

# VULTURE

March 19, 2024

What to See and What to Skip at the Whitney Biennial Searching for the real thing at the museum's latest survey of contemporary art.



By Jerry Saltz, New York's senior art critic



Photo: Courtesy of Whitney Biennial 2024

**T**he Whitney Biennial isn't what it used to be. Once, it was mainly for the inhabitants of that strange royal court we call the art world — for insiders, in other words. The past several Whitney Biennials have turned the tables. It is no longer a gathering of warring, incestuous tribes of gallerists and curators and hangers-on but an outward-facing event for everyone interested in art and culture and the issues that face humanity as a whole. The show isn't for people like me; it's for the public. These are the exhibition's contemporary values — for better and worse.

Underscoring the point is this Biennial's title, "Even Better Than the Real Thing." Named for a U2 song from 1991, it is a show gesturing at artificial intelligence that actually has very few works dealing with that hot topic. The show does address Gaza, climate change, abortion, and the continued effects of the pandemic. Every work gets ample room to do whatever it purports to be doing, but as a result, there's little optical pop or psychological nerve, as if a maximum of effort had been deployed for minimum effect. Nearly half of the 71 artists live or were born outside the U.S., yet all this diversity has somehow produced an underlying aesthetic that is familiar, predictable, and very safe.

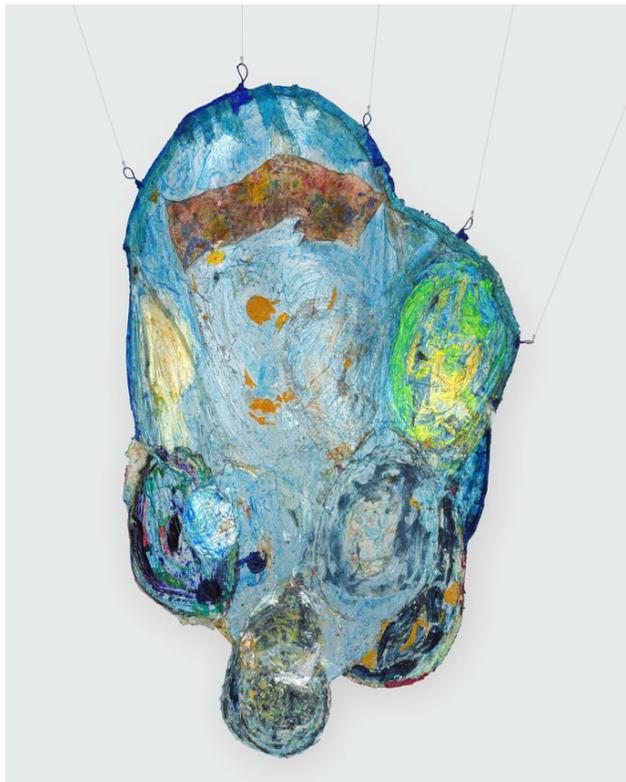
As well made and well meaning as the art is, most of what you see could have been made in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s; the forms and styles are old. Only the subject matter is new. Almost despite itself, the Biennial also features excellent work that conveys new meaning to the world, at least partly justifying the recent impulse to be less insular and academic. In all these ways, the Biennial is an agenda-driven snapshot of what art is today — the good, the bad, and the very bad.



Mavis Pusey, *Within Manhattan*, 1977.  
Photo: Elon Schoenholz

Mavis Pusey's riveting geometric paintings, made in the 1960s and '70s, instantly make you wince when you consider that this deceased Jamaican-born artist was unjustly passed over in her life.

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Suzanne Jackson,  
*Rag-to-Wobble*, 2020.  
Photo: Courtesy the  
artist and Ortuzar  
Projects, New York.  
Photograph by David  
Kaminsky.

Don't miss Suzanne Jackson's amazing hanging encrustations of poured and scraped paint. These things are so morphologically alive they become skin.

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Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio, *Paloma Blanca Deja Volar / White Dove Let Us Fly*, 2024. Photo: Nora Gomez-Strauss

A wall by Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio made of amber and embedded with dirt, detritus, and archival material from white activist groups. It pulses darkly with life, melting very slowly in the sunlight from the nearby windows.

