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A Whitney Houston-Inspired Art Show Puts Women Center Stage

Meet the artists of the 'All Women Biennial'

By Alanna Martinez • 03/27/17 4:06pm



The 2017 Whitney Houston Biennial at Chashama, with work by Angel Favorite in the foreground.
Alanna Martinez for Observer

The Whitney Biennial may be the talk of the town at the moment, both because it's arguably the most prestigious art world event on U.S. soil and because it never fails to drum-up some sort of controversy. But just a little further downtown there's another exhibition packing a punch. Now in its second year, the Whitney Houston Biennial (yes, you read that correctly) is back on at Chashama, with a dense salon-style display of works by 167 women and women-identifying artists.

"I wanted to have the full rainbow of humanity represented on the wall," curator C. Finley told me by phone. While its peer, the Whitney Biennial, boasts a seemingly more diverse artist roster than past editions, representation of women and artists of color is still lacking in major museums and galleries. With the Whitney Houston's 2017 edition, titled "Greatest Love of All," Finley strived "to create a platform that's all ages. I really tried hard to get younger and older artists who might be underrepresented." For that reason, work in the show runs the gamut from photography and painting to sculpture and video, and its roster of artists is intentionally diverse. Over 1,000 visitors attended the Biennial's opening on March 19, packing into Chashama's small, ground-floor gallery space in Tribeca, said Finley.

While the show takes its name and inspiration from musical icon Whitney Houston, don't expect a show filled with fan art. Rather, the Biennial is named for the singer because of the active role she played mentoring younger artists. Focusing

on the theme of mentorship, Finley has asked participating artists to submit a written statement about someone who has inspired them along the way. Accompanying works by Caroline Falby, Becky Flanders, Nadja Verena Marcin and Chanel Matsunami Govreau are tidbits and historical background about art critic Arlene Raven, artist Renee Cox, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and civil rights advocate Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, among many others.

Some not-to-be-missed pieces include returning Biennial participant Dominka Ksel's sculpture, *Parable of Democracy*; a sound work and woven tapestry inspired by science fiction writer Octavia Butler. Butler's image is sewn into the cotton fibers of the tapestry, while an audio tape plays interview clips with the author spliced together with examples of "hate speech" by Donald Trump, Adolf Hitler and Richard Spencer.

Midnight Work, a video by artist and performer Chanel Matsunami Govreau done in collaboration with the Korean waacker Lip J, captures the subtle and sensual facial expressions and hand gestures of a group of Korean dancers waacking—a dance style that originated in Los Angeles in the 1970s—while shouts and cries of encouragement can be heard from an audience off-screen.

In the center of the exhibition, Angel Favorite's participatory installations, *Intention Platform* and *Transliminal Communion*, invite viewers to remove their shoes and sit

