

# TIME

## The 6 Most Compelling Works at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, Explained by its Curators

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Every two years, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City presents a survey of contemporary work aiming to represent the current state of art-making in the U.S. Throughout its nearly century-long history, the Whitney Biennial has been a showcase for significant American artists on the rise. It has also remained a flashpoint for public protest and a stage for larger cultural tensions bubbling beyond the gallery walls.

This history is exemplified by a controversy surrounding a painting of the mutilated body of Emmett Till by Dana Schutz, a white artist, at the 2017 Biennial. Many saw the painting as a tone-deaf exploitation of black suffering, and it sparked demonstrations in the gallery, online discourse about institutional racism and even demands for the painting's destruction. This year has seen protest, even before the Biennial's May 17 opening, over the Vice Chair of the Whitney's ownership of a tear gas manufacturing company.



Kyle Thurman, *Suggested Occupation 4*, 2016. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art

The co-curators of this year's Biennial, Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta, approached the project of this year's Biennial with a full awareness of the exhibition's legacy, recognizing in their curatorial statement that "fundamental to the Whitney's identity is its openness to dialogue." By assembling a multifaceted body of work that is forthright in speaking to issues roiling in America today, they have put together an exhibition in the spirit of productive dialogue, which neither shies away from this history nor provokes for provocation's sake. And, featuring the work of 75 artists and collectives, the 2019 Biennial is one of the Whitney's most diverse, with a majority of the artists being people of color, and half identifying as women. TIME spoke with Hockley and Panetta to discuss six works in this year's Biennial that represent the breadth of the exhibition.

### *Suggested Occupation 4*, Kyle Thurman

*Suggested Occupation 4* is one of several figurative works by Kyle Thurman featured in the Biennial. In this series, Thurman takes images from newspaper and other media of archetypal depictions of men, frequently soldiers or athletes. Through his process of reproducing the image as a drawing, Thurman omits the surroundings, leaving the figures isolated in a field of color. The resulting image brings attention to the figures on their own, "highlighting the strangeness around masculinity and men's bodies being in proximity to each other," Hockley says. Without their context, previously unseen intimacies are made visible, as well as undercurrents of homoeroticism that go unacknowledged in typically masculine spaces.