

MOUSSE

REVIEWS

Whitney Biennial 2017

by Andrianna Campbell



Pope.L, *Claim (Whitney Version)*, 2017. Whitney Biennial 2017, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2017
Collection of the artist; courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. Photo: Matthew Carasella

A few days ago, a firestorm flared up around Dana Shutz's *Open Casket* (2016), and it has threatened to overwhelm any sensible discussion of one of the most inclusive Whitney Biennials to date. The curators, Mia Locks and Christopher Lew, have laid out a daring exhibition that is representative of a broad swath of the population. At its center is Pope.L (aka William Pope.L)'s *Claim (Whitney Version)* (2017), a pink box on the outside slathered mint green on the inside. Pinned with 2,755 slices of bologna, each slice has a photocopy portrait of a person affixed to it. Pope.L. claims the slices are consistent with a percentage of New York City's 1,086,000 Jewish residents. Despite this potentially volatile collation, they are largely illegible as portraits. The cold cuts curl in a manner reminiscent of Hannah Wilke's terra-cotta vaginal forms. The decaying, sagging meat is physically gorgeous. Conceptually, the

luscious degradation and lingering stink points to anxieties about identity at the heart of the exhibition and indeed the greater culture in the United States. Pope.L's allusion to the vagina without the shocking reprobation encountered by Schutz is indicative of the climate. Schutz's *Open Casket* is an exquisitely rendered composition of a horrible act of violence. The schemer of the brushstroke feels akin to the quality of what Emmett Till's flesh must have been like as it came out of the water. We know this from the *Jet* magazine photograph and yet somehow the paint, closer to the quality of skin, explicates the violence of the attack. The revulsion expressed by Hannah Black is conceivable because of the horror of the crime. Yet the crime is not Schutz's, and the work brings up necessary conversations for the historical moment. Another prone figure sprawls in Henry Taylor's *The Times They Ain't A Changing, Fast Enough!* (2017), a stylized depiction of the execution of Philando Castile at the hands of a Minnesota police officer. Taylor's paintings are some of the best that he has exhibited, with flat expanses of white and browns interrupted by drips and smudges. Everywhere one looks, one sees a political statement; even overhead Cauleen Smith's banners *In the Wake* (2017) refer to the state of blackness in the contemporary moment. Sierra Ortega, Bibiana Medkova, Puppies Puppies, and many others address the climate of fear, racism, and violence that has become hypervisible in this last election year, making this one of the most politically astute Whitney Biennials since the 1993 edition.

Painting stands out, including Shara Hughes's colorful landscapes, which pick up the symbolist worlds of Odilon Redon, or perhaps of Agnes Pelton, and bring them into the present. So does technology, from the nauseating virtual-reality experience of Jordan Wolfson's *Real Violence* (2017) to Anicka Yi's high-definition video *The Flavor Genome* (2016); we are made aware that the politics of the body, fraught as they are in the quest for equal rights, are also enmeshed with the politics of science. Our future is being negotiated in created realities, in machines and in labs, with little thought as to questionable ethical practices. In Yi's *The Flavor Genome*, shots of lab workers in pristine coats are interspliced with narration showing us the lumbering liger. Scientists created ligers (a mix of a male lion and a female tiger) and they have features of both species, but they cannot mate and cannot live in the wild since they have no natural habitat. Metaphorically, the liger, as an abstract idea that has become real in the physical space, is a prime example of the ultimate divorce between what is possible and what should be undertaken. If so far the biennial organizers have tackled the politics of identity, and technological means of interfacing or redefining identity, it follows that they would be interested in some form of Marxist critique. Cameron Rowland's *Public Money* (2017), D. Gabriela Torres-Ferrer's *Advertisement for Promesa Act or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Enjoy Debt* (2016), Yasmin Hernandez's *De-Debt/Decolonize* (2017), Conrad Miles's *Compound Interest* (2017), Jason Christopher Chilers™'s *Consumer Culture* (2017), and Occupy Museum's *Debt Fair* (2017) are mostly visually minimal but rich in procedure and/or information, and have a very different quality than the depictions of bodies or technology. Rowland's document asked the museum to enter into a Social Impact Bond or a "Pay for Success" contract to invest in reducing the incarceration of adults. In many ways it is one of the few works that approach

the political as intertwined in everything, not solely belonging to one identity category or another. The culmination of this kind of intersectionality is Raúl de Nieves's *beginning & the end neither & the otherwise betwixt & between the end is the beginning & the end* (2016). The work itself is six floor-to-ceiling windows, each divided into three sections to constitute eighteen "stained glass" windows made of acetate, glue, and beads. Akin to the turn toward furniture or the architectonic that we see in Jessi Reaves's "derelict" re-envisions of modernist furniture, de Nieves uses humble materials to make the wondrous. A group of figures gathers under the cast light. I like to think of light as penetrating absolute categorizations. Based on Greek philosophy, Tala Madani's series of paintings posit the human body as full of light, and I imagine their proposition as a de Nieves suite inhabiting pictorial space. *Shafts* (2017) features four babies crawling away with laser-like lights emitting from their rectums. What might otherwise seem like scatological subject matter has been transformed into the possible future akin to the transfiguration seen in de Nieves. Madani's paintings raise the question of our shared humanity in what are certainly dark times. In this way the Whitney curators have had some success. Rather than shy away from the heated moment, they have embraced complexities outside of black and white.