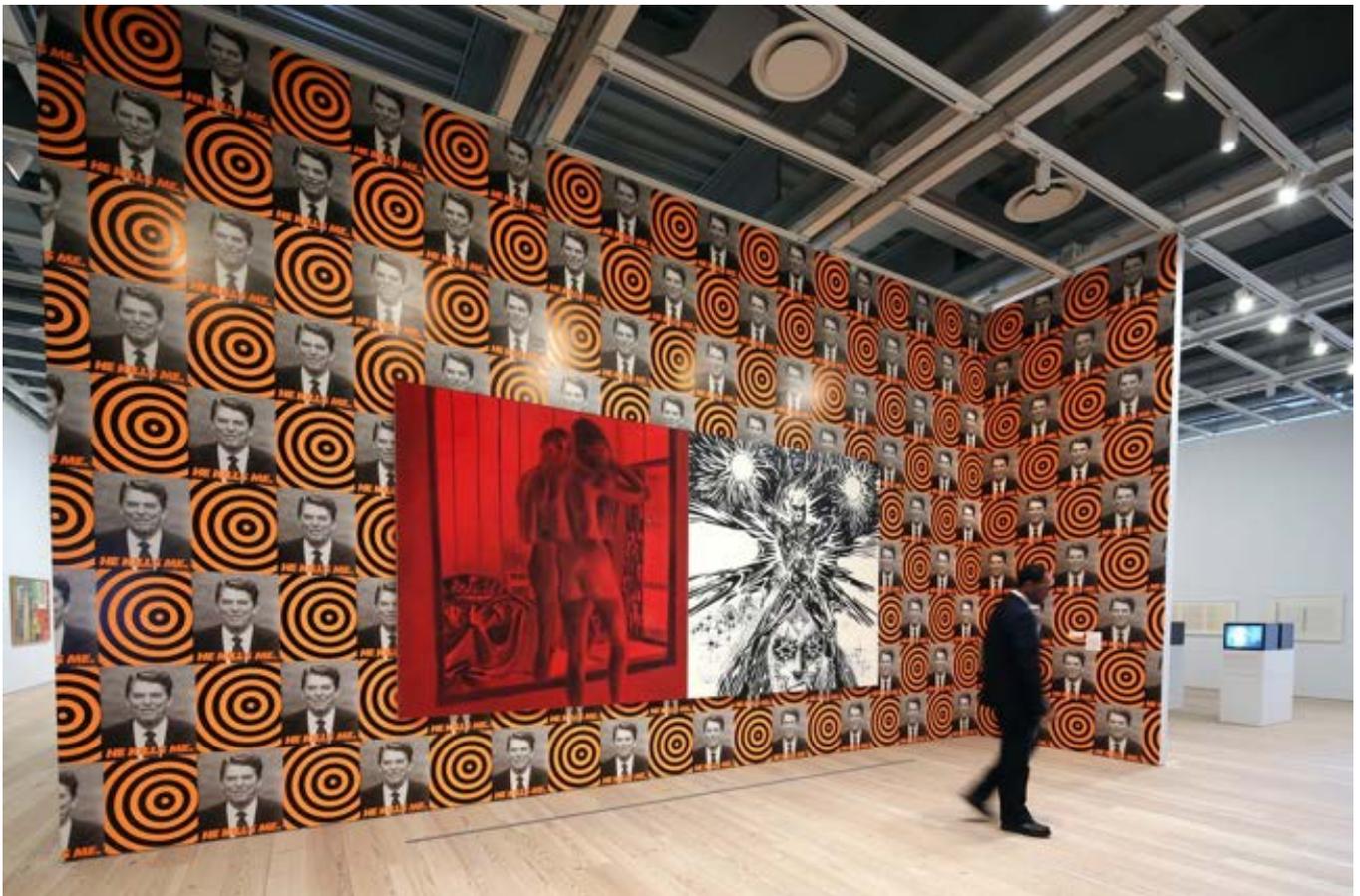


Review: New Whitney Museum's First Show, 'America Is Hard to See'

April 23, 2015



The first exhibition at the new home of the Whitney Museum of American Art, "America Is Hard to See," is to open on May 1. Here, David Salle's "Splinter Man," on a background print of Donald Moffett's "He Kills Me." Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

From outside, Renzo Piano's new Whitney Museum of American Art, set beside the Hudson River, has the bulk of an oil tanker's hull. Inside is entirely different. The galleries, with high ceilings, tall windows and soft pine-plank floors, are as airy and light-flooded as the 19th-century sailmaker's lofts known to Herman Melville, who worked as a shipboard customs inspector where the Whitney now stands. Art feels at home in them, and the work in the museum's top-to-bottom inaugural show is homegrown. Culled from the permanent collection, it imaginatively mixes

favorites by Edward Hopper, Georgia O'Keeffe and Jasper Johns with objects and artists that the Whitney had all but forgotten.

