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Why These 4 Whitney Biennial Artists Are Making Waves

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Since its inception in 1932, the Whitney Biennial has been serving up a real-time snapshot of the American art scene. Featuring dozens of artists following different muses, the show is by its nature heterogeneous, contradictory, uneven, and often provocative—in the best way. In the past few decades New York’s highest-profile biennial has been known as a flash point for controversy, too.

“There’s no set formula or manual for creating this exhibition,” says the Whitney Museum’s director, Adam Weinberg, adding that it’s an attempt to find the “unadulterated but not uncomplicated heartbeat of artmaking at this moment.”

The fruits of that thoughtful searching will be unveiled on May 17, when the biennial’s 79th edition opens with the work of 75 artists, many of them under 40 and many featured in the show for the first time. Performance pieces will be prominent—reflecting an inescapable art-world trend—as will creative use of nongallery spaces inside and outside the museum.

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"There's an engagement with politics and current events," says Rujeko Hockley, who curated this year's biennial with Jane Panetta. "But not in a doom-and-gloom, sliding-off-the-cliff sense." Hockley says that a spirit of connection and shared purpose bubbles up most strikingly. "Artists and their peers are part of broad networks," she says. "There's a sense of community that comes through."

In the run-up to the show, *Galerie* spoke with four dynamic participants.



Tomashi Jackson in her studio surrounded by her colorful-layered assemblages.
Photo: Jeremy Liebman

Tomashi Jackson

Raised on the West Coast, Tomashi Jackson says her real artistic education came once she deferred her studies at San Francisco Art Institute and apprenticed for Bay Area mural painters. She has always needed to do her own thing. "I have a long-standing compulsion to make my own material, to make my own surfaces," says the artist (who later graduated from Cooper Union), referring here to her colorful, layered, and improvisatory-looking assemblages that combine painting, printmaking, photography, and handicraft.



The studio of Whitney Biennial artist Tomashi Jackson.
Photo: Jeremy Liebman

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In her three biennial works, the New York-based Jackson addresses racial inequality, particularly the way communities of color have been displaced in urban development, going all the way back to the construction of Central Park in the 19th century. The unconventional paintings are made with gauze, linen, muslin, brown butcher paper, and paint; one of them uses a shop awning as a base instead of canvas. Boldly hued, they appear abstract from a distance, but distinct figures become visible up close. "We see some of the faces of these displaced people in the works," she explains.

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Despite the strong thematic thrust of her work, Jackson considers herself a formalist. "I use photography and printmaking to create a graphic space inside the painting," she says. "When the images collide they create a crosshatch—and that really excites me."