

# NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

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Siddhartha Mitter, "The Whitney Biennial Called. How Will They Answer?" *The New York Times*, May 9, 2019.

## The New York Times

WHITNEY BIENNIAL

### The Whitney Biennial Called. How Will They Answer?

For these eight first-time artists participating in the biennial, it's a surefire résumé builder. But it also exposes them to heightened scrutiny.

By Siddhartha Mitter

• May 9, 2019



From left, Meriem Bennani, Tiona Nekkia McClodden, Calvin Marcus, Maia Ruth Lee, Todd Gray, Sofia Gallisá Muriente, Nicholas Galanin and Tomashi Jackson. Credit: Photographs by Christopher Gregory (Bennani, McClodden, Lee, Muriente, Jackson); Brian Guido (Marcus, Gray); and Ben Huff (Galanin) all for The New York Times

When [Tiona Nekkia McClodden](#), a Philadelphia-based filmmaker and installation artist, was invited to take part in this year's Whitney Biennial, she felt satisfaction, but also crippling panic.

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On one hand Ms. McClodden, 37, was coming off [well-received film and performance projects](#) in New York that had explored black queer culture in the 1980s. But the work had run its course. “I was having this chaotic meltdown,” she said.

What new work would she make?

Selection in the Whitney Biennial instantly marks an artist as a figure at the forefront of American contemporary art. For young selectees like Ms. McClodden — three quarters of this year’s roster of 75 artists are under 40 — it is a surefire résumé and market builder. By the same token, it exposes them to inevitable political stakes and heightened scrutiny.

The Biennial is sometimes provocative by design: [the 1993 edition famously landed in the midst of the culture wars](#) with a barrage of in-your-face art asserting race, gender, and sexual identities. Other years have sparked more specific confrontations, as the last one did, [in 2017](#), over a rendering by the painter [Dana Schutz](#) of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old boy who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955.

This year, not only is the national political climate tense, but so too are institutional debates around the Whitney itself. The group [Decolonize This Place](#) has convened performance-like protests in the museum’s lobby. They [demand that the institution remove its vice chairman of the board, Warren B. Kanders](#), who is the chief executive of Safariland, a company that makes law-enforcement products like tear gas.

Although just one invited artist, [Michael Rakowitz](#), withdrew from the Biennial in response to the activists’ initial request, nearly 50 participants in the show have added their names to an [open letter calling for Mr. Kanders’ removal](#).

And some participants may charge the issues head-on. The art and research group [Forensic Architecture](#), for instance, has [signaled](#) that its work will address the Kanders controversy directly.

Still, recent visits with eight of the first-time participants in the Biennial — six studio visits, in three cities, and two by video — found them completing work that made its social points subtly, without polemics. They were well aware of the debates swirling around the show, which opens May 17; four of them signed the open letter. But their work channeled other energies: research, technique, play, ritual. If anything, the artists we met seemed to seek areas of calm — for the viewer, for themselves.

[Ms. McClodden](#), who is black, queer, and grew up in South Carolina, has had little patience for the recent protests, which she sees as parochial. Her new work, which draws deeply on African-rooted spiritual practices, lays down a different gauntlet. “This is a chance to comment on what the range of American art can be,” she said. “This is art that challenges the limitations of the building that it’s in.”

It is far from a scientific sample but auguries point to a 2019 Whitney Biennial that has the potential to show creative ways forward, for the culture — and maybe even the country.

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The curators, Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta, acknowledged that organizing the show in the current social climate and following the last edition's blowup was a challenging task. "We took our responsibility very seriously in light of previous Biennials," Ms. Panetta said. "It felt a little daunting at first."

In visiting artists over 14 weeks, traveling around the country, they found more optimism than they expected. "Over time you have to start thinking about creative possibilities, and we saw that in a lot of artists we met," Ms. Panetta said.

The exhibition's impact will be clear only once it is up, of course. But here is a preview of what we saw as eight artists' sketches, models and images — their dreams — came to life.

## Tomashi Jackson

"The comfort I find is in making the work."



Ms. Jackson in her Brooklyn studio. Credit Christopher Gregory for The New York Times

For a painter, Tomashi Jackson is something of a policy nerd.

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“I have a compulsion to address issues of public concern,” she said. [In her studio in the Brooklyn Army Terminal](#), there were history books and images of people who lost their homes in New York — some in the 19th century, when Seneca Village was razed to become part of Central Park; some recently, under a controversial policy known as third-party transfer.

Ms. Jackson’s paintings in progress integrated these images and built them into installations using Mylar, PVC strips, and a bodega-like awning. Two will be in the Biennial; others are now in a solo show at [the Tilton Gallery](#) in New York.

Raised in South Los Angeles, Ms. Jackson, 39, was a muralist in the Bay Area before attending the Cooper Union and the Yale School of Art. In between, she did a design-oriented master’s degree at M.I.T. that led her to Harvard policy classes. The methods helped her grasp, for instance, why generations of women in her family were domestic workers.

“This dry, distant research could help fill in narratives that implicate me,” she said.

Recently, Ms. Jackson [has made paintings inspired by court rulings on school desegregation](#). She is partly in search of a visual language to convey law and policy, she said. But she is also processing legacies of oppression through technique.

“The comfort I find is in making the work,” she said, “and what it shows me through its material evolution.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/09/arts/design/whitney-museum-biennial-artists.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=Arts>