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The Greatest Biennial of All

The Whitney Houston Biennial is back, showing the work of 167 women artists.



[Jillian Steinhauer](#) | [3 days ago](#)



The 2017 Whitney Houston Biennial (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Three years ago, the Whitney Museum opened its last biennial in the Marcel Breuer building, a sprawling but largely inward-facing show that drew heavy criticism for its lack of diversity. Just a few days later, a one-night exhibition of 85 women artists popped up

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in a small studio space in Brooklyn. Though it wasn't expressly positioned as a response to the Whitney Biennial, the Whitney Houston Biennial seemed to revel in inclusivity and, in that sense, felt like a rebuttal.

Now the 2017 Whitney Biennial has arrived in the museum's new home, bringing it with both praise — for showcasing a more heterogeneous group of artists engaged with the world around them — and considerable critique — for hollow depictions of violence. Alongside it, the Whitney Houston Biennial has quietly made a return too, in a space run by Chashama just 1.5 miles from the main event and lasting for 10 days instead of four hours.



Nadja Verena Marcin's cheeky video "How to Undress in Front of Your Husband" (2016), HD video, 13 mins

Artist and curator C. Finley founded the Whitney Houston Biennial, and she's the organizer once again of the 2017 edition — with considerable help from a large group of women and

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queer folks. That part is important, because for her, the show is as much about art as it is about community and “creating connections” for the artists involved. “It encourages people,” she says of being included in the exhibition, especially students whose work is hung alongside art by the likes of Linda Mary Montano. For better or for worse, in the art world, “you get things by who you know. This is who we know.”



Francena Ottley, “Seat of Heritage” (2016), 26 x 15 in

As in 2014, that “we” seems to encompass a genuinely broad spectrum of artists, though the one common factor among the 167

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of them may be that they're not household names (with Anne Carson and Justin Vivian Bond among the few exceptions). Walking through the show, which covers nearly every inch of wall space and a chunk of the floor — Finley calls this, fondly, “my crazy, salon-style weirdness” — I recognized work by some friends and acquaintances but spent most of my time appreciating all that was new. I paused for a while to look at and listen to Dominika Ksel's haunting tribute to science fiction writer Octavia Butler, “Parable of Democracy” (2017), and watched, nearby, Nadja Verena Marcin's cheeky video “How to Undress in Front of Your Husband” (2016). I pondered Patricia Dominguez's intriguing prints in “The Museum of Seagulls” (2017) and marveled at a trio of pieces by Francena Ottley, including a miniature chair that appears to be made entirely of hair. I laughed many times, not least thanks to the Cake Butt Collective's snappy “King Cake” video (2016) and Meegan Barnes's clever sculpture “Peek-a-boo Versace Booty” (2016). Each participant was asked to pick a female-identifying “pioneer” who inspires them; those short response texts — on subjects ranging from Venus figures to famous artists like Lynda Benglis to a librarian in Havana to many people's mothers — are included on the wall labels and make for a lot of interesting reading, if you're inclined to do it.

It's difficult to know what to make of a show like the Whitney Houston Biennial, where the sole determining factor for participating artists is their womanhood (Finley says applications were open to anyone who identifies as such). There's a beauty to the diversity — of identities, media, and styles — but there's also the feeling of a grab bag, plus the nagging question of whether it ghettoizes its participants. In 2014, the scrappy show blew into a stifled art world like a breath of fresh air; in 2017 and the days of Trump, there seems to be less distance between the Whitney and

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Whitney Houston (both literally and figuratively), and the latter, lacking any kind of unifying theme, risks not having enough of a clear purpose.

For Finley, the show's value lies in the creation of a community, exposure for artists, and possible sales. I find myself agreeing — promoting the work of lesser-known women artists is always a social and hopefully an economic good. But I was also encouraged to hear that Finley wants, starting in 2019, to bring on younger curators, with an eye towards passing the biennial on to them to shape as they see fit. In a doggedly sexist world, the Whitney Houston Biennial remains necessary, but it's still figuring out how to grow into a force of its own.

