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ART & DESIGN

State of Our Art, According to Whitney A Guide to the 2014 Whitney Museum Biennial

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WHITNEY Biennials can be daunting, confounding, exhausting and sometimes even outrageous. No matter how the curators organize this sprawling survey of what's happening in American contemporary art right now, trying to navigate the museumwide exhibition and make sense of it all is a challenge, even for the pros.

This year's edition, its 77th, which opens next Friday, is the last in the Whitney Museum's Madison Avenue home before it decamps to its new building in Manhattan's meatpacking district in 2015. It is also perhaps the most highly anticipated contemporary art event in a week jam-packed with gallery openings and art fairs.

For the Biennial's finale in the Marcel Breuer building, the Whitney invited three outside curators to organize the show: Stuart Comer, chief curator of media and performance at the Museum of Modern Art; Anthony Elms, associate curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia; and Michelle Grabner, an artist and a professor in the painting and drawing department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In a break from years past, the three have each taken a floor and will present distinct visions, rather than one buildingwide narrative. Although they have coordinated in some of the public spaces, the second, third and fourth floors can be seen as independent shows and visited either in bite-size pieces — one floor at a time — or swallowed in one gulp.

“It's as if you're on your laptop and have three windows open,” Mr. Comer explained. “It's not a collaboration but a conversation, a dialogue.” To drive

home the point that this is “a show with three chapters,” as he calls it, the catalog gives each curator a distinct section, printed on differently textured papers.

This year’s biennial is especially dense, featuring the works of 103 participants (a word carefully chosen to include both individual artists and artist collectives), more than twice the number in 2012. Art is everywhere — in the stairwells, the sculpture court, the elevators, the lobby (where the composer and artist Sergei Tcherepnin has created a sound installation emanating from the ceiling).

Performances will be sprinkled throughout the museum, changing during the run of the show, which ends on May 25. (The schedule will be posted on the [museum’s website](#).)

It’s not the first time the Biennial will spill out of its home, this time into Hudson River Park, at 17th Street, with a monumental multimedia work by Tony Tasset, composed of colored acrylic panels etched with the names of 400,000 artists, from Picasso and Warhol to little-known emerging artists.

For visual omnivores, the week also offers a panoply of commercial art fairs. There are the [Art Dealers Association of America Art Show](#), at the Park Avenue Armory (at 67th Street), which opens on Wednesday, and the sprawling [Armory Show](#), at Piers 92 and 94 (12th Avenue and 55th Street in Clinton) and the [Independent Art Fair](#), (548 West 22nd Street in Chelsea), which both open on Thursday.

But it is the Biennial that aims to capture what’s happening in American art. Themes inevitably emerge, delivered in different ways, in different mediums, by different curators. Here are a few to look out for during your visit.

PAPER is a star of this Biennial, with dozens of books and printed material. “Now that we have access to more archival material, we are all preoccupied with how we can reanimate it and create living histories,” Mr. Comer said. The independent publisher [Semiotext\(e\)](#) is presenting a series of books; an artist duo, Valerie Snobeck and Catherine Sullivan, have created an installation whose imagery and objects are based on a lifetime of airline menus collected by a Chicago anthropologist.

The 89-year-old Beirut-born cultural editor and artist [Etel Adnan](#), whose accordion-folded paper books and diaries depict street scenes of New York, suggest the relationship between writing and painting. Also on view are the spiral notebooks with sketches that the writer David Foster Wallace kept while researching “The Pale King,” his last novel. (His biographer, D. T. Max, called them “an improvised bulletin board.”)

In addition to printed matter, look for literary accouterments, such as a writing table created for Nancy Mitford, the British novelist, by the Canadian-born artist Paul P.

The first Arts and Crafts movement, in England, challenged the taste of the Victorian era. Now the handmade aesthetic is flourishing again, Ms. Grabner said. “As so much moves to the digital world, there is a movement of slowing art and life down.”

Sheila Hicks, an artist whose career has involved melding art, design, craft and architecture, has created a monumental fiber sculpture from ceiling to floor in a spectrum of colors. Lisa Anne Auerbach, based on the West Coast, has knitted sweaters with political messages in the trim.

There is also ceramic art by Shio Kusaka, John Mason and Sterling Ruby, as well as a delicately tooled leather wall piece created by Carol Jackson. The Los Angeles artist Joel Otterson created a 14-foot-tall curtain wall of colored beads that seems straight from a hippie apartment.

