

ArtReview



Mark Bradford
and other tales from the Venice Biennale

Art Life *New York*

The Whitney Biennial is not the only story in town,
as this roundup of exhibitions reveals

by Sam Korman



Sarah Zapata, *If I Could*, 2017 (installation view). Courtesy the artist and Deli Gallery, New York

The wrongness of alrightness

Even before the 2017 Whitney Biennial opened, it had already been rendered nostalgic by the world around it. Commissioned during the course of 2016, the biennial, and most of the work it presents, was conceived with the expectation that, by the time it opened to the public, Hillary Clinton would be our president and, as her campaign promised, the public would be ‘Stronger Together’. Of course, when the 78th edition of the biennial did open, all that was not the case.

The biennial’s struggles to interface with the world that has inherited it is a problem tragically embodied by the new building itself. A year and a half has gone by since the Whitney Museum of American Art decamped to its sterile and stately Renzo Piano-designed building in the Meatpacking District. In the moment when we might cling to the museum as a sanctuary for vulnerable ideas, and more importantly, people, the building is complicit in the spectacle of real-estate speculation, as part of the 20 blocks of starchitecture that ends with Hudson Yards, the us’s largest-ever private real-estate development. Naturally, curators Mia Locks and Christopher Y. Lew, surfing the rising tides

of identity politics, were eager to leave a different mark on the new building. Their ambitious artist list, the most diverse in recent memory, proposed to renegotiate the conversation this already rebranded institution hosted: one in which the act of representation was posited as means to broker racial, gender and sexual intersectionality. Really, it promised pictures, but I’m still waiting for punchier provocations.

The biennial brings together a fairly traditional range of media associated with a more sincere, earnest and empathic artistic approach. If this seems like a relatively banal statement to make, it does demonstrate how easy it is to slip into a mood of tepid alrightness within the show. Like Matt Browning’s minimalist wood carvings, which retreat meditatively into a world of handicraft, they’re fine, and offer a moment of peace or ironic distance, but they don’t quite address exactly what they’re retreating from. In fact, it is the more (literally) conversational works that seemed to embody the issues around the biennial. In her series of *Liquor Store Theatre* videos (2014–17), Maya Stovall canvasses people about the value of art as they loiter outside Detroit-area liquor stores. Lo-fi and grassroots, collegial and fun – it also involves Stovall doing improvised

dance routines in the parking lot – these videos recognise that art’s value lies in fostering a public discussion. Asad Raza’s *Root sequence. Mother tongue* (2017) is a mini-arboretum that hosts conversations with the trees’ caretakers about the trees and the personal effects they added to the installation. During my visit, tree-related conversations lulled people into engaging personal anecdotes. Following a kind of factionalising withdrawal during the first months of Trump’s presidency, the experience was refreshing and rewarding. But the emotional release also revealed how hamstrung our reactions could be, and the extent to which, throughout the show, we were able to witness the dramatic effects that changes in politics and history have on the reception of art in real time.

Ultimately it is mythology and storytelling that really thread the show together. When the world feels shaky, it’s easy to understand the more urgent desire for art to assume its traditional responsibility and tell a community’s stories. In this respect, the pairing of Deana Lawson and Henry Taylor deserves extra attention, because it speaks to the biennial’s ability to rouse the political dimensions of pictures. Lawson’s photograph *Sons of Cush* (2017) dovetails with Henry Taylor’s *A HAPPY*



Asad Raza, *Root sequence. Mother tongue*, 2017, 26 trees, uv lighting, customised scents, carpet, cabinet with possessions of caretakers.
Photo: Bill Orcutt. Courtesy Whitney Biennial, New York



Whitney Biennial, 2017 (installation view, left and right: Henry Taylor, *The 4th*, 2012–17, and *THE TIMES THAY AINT A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!*, 2017; centre: Deana Lawson, *Ring Bearer*, 2016). Photo: Matthew Carasella.
Courtesy Whitney Biennial, New York

DAY FOR US (2017), with both works offering parables about the complex institutions that guide children into this world, be they family, money or God. Other works by these artists conflate masculinity with violence, celebration with solemnity, or sexuality with home. But it's the restrained emotional tension of a middle-aged woman seemingly daydreaming about a symbolic black horse in Taylor's *Reflecting* (2017) and the woman prowling naked on her living room rug in Lawson's *Nicole* (2017) that imbue these bodies with life, and declare a new realism for the black body.

The biennial captures an activist spirit from 2016, and distils its mood into a context for engagement rather than articulating a strict polemic. It's laudable, and if there is some handholding, the show still often stresses the audience's responsibility of interpretation. It is telling that the most significant controversy surrounded Dana Schutz's misguided and misinformed appropriation of Emmett Till's likeness – Google the photo if you need a reminder, because it is sad how much the power of the image, and bravery of Till's mother, was lessened by its depiction here. I can't pretend to claim the historical trauma Schutz's painting triggered, merely that I felt all too aware that the art community seemed impossibly segregated

and unable to de-escalate the situation without outside interference. Really, no official response acknowledged anyone's trauma before it was propelled and exacerbated by the national news cycle and the rampant backlash of social media.

