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The Whitney Biennial Called. How Will They Answer?

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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.

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 famously 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-like protests in the museum’s lobby. They demand 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.

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."



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

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.

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.