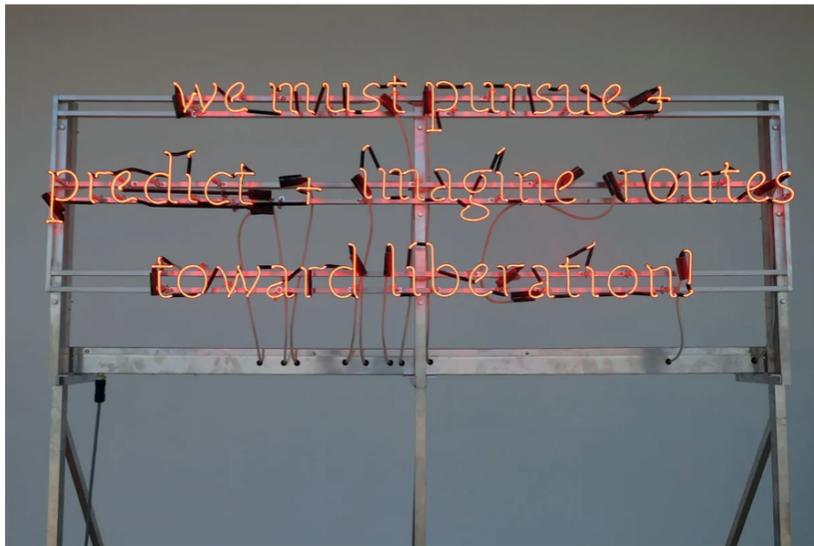
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P. Staff, *Afférent Nerves* and *A Travers Le Mal*, 2023. Photo: Courtesy the artist and Kunsthalle Basel. Photograph by Philipp Hänger.

A lot of art here just takes up space. P. Staff's all-yellow room with an electrified net suspended overhead is a good place to take a selfie.

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Demian DinéYazhi', *we must stop imaging apocalypse / genocide + we must imagine liberation*, 2024. Photo: Nora Gomez-Strauss

A neon text by Demian DinéYazhi' reads, WE MUST PURSUE + PREDICT + IMAGINE ROUTES TOWARD LIBERATION. It's great to include this artist. But not this simplistic meme.

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Holly Herndon &  
Mat Dryhurst,  
*xhairymutantx*  
*Embedding Study 1*,  
2024. Photo: Audrey  
Wang

Skip the dead, shiny AI images of Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst, who, despite occupying the 77th spot on *ArtReview*'s insane "Power 100" list, are pretty horrendous stand-ins here for better digital artists.

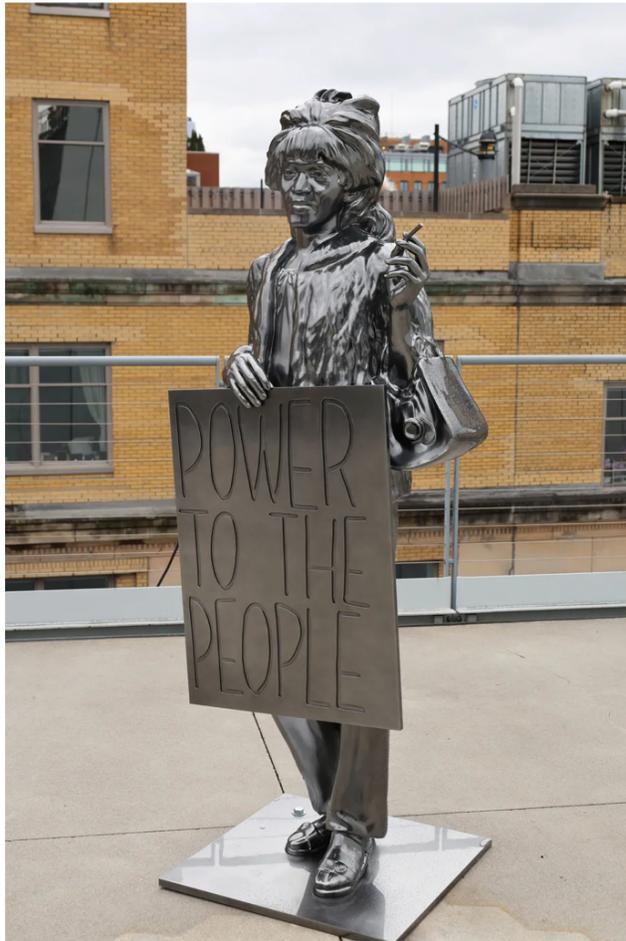
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Karyn Olivier, *How Many Ways Can You Disappear*, 2021.  
Photo: Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York and Los Angeles. Photograph by Pierre Le Hors.

There's a lot of bad art made in obvious ways. The sculptures of fishing detritus by Karyn Oliver, composed of buoys, rope, fabric, lobster traps, and driftwood, trade in a well-worn aesthetic. The wall text states that the work invokes "the practice of trading salt for enslaved people in ancient Greece."

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Kiyan Williams,  
*Statue of Freedom*  
(*Marsha P. Johnson*),  
2024. Photo: Audrey  
Wang

Kiyan Williams's sculpture of the trans activist Marsha P. Johnson standing "as a witness" is a self-indulgent piece that says nothing about America on the precipice.



Ser Serpas, *taken through back entrances subtle fate matching matte thing soiled....*, 2024. Photo: Audrey Wang

Ser Serpas's lobby installation features a ratty section of a couch with a soiled American flag. This is the Biennial at its best: beautiful, serious, experimental chaos.