

Post-Post-Millennial: The New Museum Triennial and the Whitney Biennial

By [Will Heinrich](#) 2/28 5:36pm

Portrait of Keith Haring as a Young Man: Brooklyn Museum Focuses on Early Years



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The New Museum's Triennial begins by acknowledging "the impossibility of fully representing a generation in formation." Of course it's impossible, but isn't it still the point? If "The Ungovernables," curated by Eungie Joo, doesn't succeed in finding a final answer, though, it certainly elucidates one problem facing the current generation: the nature of art's relationship to the events of the larger world.

Of those that take a literal, documentary approach, the most successful work is the most direct, beginning with Pratchaya Phinthong's *What I Learned I No Longer Know; the Little I Still Know, I Guessed*, a square stack of dollar bills on the floor. Six and a half bills long by six and a half wide, the stack must be several quadrillion high: these dollars are from Zimbabwe, and their individual denominations run as high as 10 trillion. Slightly less direct are Amalia Pica's *Eavesdropping (Version #2, large)*, a constellation of clear, blue, and red drinking glasses—including one reverse-Coca-Cola-shape glass for

7-Up, “the uncola”—glued to the wall, and Danh Võ’s *WE THE PEOPLE*, life-size copper reproductions of sections of the Statue of Liberty, fabricated in China and leaning against a wall. Possibly too direct are the Propeller Group’s five looping videos on five both literally and figuratively inward-facing screens, recording a marketing firm discussing rebranding communism, and Pilvi Takala’s *The Trainee*, a project—documented with video, PowerPoint and ephemera—which consisted of pretending to work, while making a point of visibly not working, at the professional services company Deloitte for a month.

Those who take a head-in-the-sand, fantasy approach include Adrián Villar Rojas with *A Person Loved Me*, a giant, branching, machinelike object made of cracking clay and cement that scrapes the ceiling and looks like a prop from a Miyazaki movie.

But if the artist takes account of the larger world, the art will take care of itself, as in Lee Kit’s installation *Scratching the Table Surface and Something More*, for which he scratched the same place on a table for two years, until the varnished surface gave way to reveal the wood beneath; Hu Xiaoyuan’s *Wood*, in which she covered 31 pieces of lumber with white silk painted with exact copies of the grain; Gabriel Sierra’s ladder, level, table and two-by-four set vertically and sideway and flush into custom-made holes in the wall; and especially Iman Issa’s *Material for a Sculpture Representing a Bygone Era of Luxury and Decadence*, a brass disc on a jointed wooden tail that’s a cross between Akhenaten and Brancusi.

The final answer, or anyway the most complete and recent one, is uptown at the Whitney Biennial, curated by Elisabeth Sussman and Jay Sanders. Enormously wide-ranging but completely coherent and decisively focused, the show has a kind of watercolor aesthetic of browns and pale yellows, of slideshows and collage. A decade or more after the collapse of our post-millennial hopes, it suggests, we have retracted our ambitions back within material boundaries. We’re dealing with history again as if it were the dawn of time, or of the 20th century—working next to chaos rather than against it, abandoning the aspiration to universal principles, reaching for primal forms and totemic animal figures, making each shape its own fresh compromise. The only difference is that this time we’re not hoping to learn anything. And after decades of burdensome overthinking, we’re now finally dealing with art history the way Vodoun deals with Catholic hagiology, cherry-picking figures of power for ceremonies of our own while blithely ignoring the hierarchical systems of their original context.

Wu Tsang’s *GREEN ROOM*, furnished with low leather couches, dressing mirrors, red lights, a coat rack, a wall of cubbies, and perpendicular screens on two walls looping a video about a transsexual Honduran finding a new life in L.A.’s Silver Platter club, functions as a dressing room for other artist’s performers as well as an installation and lounge for the public. Shooting for a Borges story but looking like HBO, it lands somewhere between the two. L.A. artist Dawn Kasper has installed herself and all her worldly possessions, including an electrically rotating tennis racket and a copy of A

Clockwork Orange but excepting “some of [her] socks and underwear,” in the Whitney for the duration of the show as *THIS COULD BE SOMETHING IF I LET IT*. And scattered around the museum are 85 framed, nine-inch-by-six-inch black-and-white book pages, which illustrate various celestial glories in the much reduced, black-and-white way we imagine them and altogether constitute Lutz Bacher’s *The Celestial Handbook*.

Sarah Michelson’s *Devotion Study #1 – The American Dancer* reimagines the postperformance sublime as a lonely gymkhana in which the artist, in a brown body suit and horse mask, paces around a fenced-in enclosure with gray architectural drawings on the floor. A green neon light in the form of a woman’s featureless face hangs on the wall and is reflected in a window. The textured, weird, patently unbalanced paintings of Forrest Bess, who lived in near-total isolation as a fisherman in Texas (though he did show work in New York with Betty Parsons), are given their own well-deserved room: Bess, who died as a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic, was obsessed with transforming himself—surgically as well as metaphysically—into a hermaphrodite, and this exhibit realizes for the first time his desire to display his meta-medical treatise next to his paintings. Lutz Bacher’s *Pipe Organ* is a Hammond rigged up to play chords automatically, with tin organ pipes, looking like ballistic missiles, leaning over it. Werner Herzog’s *Hearsay of the Soul*, also in its own room, is portentous.

A series of Andrew Masullo’s fabulous oil paintings stand in for the power of serene concentration to shut out larger existential problems. Made with sugary, bright, unmixed colors and hard-edged shapes that seem to date from the ’60s, each of the 34 numbered canvases establishes and wrestles with its own subtle compositional problem. Richard Hawkins’s haunting *Ankoku* collages reconsider the origins of *butoh*, juxtaposing art-historical images with strangely written short English texts and Japanese characters. Nicole Eisenman’s *Untitled*, consisting of 45 mixed-media monotypes, dissolves and recongeals the possibilities of the face. (One monotype shows a Matt Groening-style alien; another, a naked little girl whose genitals look like a fortune cookie.)

Joanna Malinowska has built a “Wall for *Horse Nation*”—the wall is sheetrock, and *Horse Nation* is a schmaltzy painting of wild horses by Native American activist and federal prisoner Leonard Peltier. Kate Levant has made a collage with materials scavenged from an abandoned house in Detroit. Tom Thayer’s mixed-media pieces fold up into images of swans and storks. Matt Hoyt’s superlatively quiet small sculptures, arranged in groups on low shelves, pull in where everything else pushes out. A watercolor by Charles Demuth hangs within an installation by Nick Mauss.

In the fourth-floor mezzanine, Lucy Raven’s *What Manchester Does Today, the Rest of the World Does Tomorrow* consists of a player piano and three paper music rolls, which play three variations, written with Jason Moran, of LCD Soundsystem’s 2010 “Dance Yrself Clean.” It is, Ms. Raven has said, “a way for the player piano to play its own elegy.” But the beautiful thing is that because the piano’s playing again, it’s not an elegy.

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