



The Whitney Biennial Called. How Will They Answer?

The New York Times, May 2019

(author: Siddhartha Mitter)

1/4

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WHITNEY BIENNIAL

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For these eight first-time artists participating in the biennial, it's a surefire résumé builder. But it also exposes them to heightened scrutiny.

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 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.

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2/4

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, 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.

[Ms. McClodden](#), who is black, queer, and grew up in South Carolina, has had little patience for the recent protests, which she sees as parochial. Her new work, which draws deeply on African-rooted spiritual practices, lays down a different gauntlet. “This is a chance to comment on what the range of American art can be,” she said. “This is art that challenges the limitations of the building that it's in.”

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.”

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3/4

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.

Meriem Bennani

“I need to work from a place of having fun.”



Ms. Bennani at her home in Brooklyn. Christopher Gregory for The New York Times

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

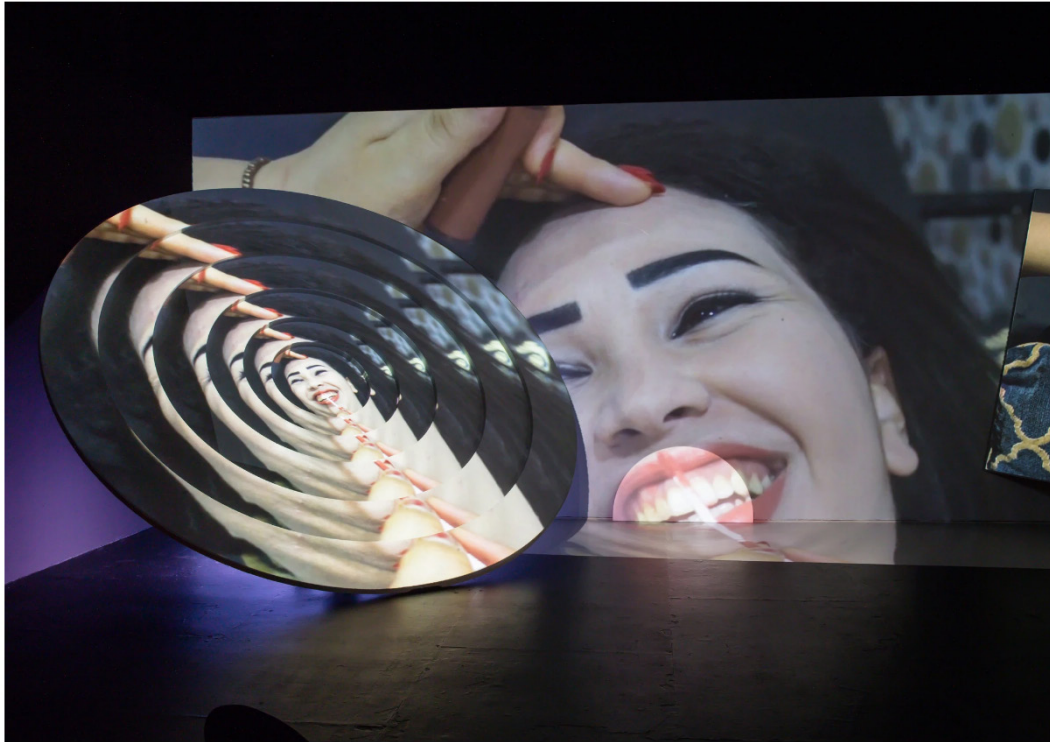
She had embedded in the lives of six young women, seniors at her former high school, a French establishment that draws students from Morocco’s elite. Now she was cutting the film in the manner of a reality TV show, and adding animation, representing herself in the form of a cartoon donkey making occasional comments.

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4/4



A video installation by Ms. Bennani at the Kitchen in New York in 2017. Meriem Bennani; Jason Mandella

“I need to work from a place of having fun,” Ms. Bennani, 31, said. Her projects are documentary, but absurdist. In [her installation at MoMA P. S. 1 in 2016](#), viewers flitted around Morocco guided by an animated fruit fly.

For the Biennial, Ms. Bennani has the use of the Whitney’s fifth-floor terrace — a challenge for film, but an opportunity to design cabana-like viewing stations in pastel colors, with actual palm trees, creating a beach-like vibe.

Ms. Bennani first studied art in Paris, but moved to New York in 2010, to attend the Cooper Union. She said she had found more space in the United States to work critically. Behind the fun in her new work lurks a study of the country’s upper middle class, with its lingering colonial mentality.

It is the same milieu that she comes from, and she expects ruffled feathers. “It’s the first time that I do a project that I know for a fact will make some people angry,” she said.