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Young voices from the Whitney Biennial

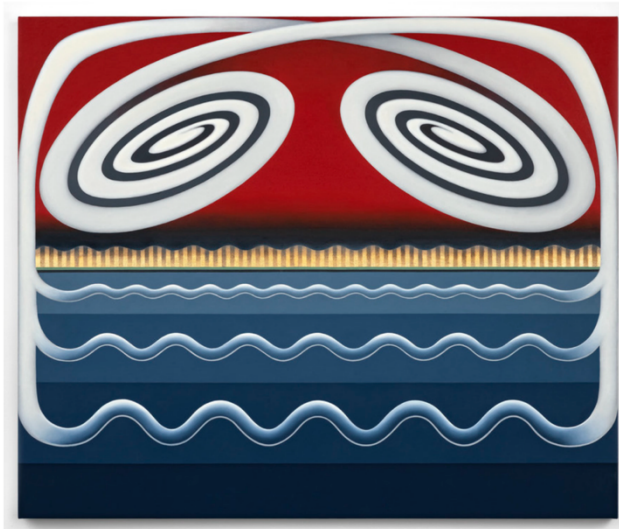
Urgent questions of minority identity propel this edition

By Sarah P. Hanson | 22/03/2024 09:00 | 5 min read

'Curating is about listening,' says Chrissie Iles, the Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. 'We're like antennae.'

The Whitney's 81st biennial exhibition, which opened to the public on March 20, features a notable number of suspended sculptures that cannot help but feel like metaphors for the historical moment. Climate change, racism, trans rights, bodily autonomy, war, artificial intelligence – 'we're at a precipice in so many ways,' notes Iles, who co-curated the show with the museum's curator-at-large, Meg Onli. The works ask visitors to navigate around them, and consider multiple vantages, subtly reinforcing the exhibition's theme, 'Even Better Than the Real Thing,' in which notions of authenticity and subjectivity hang in the balance.

Thirty years on from the 1993 biennial, which famously thrust marginalized voices to the fore, the 71 artists and collectives in this edition seem bent on eluding categorization. 'Something that became clear early on in our conversations with artists was their desire to challenge ideas of fixed identity,' Onli observes in the catalog. 'These artists want to destabilize the ways that identity gets flattened within the art world.' Below, we highlight five works in the show that embody this mission.



Takako Yamaguchi's Issue, 2022. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Orkney Projects, and artist.

Takako Yamaguchi

Issue (2023); *Proxy* (2022); *Catalyst* (2023); *Formula* (2023); and *Clasp* (2022)

Painters are in relatively scarce supply in this biennial, but the curators make their inclusions count, particularly by highlighting a handful of non-white women artists who have been working steadily against the grain for years. Take energetic, quasi-narrative abstractions by ***Mary Lovelace O'Neal*** (b. 1942), or the stylized architectures of Mavis Pusey (1928-2019). Or the Los Angeles-based painter Takako Yamaguchi (b. 1952), who contributed five recent canvases to the show, all of which build on her long interest in landscape and what she calls 'abstraction in reverse': a sly embedding of ornament in otherwise graphic, minimal compositions.

The seductively surfaced paintings on view transmute the drama of Romantic seascapes via Art Nouveau-inspired framing and suggestively modeled shapes. 'She's always looking at what falls out of art history,' says Kenta Murakami, director at her New York gallery, ***Ortuzar Projects***, pointing to previous series that have dealt with the female nude and photorealism (Yamaguchi also shows with as-is.la, where some of these works are currently on view through March 30). Like many young painters today, 'she is interested in the superficial and invested in pleasure,' says Murakami. 'But simultaneously, she's approaching each series with a certain level of critical distance, even irony.' Yamaguchi leapfrogs binaries of identity and genre to arrive at a distinctive and sophisticated fusion – a trait that may be this biennial's hallmark.

Credits and Captions

The Whitney Biennial '***Even Better Than the Real Thing***' runs from March 20 through August 11, 2024, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Sarah P. Hanson is a New York-based writer specializing in contemporary art and the art market.

Caption for top image: Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Uŋziwoslał Wašičuta (from the series Future Ancestral Technologies)*, 2021-. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery.

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