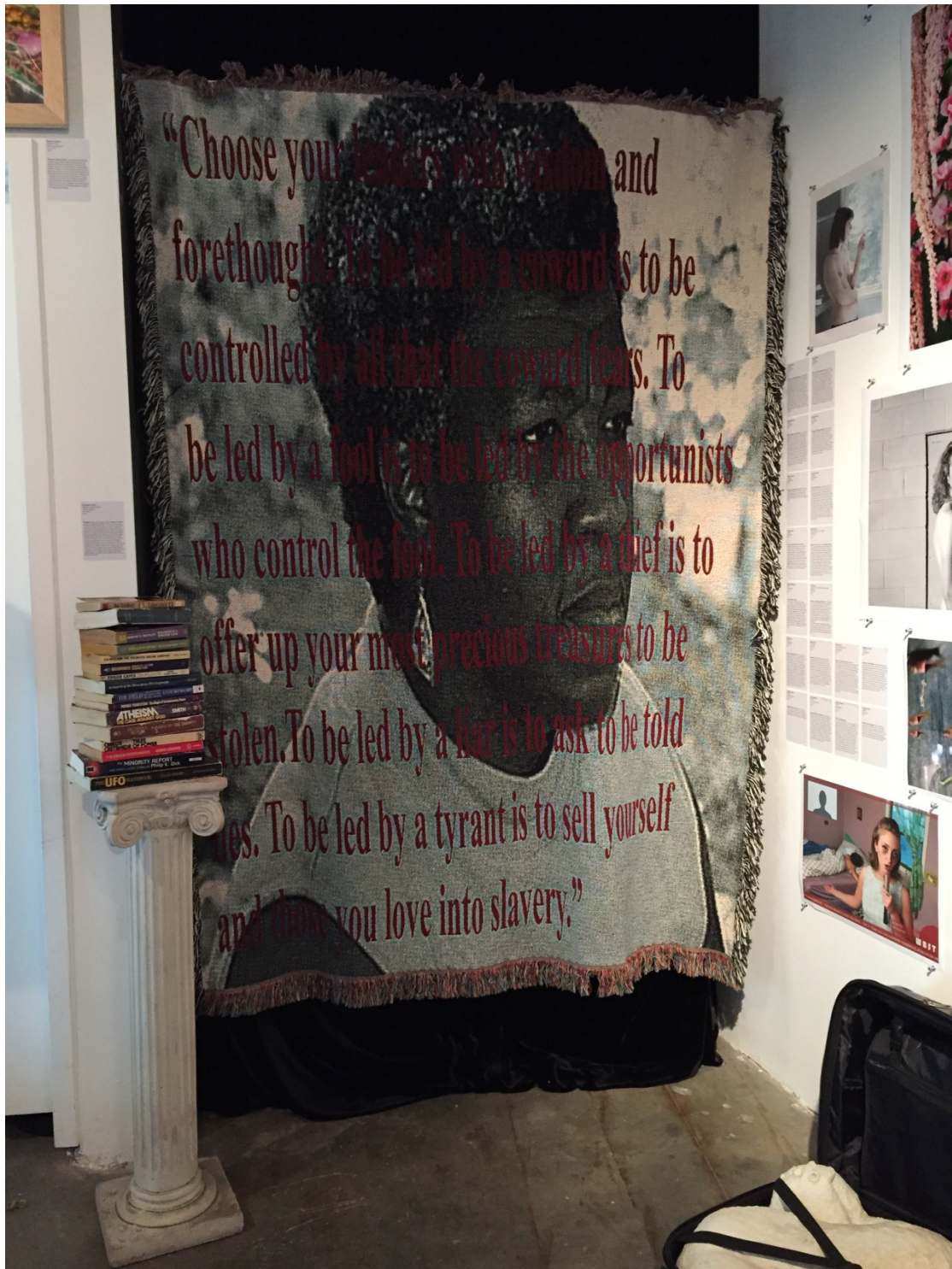
inside a reflective, pyramidal platform amid an assortment of object offerings, from candles to Tarot cards and smudge sticks and crystals. A card on the floor reads: “You are welcome to sit and meditate/make intentions...Move objects to suit your needs....” The work is a living piece, Finley tells me, and visitors are encouraged to bring and place additional offerings at the base of the sculpture for the duration of the show.

But a Biennial that’s been named for one of pop music’s biggest stars wouldn’t be complete without at least one visual nod to the late singer, which has been provided for this edition by artist Alex Nuñez. The artist’s piece, titled *Whitney*, an embellished cover of one of Houston’s vinyl records that’s been covered with glittering beads, is hung adjacent from Favorite’s immersive sculptures.

“The Whitney Houston Biennial: Greatest Love of All” is open through March 29 at Chashama.

<http://observer.com/2017/03/all-women-whitney-houston-biennial-exhibition-review-photos/>