What should be a measure of this (or any biennial) is its ability to meaningfully offend and to impishly challenge its own context. Disappointingly, the 2017 Biennial doesn't manage a major offence of its own accord. Some artworks push on the architecture, but even these tend to mete out a challenging encounter one selfie-vista at a time. And while Jordan Wolfson's hyperviolent VR video tried, really, just close your eyes. Other works, such as Cameron Rowland's *Public Money* (2017), offer direct critique: Rowland implicates the museum in a seeming cycle of public exploitation by investing biennial funds in a Social Impact Bond, offered by governments to encourage private investment in public services. Pope.L's *Claim (Whitney Version)* (2017) commandeers the museum's entire fifth floor with the unctuous smell of old bologna. It's a room covered inside and out in a grid of 2,755 slices of bologna, each displaying a tiny portrait – they're all Jewish people, according to a framed text hanging inside the installation, next to an open bottle of Mad Dog 20/20 malt liquor. Every gesture

is a rabbit hole that only leads to the work's irreverent and stupefying magic. It musters the best response the biennial could hope to offer about what's been happening outside its doors. The framed inscription warns against hubris: 'When we quantify, we point with a wavering finger. Like a child. Like aaa drunk or a dyslexic. Like a palsied person. Like a curator filled with helium. Like a venerable black artist filled with schism, we point with a wavering finger. And of course we insist, we insist, we insist we know where we are pointing...'

Rumours

Pointing crane towers have become synonymous with art for me lately. I walk by the numerous construction sites on my way to nearby galleries (or the bar) most days of the week. It's easy to feel hostage to the construction here. The precariousness it creates for any living situation in its midst is isolating, and localises a renter's concerns to a few square metres of space. We might turn to nonprofits as relatively stable sanctuaries, safe spaces in which we can look to an outside perspective. But even Art in General was forced to move out of the Tribeca space it occupied for more than two decades.



Pope.L aka William Pope.L, *Claim (Whitney Version)*, 2017, acrylic paint, graphite pencil, pushpins, wood, framed document, fortified wine and bologna with black-and-white portraits, 500 × 500 × 500 cm.
Photo: Bill Orcutt. Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York



Postcommodity, *Es mas alcanzable de lo que se imaginaban*, 2017, photograph. Courtesy the artists

The organisation's new location, in DUMBO, hosts Postcommodity's powerfully understated show *Coyotaje*, a potent illustration of migration and life lived in extremis. An audiowork plays overhead, repeating phrases like, "Quickly! We need to go! Children! I don't want you to die out here!" in Spanish, filling the exhibition space with urgency and menace. Border patrols use the recording to trap migrants on the us–Mexico border. An invisible CCTV system captures our likeness, which is then projected onto an inflatable rendition of the mythological chupacabra. Postcommodity expertly conveys the desperation on the border, when the subterfuge of politics can reduce your life to a rumour.

For many years, Otis Houston Jr's career was a word-of-mouth affair, and most of his artistic output has been destroyed; though he was the subject of a recent documentary. What survives of his work, however, is on view at Room East. His few extant collages, magazine pages arranged on sheets of metal, demonstrate a rigorous approach to both composition and appropriation. He also hung two banners in the window, spraypainted with the cliché: 'A good artist copies', 'A great artist steals'. In a way, it's a manifesto for Houston Jr's approach to artmaking, having performed and constructed temporary sculptures

at the intersection of 125th Street and FDR Drive for approximately 20 years. To steal is to claim as one's own, and Houston Jr uses art to lay claim to public space. He'll extemporise on Muhammad Ali, replete with boxing gloves; hang a banner that says, 'Read more'; and make quick sculptures with staple crops from the Caribbean, like sugarcane, coconut and bananas. His work is committed to art's human scale, performed primarily for a few passersby in East Harlem and the car-bound commuters on the FDR. He goes by the name Black Cherokee and he doesn't let you forget: art is best seen wherever you are.