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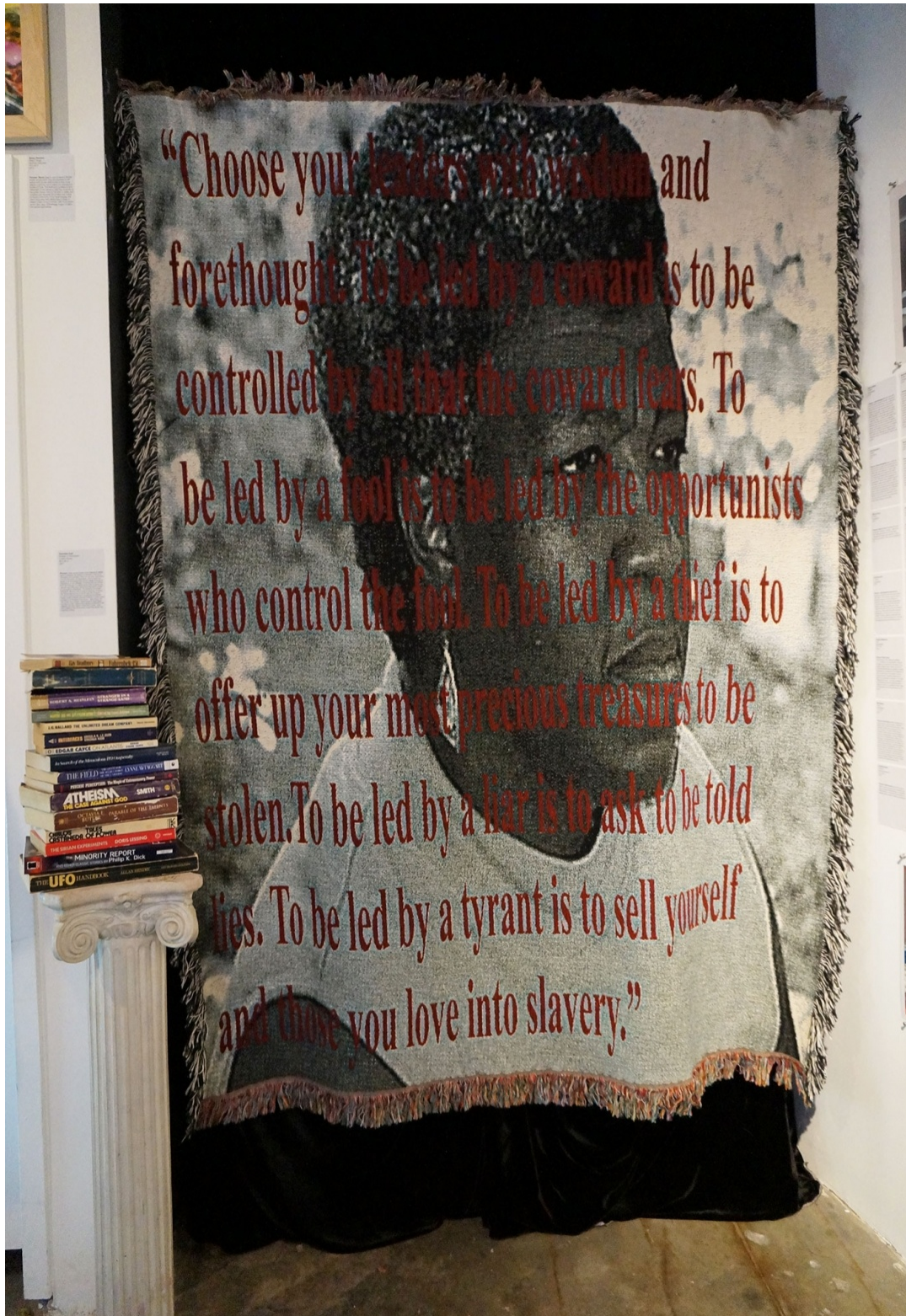
Installation view, 2017 Whitney Houston Biennial, with Angel Favorite's "Intention Platform" in foreground

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The Cake Butt Collective, "King Cake" (2016), video

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Dominka Ksel, "Parable of Democracy" (2017), woven cotton, 80 x 60 in

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Installation view, 2017 Whitney Houston Biennial



Jennifer Mack-Watkins, "Afro Hawk" (2011), silk screen, 26"x35" and "Black Warhol" (2011), silk screen, 26"x40"

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Above: Daniela Gomez Paz, "Tierra" (2016), melted fabric, expired pigments, tempera paint, crayons, found resin, and objects, 9 x 12 in; below: Megan Pahlmier, "Of the Same" (2014), paper, 3 x 6 x 1 in and "Soft Sound" (2014), paper, 7 x 9 x 1 in

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Foreground: Aniahs Gnay, "Thumbs Fell from the Sky" (2013), 24 x 36 in; background: Gabriela Vainsencher, "El Objeto Que Se Acuerda" (2016), archival inkjet print mounted, 72 x 88 in

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Jia Sung, "As you can see, i have: a red heart, a white heart, a yellow heart, an avaricious heart, a greedy heart, an envious heart, a petty heart, a competitive heart, an ambitious heart, a scornful heart, a murderous heart, a vicious heart, a fearful heart, a cautious heart, a perverse heart, a nameless obscure heart, and all kinds of wicked hearts, but not a single black heart." (2016), oil on panel, 33 x 12 in



Work by Desiree Des in the 2017 Whitney Houston Biennial