was invited to take part in this year's Whitney Biennial, she felt satisfaction, but also crippling panic.

On one hand Ms. McClodden, 37, was coming off well-received film and performance projects in New York that had explored black queer culture in the 1980s. But the work had run its course. "I was having this chaotic meltdown," she said.

What new work would she make? Selection in the Whitney Biennial instantly marks an artist as a figure at the forefront of American contemporary art. For young selectees like Ms. McClodden — three-quarters of this year's roster of 75 artists are under 40 — it is a surefire résumé and market builder. By the same token, it exposes them to inevitable political stakes and heightened scrutiny.

The Biennial is sometimes provocative by design: The 1993 edition landed in the midst of the culture wars with a barrage of in-your-face art asserting race, gender and sexual identities. Other years have sparked more specific confrontations, as the last one did, in 2017, over a rendering by the painter Dana Schutz of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old boy who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955.

This year, not only is the national political climate tense, but so too are institutional debates around the Whitney itself. The group Decolonize This Place has convened performance protests in the museum's lobby. It demands that the institution remove its vice chairman of the board, Warren B. Kanders, who is the chief executive of Safariland, a company that makes law-enforcement products like tear gas.

Ms. McClodden is initiated in Santería, the Afro-Cuban religion with roots in the Yoruba culture of present-day Nigeria. Soon after her Biennial invitation, her instructor in Santería advised her to orient her work toward Shangó, the orisha, or deity, of power and bravery.

Her anxiety dissolved, she said, as she saw an opportunity to reconnect her art with her spiritual practices.

Last August, on an artist's residency at the Skowhegan School in Maine, she cut down a tree. She bathed the wood there, sculpted the objects in Philadelphia, sanded them in Cuba, in a spiritually correct way. In March, she made a trip to Nigeria to present the tools to the divinity in a particular shrine.

Beside the wood pieces, a cassette recorder and a motorcycle helmet sat on the table — the helmet is her witness, she said, and she keeps it near her wherever she goes. On her computer, she pulled up footage that documents the entire process in what she calls "auto-ethnography." Her installation in the Biennial combines Shangó's tools with three channels of video and a separate audio narration.

This is more interior work than Ms. McClodden's last projects, which engaged history and public culture. But there is a shared concern with research and rigor.

"At the foot of it, I'm a knowledge seeker forever," she said.

Meriem Bennani

In her apartment in Brooklyn, Meriem Bennani was working through footage from a two-week shoot in Rabat, Morocco, where she grew up.

She had embedded in the lives of six young women, seniors at her former high





From left, Meriem Bennani, Tiona Nekkia McClodden, Calvin Marcus, Maia Ruth Lee, Todd Gray, Sofia Gallisá Muriente, Nicholas Galanin and Tomashi Jackson. Credit Photographs by Christopher Gregory (Bennani, McClodden, Lee, Muriente, Jackson); Brian Guido (Marcus, Gray); and Ben Huff (Galanin) all for The New York Times.

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Although just one invited artist, Michael Rakowitz, withdrew from the Biennial in response to the activists' initial request, nearly 50 participants in the show have added their names to an open letter calling for Mr. Kanders' removal.

And some participants may charge the issues head-on. The art and research group Forensic Architecture, for instance, has signaled that its work will address the Kanders controversy directly.

Still, recent visits with eight of the first-time participants in the Biennial – six studio visits, in three cities, and two by video – found them completing work that made its social points subtly, without polemics. They were well aware of the debates swirling around the show, which opens May 17; four of them signed the open letter. But their work channeled other energies: research, technique, play, ritual. If anything, the artists we met seemed to seek areas of calm – for the viewer, for themselves.

It is far from a scientific sample but auguries point to a 2019 Whitney Biennial that has the potential to show creative ways forward, for the culture – and maybe even the country.

The curators, Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta, acknowledged that organizing the show in the current social climate and following the last edition's blowup was a challenging task. "We took our responsibility very seriously in light of previous Biennials," Ms. Panetta said. "It felt a little daunting at first."

In visiting artists over 14 weeks, traveling around the country, they found more optimism than they expected. "Over time you have to start thinking about creative possibilities, and we saw that in a lot of artists we met," Ms. Panetta said.

The exhibition's impact will be clear only once it is up, of course. But here is a preview of what we saw as eight artists' sketches, models and images – their dreams – came to life.



Mr. Gray at his studio in Los Angeles. Credit: Brian Guido for The New York Times



"Pax 3" juxtaposes archival prints by Mr. Gray. Credit: Todd Gray and Meliksetian Briggs, Los Angeles

When the Biennial curators asked to visit, Todd Gray said he fought back tears. "It's so late in my life, and I've been making work for so long," Mr. Gray, a photographer, said.

A youthful 64, Mr. Gray is a lifelong Angeleno, with a studio in Leimert Park. He attended CalArts in the late 1970s, and a decade later for his M.F.A. But he lived from commercial work.

Notably, he was Michael Jackson's photographer in the early 1980s. He preferred not to comment on Jackson's private behavior. "He's part of the culture," he said.

Each of his works in the Biennial – and in a solo show now at David Lewis Gallery in New York – juxtaposes photos on disparate themes, set in vintage frames, creating a puzzle of ovals, rectangles, and allusions.

His Jackson trove provides some of the material. There are also images of European formal gardens, signifying imperial power and wealth; photographs from rural Ghana, where he lives half the year. Pictures from the Hubble Space Telescope add an interstellar dimension. "It tells us we're all stardust," he said.

Mr. Gray began making these combination works five years ago at a time of growing disconnection between his career in the black American music industry and his new understandings from living in Africa. He invoked the British-Jamaican thinker Stuart Hall, who argued that cultural identity evolves in response to power.

"The act of resistance is to keep changing," Mr. Gray said.