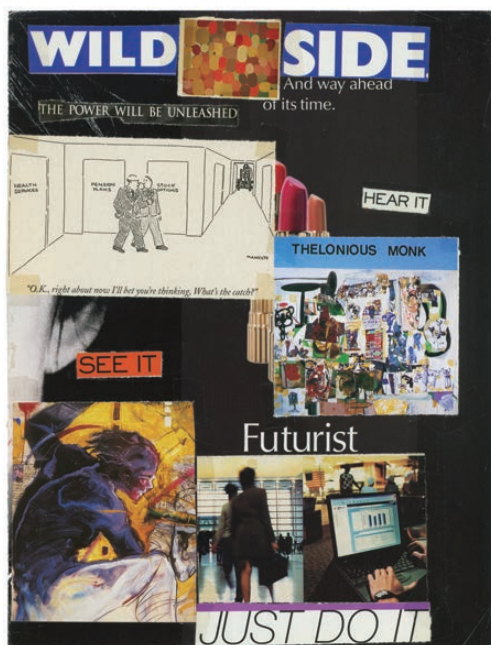
In bloom

Long Island City is a neighbourhood with a baroque street system that makes no sense, though it makes a place like Deli Gallery feel secreted away. Sarah Zapata's *If I Could* requires visitors to take off their shoes: as soon as our toes curl around the hand-woven rug that fills the entire gallery, we're allowed to indulge in something daringly informal rather than bother ourselves with decorum. Zapata is Peruvian-American, and she studied indigenous rug-making on a residency in Peru. While her approach to craft isn't new, it works – discovering

a pocket of plush feathery fluff lulls me into euphoria. The installation affects a blooming Andean meadow, populated with freestanding sculptures that resemble hunched pack animals or high-altitude foliage. If all this feels too downy and impervious to critique, check your fucking shoes at the door. Zapata spawns eroticism out of craft, flooding us in jouissance that's greater than the sum of our sensations.

The look that says 'together'

Both Zapata's show and Am Schmidt's show, *Rachel's Wardrobes* at Clinton Hill's 321 Gallery, approach women and work through fastidious arrangements of materials, but Schmidt's humour triggers a more cerebral reaction. For the exhibition she sourced Jennifer Aniston's outfits from certain episodes of the iconic television series *Friends* (1994–2004). For *Season 1, Episode 19, Scenes 5, 6, 8, 12, 13, 14* (2017), three pairs of cream knee socks, two plaid skirts, three off-white turtlenecks, one trench coat, one hairclip, one turquoise ring and three pairs of patent leather Oxford heels are arranged with utmost care on chrome clothing racks. The mise-en-place highlights the subtle differences between like items, as if Rachel,



Otis Houston Jr aka Black Cherokee, *The perfect place to play* (detail), 1984–2017, collages, steel, magnets, 122 × 81 cm. Courtesy Room East, New York



Am Schmidt, *Rachel's Wardrobes*, 2017 (installation view). Photo: Daniel Terna. Courtesy 321 Gallery, New York

a barista constantly blowing hair out of her face, represented the utmost discriminating style. Another rack displays two white T-shirts with red crosses on them and three pairs of denim overalls to choose from in *Season 1, Episode 16, Scene 14* (2017) – isn't this how Rachel dresses in every episode? It's also how all the moms walking around Clinton Hill (and other family-friendly Brooklyn neighbourhoods) have dressed the past couple years, redefining the outfit as well-moneyed and got-it-together, rather than suggesting the wearer is still trying to get her life together. If the work doesn't sell, Schmidt will return or resell the clothes and racks.

Fucking things up: the early years

A confidently light touch leads us through Jochen Lempert's exhibition at Front Desk Apparatus. It is a rigorous interrogation into image-making, with the debate between nature and culture at its heart. His subjects include plants, which he most arrestingly reproduces in photograms, and migratory birds, which he confidently and delicately formalises in photographs that range from just over 6 sqcm,

to 24 by 18 cm. Taped to the wall, the photographs' curled edges make for a satisfying accent to his diaphanous images, as if to imitate the foliage depicted in several works. *Vanessa atalanta* (2014) sums up the show's approach well: depicting a butterfly aloft over a street scene, it captures how the world of natural phenomena becomes visible through the backdrop of the city.

Lempert's photographs make surprising bedfellows with Allan McCollum. Both explore value by means of absence, presence and material potentiality. *Works 1968–1977* at Petzel Gallery explores McCollum's clumsy early paintings, process-driven attempts that were abandoned for more systematic forms of fucking things up. Still, a vitrine containing a thoughtfully strewn pile of black photographs seems to anticipate the logic of his later 'Surrogates' (plaster-moulded objects that resemble matted and framed photographs) and their confrontation with the frame.

The Bateman school of interior design

Andrea Fraser's video *May I Help You?* (1991), made in cooperation with McCollum, introduces the former's exhibition *Lost Objects* at Mary Boone.

In it, Fraser plays an art dealer charged with selling works from the *Plaster Surrogate* series. Staring straight into the camera, her pitch vacillates between dismissiveness, desperation and flare – we're her client. The video humorously combats the Machiavellian self-seriousness that marshals consensus, and therefore value, in the artworld. But it's funny, because the video predates an identical sketch on the MTV 1990s show *The State*, in which Michael Showalter also plays an art dealer who desperately projects onto the art he sells. And that's not to mention that every time I see a 'Surrogate' I am reminded that they appear in the film *American Psycho* (2000), decorating the villainous investment banker and possible serial killer Patrick Bateman's highrise apartment.