Looks That Deceive

Things are not always as they appear. Genders are switched. Artists known for working in one discipline are presenting work in another. There are writers who paint; painters who write poetry; filmmakers who create sculptures; photographers who draw.

What appear to be abstract canvases by Ken Okiishi are actually oil paintings on flat-screen televisions, with a mash-up of footage from old VHS tapes and new digital images in subjects ranging from newscasts to commercials in an installation that is neither a painting nor a video.

An especially provocative photographic diary compiled by Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst in Mr. Comer’s installation chronicles the couple’s five-and-

a-half-year relationship, in which one [transitioned](#) from female to male, and the other from male to female. Until now, this had been a private journal.

Toward the end of March, look for a 22-minute video by the duo called “She Gone Rogue,” described as an odyssey through a world of transgender-themed magical realism when it was shown at the [Hammer Museum](#)’s biennial in 2012.

Female Painters

Women are revitalizing abstract painting, and they are well represented here, with works by artists like Louise Fishman, Jacqueline Humphries, Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, Dona Nelson, Laura Owens and Amy Sillman.

“I am focusing on a handful of women artists who take on the authority of abstract painting — its history, its ambition and its relationship to power and gender,” Ms. Grabner said. “I wanted to put them together to underscore how different the language of abstract painting can be.”

She isn’t alone; Mr. Elms has included two large-scale abstract paintings by Rebecca Morris on the second floor. Long a fan of Marcel Breuer’s Brutalist architecture, Mr. Elms said the works fit perfectly with the space.

Nostalgia

In trying to grapple with the future, artists of different generations are looking to the past for inspiration. The Surrealist environment on the fourth floor, created by Shana Lutker, a Los Angeles-based Conceptual artist, is loosely based on a fistfight between André Breton — a founder of Surrealism — and two artists, Joan Miró and Max Ernst, over their sets and costumes for a ballet based on “Romeo and Juliet” in 1926. (Breton considered the production lowbrow, Ms. Grabner explained). Ms. Lutker’s stage, an abstract re-creation of the sets and costumes, from Miró’s drawing, includes hanging stainless-steel figures of dancers, two cast ballerina feet and hundreds of red fliers on a ballet bar, to symbolize those thrown onto the stage in a protest.

On the third floor, a 19th-century-style salon, the work of Keith Mayerson, is hung with images from his own modern family: he and his husband; Elvis Presley; Kermit the Frog; and Marvin Gaye, among them.

“It falls somewhere between comic books, a story board and an old-fashioned painting gallery,” Mr. Comer said. He also enlisted [Triple Canopy](#), a nonprofit group that publishes books and an online magazine, to create an installation that explores the cultural meaning of artworks as they are collected, sold, replicated, photographed and exhibited. It focuses on the Garbisch family (Col. Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch) and its vast trove of American primitive paintings and furniture, given to many museums. (The Whitney sold its gift in 1999 to focus on the 20th century.) Objects include a wash basin on loan from the Met and carefully made reproductions.

Architecture

Perhaps because the Whitney is saying goodbye to the Breuer building — or because more artists today are preoccupied with architecture, both as a form and a discipline — watch for constructed objects and architectural images, and ideas about what a museum should be, to be addressed in myriad ways.

Zoe Leonard has transformed a fourth-floor space into a giant camera obscura. Most of the Breuer’s trapezoidal window is blacked out, with only a small hole left that projects an inverted image of the unfolding streetscape — people rushing, and taxis and buses barreling by — onto the walls, ceiling and floor of the gallery.

Morgan Fisher, a Los Angeles artist, has created a curious portrait of the Whitney’s new Renzo Piano building. His sculpture, on the third floor, is an intentionally scrappy construction fashioned from drywall, in which he has reconfigured spaces in the museum, from the lobby to a boardroom coat closet. “It’s about how we rethink the history of museums and the hierarchy of space,” Mr. Comer said.

Mining Marcel Breuer’s archives, Mr. Elms brought together 24 artists and groups to answer a question by Breuer in his earliest notes on the building, when the architect wrote: “What should a museum look like, a museum in Manhattan?”

Look for the artists’ responses to that question in Mr. Elms’s second-floor installation.

Correction: March 1, 2014

An article on Friday about the Whitney Biennial, which opens next Friday, misstated the age of Etel Adnan, an artist who will have work displayed in the show. She is 89, not 84. The error was repeated in an accompanying picture caption.