

The 2019 Whitney Biennial Shows America's Artists Turning Toward Coded Languages in Turbulent Times

by Ben Davis
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History, identity, craft, and community—these are the themes that curators Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta say they discovered in their years-long research for the 2019 Whitney Biennial. But these headings are a bit too broad to offer real clarity about art in the present—and indeed, a retreat from clarity is one of the hallmarks of the show.



Todd Gray, *Euclidian Gris Gris 2* (2018). Image courtesy Ben Davis.

Unwanted Conversation

As for the third way to read the biennial, the curators note that the other zeitgeist they are picking up on is the turn to the handmade, read as a possible rejection of the digital. I wonder how much this retreat from the digital is actually connected to the defensively hermetic quality.

Online spaces have both accelerated the visibility of demands for recognition of all kinds, and led to an intensified penetration of unwanted vitriol and scrutiny into all aspects of life, as well as creating a constant intimacy with bad news and traumatic imagery. The verdict is pretty much in that constant exposure to social media increases depression and anxiety.

The early reviews of the 2019 Biennial have tagged this show as playing it safe, but I wonder if it is not, in fact, more about safety—including safety from the relentless online scrum, the kinds of scarring debates that marked the last Whitney Biennial. You can almost feel the anxiety as you peruse the show texts, as if the curators are preemptively trying to frame every artist as maximally personally righteous, and to take account of any possible negative associations, in an environment where any signifier that gets pinned down too clearly to a negative meaning can take on a life of its own.

Todd Gray's fascinating sculpture-photo-painting hybrids mine his own personal archive as a photographer, permuting images into disorienting Exquisite Corpse-style images. Among the works, Michael Jackson recurs; Gray happens to have been the pop star's personal photographer in the 1970s and '80s. But here, he explains, he is using Jackson as a symbol of something larger: of global celebrity and "the African body, the Black body."

The wall text lays out his intentions—but then also offers the following separate disclaimer: "Michael Jackson was accused of child sexual abuse in 1993 and then tried and acquitted for the crime in 2005. New allegations surfaced in a documentary released on HBO earlier in 2019."

The ability of artist or museum to corral symbolic associations has broken down in the present information environment. And you can imagine how this, too, might lead to an increased emphasis on carving out personal space, both physically and symbolically.