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## 10 Art Works You Must See At The 2017 Whitney Biennial

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We are living in an era of unparalleled regressive decline. The pendulum of progress has historically always swung back and forth in The United States. The civil rights reforms of JFK and LBJ were met by the security state corruption of Nixon. The moderate civics of Clinton came before the war mongering fear tactics of W. But never has there been an anti-progress movement as sharp and unsettling as what we are currently seeing Trump and the GOP do to undermine the considerable domestic achievements of Obama: Muslim bans, the demonizing of the American press, women's rights attacks, transgender rights attacks, and mass deportations have all made modern American life a series of solitary horrors. But we have one saving grace: our smart phones. Perhaps we should all be thanking Steve Jobs, because even though the Internet has facilitated the spread of false information via Facebook and other social networking ads, we should still consider ourselves lucky that the flow of information cannot be disrupted in any meaningful sense. Artists at their best are the reflections of their time periods, therefore it made perfect sense that the contemporary artists exhibited at the stunning 2017 Whitney Biennial, the first Biennial to take place at The Whitney Museum's new Meatpacking District home, often utilized the technology available to them to make sharp and intellectual political statements.



*(from left) Whitney Museum Deputy Director for Programs and Chief Curator Scott Rothkopf, Biennial co-curators Mia Locks and Christopher Y. Lew, and Whitney Museum director Adam D. Weinberg*

Co-curated by Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks, [The Whitney Biennial](#) counted ‘the formation of self’ and ‘the individual’s place in a turbulent society’ amongst its primary themes. How does one remain fearlessly true to themselves when powerful forces seek to diminish the identities of so many humans that aren’t rich, white and male? How do we not become complacent in the face of white nationalism as the new standard? I found myself asking these questions and more while perusing the works exhibited at the 2017 Biennial. “When we first embarked on this project sometime in 2015 the world felt like a completely different place,” said Locks. “It became apparent that the idea of ‘humanness’ or what it means to be a human right now was an energizing force for the show. Many of the works in the show address interesting questions about how we view ourselves as human beings and the forces that bring us together and the forces that bring us apart.”

The curators decided to include work by well-established artists like Jordan Wolfson, William Pope. L and Jo Baer as well as artists so unknown that some of them don’t even have a page on [Artsy](#), like Rafa Esparza and Maya Stovall. The video pieces and more technological works in the show, including those by artists like Wolfson, Tuan Andrew Nguyen and Tommy Hartung, were perhaps the most confrontationally political of the Biennial. The photographic projects, by artists like Deana Lawson and

Lyle Ashton Harris, felt more personal and identity exploratory. There was also a surprising emphasis on traditional methods of art making, including paintings by the likes of Carrie Moyer and Shara Hughes, that allowed viewers a respite from the political charge of the show. But because of this, even the paintings that focused on the core elements of art (form, shape, color) felt political in their reaffirming of the practice of painting as a means of establishing one's identity. And this doesn't even come close to recounting all the work in the Biennial that also included stunning feats of sculpture and installation. Below are 10 of my favorite pieces and installations of the 2017 Whitney Biennial.

### **Leigh Ledare, *Vozkal***



*Still captured from 'Vozkal' by Leigh Ledare*

I have come to know and love Brooklyn-based artist Leigh Ledare's extremely confrontational photography, collage, and appropriated images culled from fashion editorials, pornography and commerce. Ledare was once assistant to iconic photographer Larry Clark and has acquired his mentor's taste for using shocking and disturbing imagery to arouse conversation. His best known work, *Pretend You're Actually Alive*, presents a series of photographs that capture Leigh's mother (a former dancer) while posing in lingerie, masturbating, and having sex while chronicling her deteriorating health. In other words, Ledare's art is not for the faint of heart. But his Biennial presentation, a video projection entitled *Vozkal*, felt like an aesthetic, if not a

thematic, departure from the ultra-provocateur imagery Ledare got famous with. A film split into three 16 mm projections assembled randomly throughout a space, *Vozkal* captures the social interactions of hundreds of Russian citizens loitering, working in, or passing through a Moscow train station. What is so fascinating about the projections is that while you watch the citizens go about their days, they at first seem like they are free to do what they want. But a creeping sense of dread builds throughout the piece as you begin to notice perilous looking men lurking about, perhaps policing or spying on the area. It reminds the viewer that a modern society falls into chaos and fear quietly. With the Trump administration's dubious Russian dealings, the piece takes on an even more sinister tone.