Dressing down and climbing the walls on East Houston

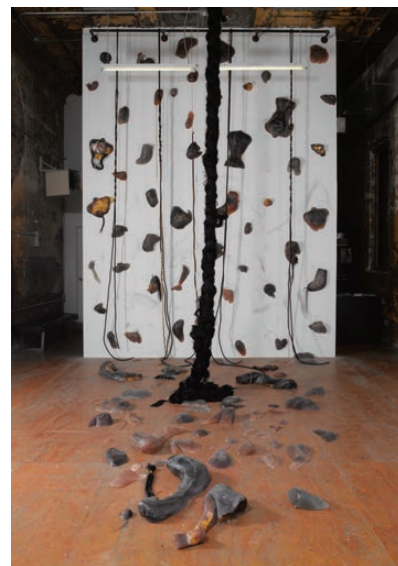
A gallery, like a house or a mind, is a place where we can let the various parts of our identity dissemble like clothes strewn across the floor. Baseera Khan's exhibition *iamuslima* makes such a use of Participant Inc, spilling out a collection of the artist's personal effects



Jochen Lempert, 2017 (installation view, left: *Phasmids*, 2013; right: *Vanessa atalanta*, 2014). Courtesy Front Desk Apparatus, New York



Allan McCollum, *Lost Objects*, 2017 (installation view). Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York, and Petzel Gallery, New York



Baseera Khan, *Braidrage*, 2017, mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Participant Inc, New York

alongside performance costumes, prints and sculptures. The centrepiece of the show is *Braidrage* (2017), a rock-climbing wall composed of cast fragments of the artist's body and embedded with gold chains and hair. Khan climbed the wall on opening night. It's a somewhat obvious move, but the other works in the show, such as the *Acoustic Sound Blankets* (2017), in which she embroidered blankets given to protesters with her family's heirloom patterns, demonstrate what it means to keep the body safe as she moves between political worlds. The fractured body in *Braidrage* promotes an exercise that melds intimacy with knowledge to develop ever more complex ciphers.

When two become one

I wish Andrea Crespo had a Saturday morning cartoon show. In *Joined for Life*, at Downs & Ross, the artist guilelessly insinuates us into a narrative about a fictional pair of twins and their attempts to conjoin themselves. In a video, *parapagus* (2017) – which affects the edifying air of infotainment found in much children's TV – they tell the story about embodiment, in which two bodies think of themselves as one,

or both, or neither. It's a complex set of permutations that the twins navigate with withdrawn innocence throughout the dreamy animation. Ostensibly, the plot follows their self-reckoning through meetings with doctors, and various memories – it's not enough that they think of themselves as one, and metaphor offers little succour, they need to physically actualise it. The twins in the video spend a lot of time explaining things to people. We hack bodies with braces and implants, the video suggests, staging language as yet another technology with major impact on the body. However, underlying all the innocence is a dread; the twins use a quote from the book of Luke 9:39 to explain things: "A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him."

What a Debord

There's a kind of bratty incredulousness about Nicolás Guagnini's exhibition *Bibelots* at Bortolami. The show negotiates the limits of an embodied experience, attacking

authenticity with a series of unique 'test tiles' inscribed with Guy Debord's 1968 protest slogan 'Ne travaillez jamais' (never work). Guagnini appears attracted to craft as a last bastion of Marxist critique of signs – it's a lowbrow rejection of an authentic form of labour, namely ceramics. Fine. That's merely the macho context for Madeline Hollander's performance *Competition* (2017), which was commissioned for the show. Dancers entered the room in a balled-up human chain, slowly unravelled and began a series of trust exercises that involved passing a sheet of paper from one mouth to another or holding balletic fourth position until falling into each other's arms. The dancers cycle through exercises meant to reveal the true threshold of the body for the next three hours. What does it mean to rehearse your limits? Certainly it leads the dancers to feelings of angst, impetuosity – a series of fitful gestures suggested it here. But then every expression of endurance and fortitude encouraged the same in the other dancers. Guagnini's show is blind to what Hollander adds, and uses to resist: all that immaterial labour that bootlegs the self for just such occasions. To keep the original copy safe.



Andrea Crespo, *Part of Your World I* (1996), 2017, unique digital prints on acetate and acrylic glass, aluminium, 152 × 73 × 1 cm. Courtesy Downs & Ross, New York



Nicolás Guagnini, *The Lettrist Dictatorship*, 2016, glazed ceramic, 33 × 43 × 4 cm. Courtesy the artist and Bortolami, New York