

## Whitney Biennial 2022

Aruna D'Souza

*An ambitious survey of American art that locates both hope and precarity in the mutability of the present moment.*

The 2022 Whitney Biennial is the most curated edition in some time—its organizers, the museum's own David Breslin and Adrienne Edwards, have an argument to make. Finding themselves with an extra year to prepare the show (albeit under the least amenable circumstances), the pair have created a biennial that eschews the mere presentation of a snapshot of the US art world. Laudably ambitious, this exhibition is a reflection, at a juncture that feels very much like a turning point in our history, on past, present, and future—how we got here, where we are, and where we might be (or could be) going. Grief and hope operate in equal measures.

A number of themes—or, as the curators call them, “hunches”—animate the selection of sixty-three artists and collectives, whose work is installed primarily on the Whitney's fifth and sixth floors. These hunches include the idea that abstraction might offer a visceral understanding of the world; that a contemporary “lush conceptualism” relies not so much on the dematerialization of the object as on a doubling down on the object's thingness; that “auto-ethnographic” work goes beyond memoirish minings of the self, locating the subject in histories, cultures, networks, and systems of power; and that language has the capacity (both as a mode of communication and as a sign system) to narrate and complicate at once.

History is an overriding concern—in the curators' eyes, the past is always coming into being and acting upon the present. Breslin and Edwards treat as unfinished business the infamous 1993 Whitney Biennial—the one that exemplified a broader turn in American culture toward the identity politics that we see taken up anew in our contemporary moment. Coco Fusco, Renée Green, Daniel Joseph Martinez, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, and Charles Ray, all included in that earlier iteration, appear again in 2022. The curators refer in the catalog to these and others in the show—Ralph Lemon, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Steve Cannon (known for his East Village gallery and publication *A Gathering of the Tribes*)—as ghosts who haunt the contemporary art world, exerting their presence in ways that are not always acknowledged. I question whether Ray truly functions in this manner; his recent resurgence seems to me less about relevance than market forces. But in other instances, the curators' case is more convincing. Take, for example, a mini-retrospective on the fifth floor of Cha's photography, video, film, and writing. Cha's interdisciplinary practice has been explicitly cited by Trinh, and forms the basis of Na Mira's affecting video *Night Vision (Red as never been)* from 2022 on the sixth floor. Another artist who seems particularly resonant right now—Coco Fusco—is represented by a 2021 video, *Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word*, in which she grieves what COVID has taken from us by rowing a boat around Hart Island, site of a public cemetery where people, including those who died in epidemics up to and including our current one, have been buried, often anonymously, by prison laborers since the mid-nineteenth century. It is an exercise in confronting the present by confronting the past.

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