It's good to see a new museum start with history, and the show, called ["America Is Hard to See"](#) and opening on May 1, is, on the whole, a carefully judged musing on an institutional past. That it could never have been done on the same scale at the Whitney uptown is as good a reason as any to have made a move. The new place, at the southern end of the High Line, has twice the exhibition space of the old one. Big slices of the collection can now be on full-time display, never possible before.



Love Letter From the War Front, a gallery dedicated to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and '90s, is part of the "America Is Hard to See" exhibition at the Whitney's new home. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Reasons for choosing the meatpacking district, blocks from Chelsea, as a destination are clear, too, but slipperier. At a time when art is literally as good as gold, the museum has, cannily it would seem, anchored itself in the mercantile center of things, in a prime neighborhood that is the

precise opposite of being an artist neighborhood. Economically, Chelsea is a gated community: Artists can visit but must live elsewhere. What will the Whitney do with that? Whose friend will it be? Market or artist? It cannot be true friend to both.

The High Line location was surely an incentive, too. Suddenly, that elevated walkway, the bizarre scene of pedestrian pacing, has a new goal: It will funnel foot-traffic straight to the museum, which will work hard to be a magnetic destination. Along with art, visitors will find an in-house bar-restaurant, a cafe, a theater-like performance space, elevators designed by Richard Artschwager that are like walking sculptures, and outdoor galleries with panoramic vistas. The new Whitney is the only major museum in this water-lapped city with fabulous river views.

David Hammons's "Untitled." Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

All (or some) of this newness is good, but it's useful to remember — and the museum does remind us — that the Whitney started small and off the commercial grid and was created by an artist for other artists. The creator was Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875-1942), a sculptor and collector who had money, social status and a rebel's appetite for American work that went against the cultural grain of her day. In offbeat Greenwich Village, she started her own museum, which also functioned as a school, a studio and a communal rec room where artists could meet, work and party. You get a vivid sense of the atmosphere in a show installed in the new museum's lobby gallery which, like the original 1931 Whitney, is free to the public. A 1916 portrait of Mrs. Whitney, painted by Robert Henri as a Venus lounging in turquoise silk pajamas, dominates the scene, but there's hubbub around her. Hopper is off in a corner sketching nudes; the museum's go-getting first director, the aptly named Juliana Force, stands, back to us, in a curatorial huddle. A delightful menagerie of sculptural animals demonstrates that the folk-and-outsider art we so value now was also valued then. And a suite of satirical

drawings by Guy Pène Du Bois, recently found in the museum's archives, reveals that the art world of nearly a century ago was every bit as silly as it is today.

From this point, the chronological story of American modernism laid out by four Whitney curators — Donna De Salvo, Carter E. Foster, Dana Miller and Scott Rothkopf, working with Jane Panetta, Catherine Taft and Mia Curran — moves up to the eighth floor and unfolds there with European-influenced abstraction, a kind of art that Mrs. Whitney was slow to warm to. She collected some: Stuart Davis's 1927 "Egg Beater No. 1" was hers. But the great Marsden Hartley works that open this section, radiating the color and clamor of World War I Berlin, came to the museum after her death, as did a big composition of google-eyed swirls by the poet E. E. Cummings, one of many novelties hauled out of deep storage.

Robert Henri's 1916 portrait of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the museum's founder. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

The show is rich in them: a little Joseph Stella collage that looks like a piece of rotting meat; a carved cherry wood bust called "Congolais" by Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, an artist of African-American and Native American descent who was a hit in Europe and ended up a housemaid back home. A 1914 painting by the little-known James Daugherty ingeniously grafts geometric abstraction to baseball. And, in the exhibition's single loan piece, Florine Stettheimer pays tribute to Lady Liberty, who on a clear day you can spy way downtown from the cafe terrace on the eighth floor.