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The 2017 Whitney Houston Biennial at Chashama; featured: Dominka Ksel's sculpture, Parable of Democracy.
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The 2017 Whitney Houston Biennial at Chashama; featured: Tora Lopez's *Baroness*, 2017.
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The 2017 Whitney Houston Biennial at Chashama; featured: Suzanne Wright's 8 Shuttles, 2016.
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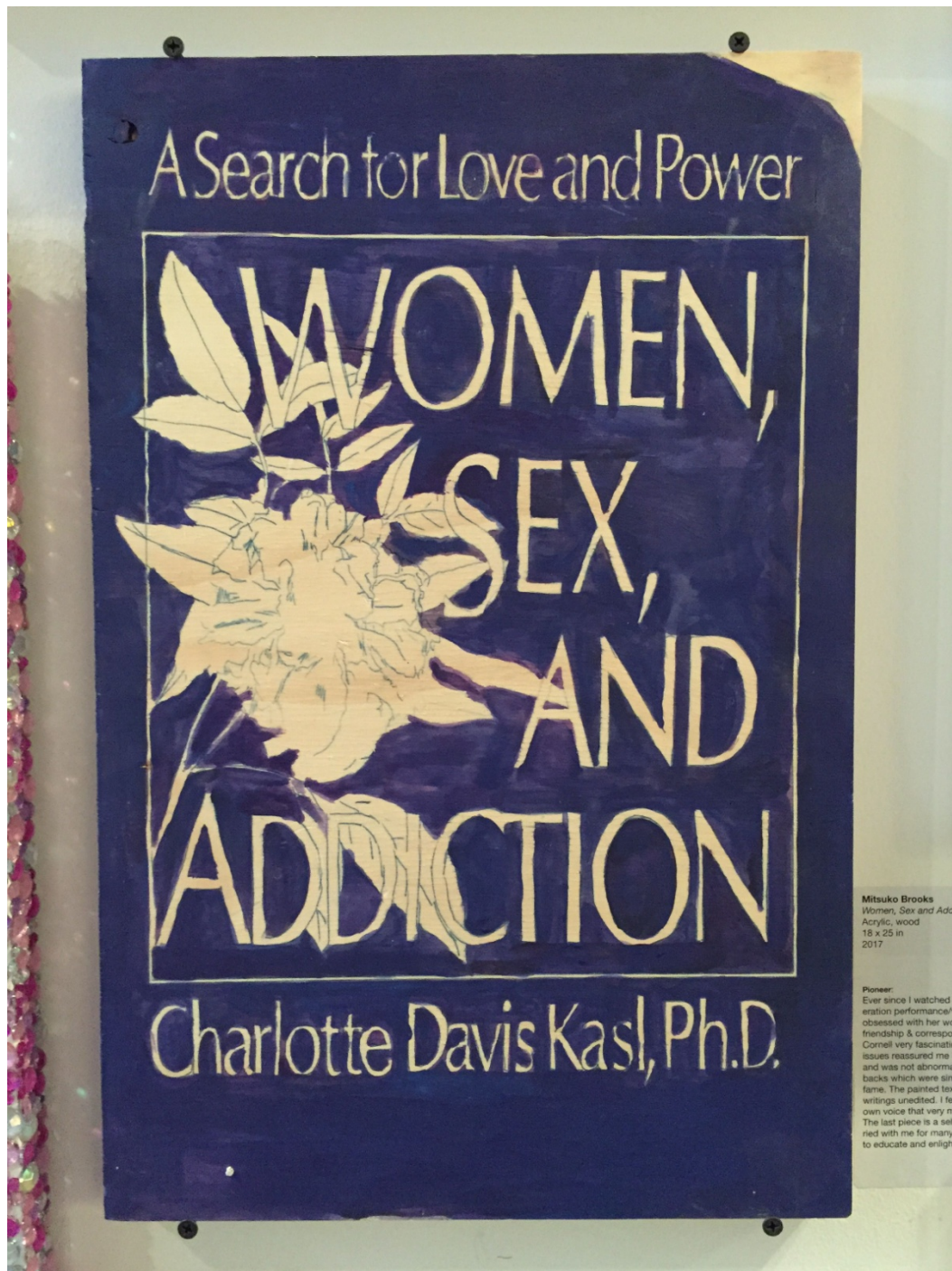
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The 2017 Whitney Houston Biennial at Chashama; featured: Alex Nuñez's Whitney, 2016.
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The 2017 Whitney Houston Biennial at Chashama; featured: Megan Barnes's J.J. Fad Cassete Tape, 2017.
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The 2017 Whitney Houston Biennial at Chashama; featured: Mitsuki Brooks's Women, Sex and Addiction, 2017.
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The 2017 Whitney Houston Biennial at Chashama; featured: Nadja Verena Marcin's *How to Undress in Front of Your Husband*, 2016.
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The 2017 Whitney Houston Biennial at Chashama; featured: Margaux Walter's *In Bloom*, 2015.
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