

## Whitney Biennial 2014: Where Have All the Politics Gone?

by Jillian Steinhauer on March 5, 2014



*Fred Lonidier, "GAF Snapshirts" (1976), 32 photo- and text-printed T-shirts (photo by Hrag Vartanian)*

The 2014 *Whitney Biennial* has many things: oversized ceramics, big abstract and figurative paintings, experimental jazz, videos of people having sex, and bead curtains. What it doesn't have all that much of is politics. For the most part, the art in this year's biennial faces inward, reflecting on itself and sometimes the larger world in safe and comfortable ways. You won't be too put out, turned off, or riled up. You'll probably just have a good time.

There is some excellent work in the show. Sterling Ruby's large, ritualistic ceramic bowls are fabulous. Zoe Leonard's room-size camera obscuras delightful. Sculptors Alma Allen and Carol Jackson offer brain-bending formal innovations, and I felt as though I could have sat and listened to Charlemagne Palestine's droning, mesmerizing staircase sound installation for an hour. Paintings by an under-appreciated Chicago Imagist (Philip Hanson), a sound piece made from field recordings of Chicago on September 11 and 12, 2001, when air travel was suspended (Academy Records/Matt Hanner), a gigantic magazine with text culled entirely from psychic consultations (Lisa Anne Auerbach) — there's plenty to like. But that's just the issue: the biennial is overly neat and likeable, scarcely messy or funny or challenging.

Is that a disastrous thing? No. Is it a shortcoming? Absolutely. All art need not be political, but a show that disregards politics in the United States in 2014 is a delusion — not simply because of the state of the country and the world, but also because of the state of art itself. Social practice is experiencing a moment of profound attention and criticality. Artists of color are being included more than ever in the mainstream, yet often still in a segregated way, which many of them question. Within the art world itself, certain practitioners have taken up residence at the border between institutional acceptance and an outsider stance, carving out space for satire and critique. By and large, none of that is in the 2014 *Whitney Biennial*.

I'm inclined to think that this omission stems at least in part from the exhibition's lack of diversity. It's telling that one of the strongest, most openly political showings comes from Dawoud Bey, whose two diptychs were curated by Michelle Grabner on the fourth floor. (Bey's photograph of President Obama also hangs, lonely, at the entrance to the floor.) Bey

recently spent seven years visiting Birmingham, Alabama, where, in 1963, white supremacists bombed an African-American church, killing four girls, and shot two African-American boys to death. His research led to *The Birmingham Project*, a series of black-and-white photo diptychs that pair portraits of African-American youths the same ages as the victims with those of African-American adults the ages the victims would have been in 2012. The gazes of the subjects are both inviting and unsettling.

Probably the only other artist as explicitly political as Bey is Fred Lonidier, an artist and longtime union activist who focuses on labor issues in his work. Lonidier's contribution, curated by Stuart Comer on the third floor, consists of a 1976 piece called "GAF Snapshirts" — T-shirts obtained by the artist from a manufacturer called GAF and then custom printed with notes and images from his research into the company — and a 2003 work titled "'NAFTA... Returns to Tijuana/TLC...' Regresa a Tijuana," two photos relating to a project that Lonidier undertook exploring the conditions at a light assembly plant in Tijuana, Mexico. The works (especially the T-shirts) are eye-catching, but even with their accompanying wall text seem to suffer from a lack of context.

Also on Comer's floor is the much-discussed 2012 documentary film *Leviathan*, made by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel of the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University. Shot on tiny waterproof cameras, some attached to nets and people, others thrown into the sea, the 87-minute-long film explores industrial fishing in an unprecedented way, through dark, disorienting images and almost entirely without words. Although its origins at the Harvard lab explicitly position the work as "ethnographic," critics have pointed out its almost *de facto* politics. At the Whitney, plunging underwater with *Leviathan* feels like bursting through the museum's walls to let in the world outside.

Other artists in the show come to politics, as many of us do, by way of identity. Ken Lum's towering "Midway Shopping Plaza" (2014, fourth floor/Grabner) is a witty amalgam of tacky signs for Vietnamese-owned shops, except all of the names relate to the Vietnam War. Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst's *Relationship* series (2008–13, third floor/Comer) consists of photographs of the two transgender artists in the process of transitioning in opposite directions, a fascinating subject, although the pictures are a bit generic. A.L. Steiner (also third floor/Comer) exhibits her film "More Real Than Reality Itself" (2014) within an all-over installation of photos, "Cost-benefit analysis" (2014), both of which attempt to use the artist's body and autobiography as a starting point for mining questions of radicalness and activism. It's one of the few pieces in the biennial that pulls you in with a seductive complexity.

Part of the problem of politically minded art in a setting like the Whitney Biennial is that its surroundings are unfavorable. In a show of such scale, viewers often gravitate to larger, flashier works and don't have the energy or time to do the reading required to understand projects such as Lonidier's. (Why linger on wall text when you could walk fewer than 10 feet to the Bjarne Melgaard room, which the artist has tricked out with plush, trippy furniture and oversexed female mannequins?) In this biennial, too, a fair amount of the political work is from the past, making it feel less relevant to the present day. (Catherine Opie and Richard Hawkins have curated a room of appealingly strange paintings by Tony Greene, who died of complications from AIDS in 1990 and whom Hawkins calls "the first one out of all of us making work specifically about HIV.") On top of that, some of the older work is presented in a pristine archival format, which makes it seem even more sealed-off and distant. (A room by Public Collectors on the Anthony Elms-curated second floor presents the archive of Malachi Ritscher, a Chicago experimental jazz enthusiast and activist. It contains mostly music recordings and memorabilia arrayed neatly in glass cases, above which one well-composed photograph of Ritscher protesting hangs on the wall.)

There is much more to come in the 2014 Whitney Biennial, as the performances, videos, and other time-based works are unveiled. Who knows what political ideas may yet unfold. But right now the exhibition's three floors offer a kind of cozy art cocoon — a sentiment not nearly as distanced from the art fairs as some observers would like to think.

*The 2014 Whitney Biennial opens to the public on Friday, March 7, and continues at the Whitney Museum of American Art (945 Madison Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through May 25.*