Each is memorable for beauty, rarity or oddness. Together they demonstrate how truly unmappable the borders of American modernism are, a fact that the curators emphasize by avoiding fixed categories in their groupings. They shuffle painting, photography, prints and sculpture. They arrange work by theme and sensibility rather than by textbook brand. A section on the seventh floor labeled "Rose Castle" is named for

a specific assemblage by Joseph Cornell. But it is really about a dream-fed strand of American surrealism, one that embraces fantasists as different as Hopper, Man Ray, Jared French and Andrew Wyeth, while also pulling the filmmakers Maya Deren and Mary Elie Bute into its orbit.

Alexander Calder's "Calder's Circus," in front of George Bellows's "Dempsey and Firpo." Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Elsewhere, "Calder's Circus" gets the center stage its popularity has earned it. But here its vaunted adorableness is wisely deflated by the unsavory company it keeps — a George Bellows slugfest hangs behind it. On another wall, Reginald Marsh's tough 10 cent dancers angle for clients, and Weegee turns opening night at the opera into a class war face-off. The big picture is of an America so addled by its appetite for entertaining distraction that it can't see its own corruption for what it is, a moral depth charge about to blow.

The theme naturally carries over into a Pop Art selection on the sixth floor, though apart from the addition of a few surprise images here — Malcolm Bailey's 1969 painting of a slave ship is one — not much is done with it. The same is true in sections devoted to Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. They're pretty much by the conventional book; they are O.K., but ordinary.

An elevator designed by Richard Artschwager. 2015 Richard Artschwager/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Not ordinary at all are three taut installations of political art. Spread over three floors, they punctuate the show like drum beats. Why do people disparage political art on the grounds that it's doomed to look dated? Drawings and prints from the 1930s protesting antiblack violence have immediate relevance. A 1970 film by Howard Lester called "One Week in Vietnam," which flashes photographs of American soldiers killed in the war in a span of seven days, is still a punch to the gut.

Art generated by or during the AIDS years of the 1980s and '90s is turning out to be more potent, not less, as time passes. And although the politics of personal identity — racial, ethnic, sexual — are now out of critical fashion, it saturates much of the most recent art in this show. In a 2013 video by Jacolby Satterwhite, and a 2014 painting by Nicole Eisenman, difference is depicted in a fresh way, as a reality beyond nailing down, beyond definition.

Passenger elevators at the Whitney were designed by Richard Artschwager and have the look and feel of individual sculptures. 2015 Richard Artschwager/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Nowhere directly addressed are the Whitney's own identity issues, embedded in its very name. This isn't a museum of American art. It's a museum of North American art. The curators are well aware of this, and sometimes use the phrase "art of the United States." But the exclusion remains: Latin American art, art of the Americas, is all but absent here, with the Cuban-born painter Carmen Herrera, 99, being among the outstanding exceptions. (She will have a solo show in 2016.)

And how can it be that in a show of more than 400 American artists, there's only one Native American — Jimmie Durham (maybe two if you count Ms. Prophet)? As part of its institutional narrative, the inaugural exhibition evokes two identity-themed Whitney shows from the past, the 1993 Biennial and the 1994 "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art." But no mention is made of one that fully carried the institution out of parochialism, Lawrence Rinder's "The American Effect: Global Perspectives in the United States, 1990-2003," which had work by artists in China, Colombia, Croatia, Cuba, Egypt, Japan and Senegal. It had faults — what out-on-a-limb project doesn't? — but if I were looking for a model to project toward the future, this would be one. So there's work ahead.

In a real sense, the new building is the least of the Whitney's concerns.

For better or possibly worse — there have already been protests over its proximity to a pipeline carrying fracked fuel — it's a done deal. If it lets art put its best foot forward and gives it an effective stage for shaping culture, it's been done well. Besides, most museums tend to turn into "classics" within a generation or two. And always, it's the institutional thinking, inherently political, that matters — determining first what and who goes into the collection, then what goes into the public spaces and lastly what new, alternative eyes will be coming on board to oversee these things. With the move, the new Whitney makes a promising start. It shakes art and itself up, bracingly, at least a little. Once the opening parties are over, I want it to do much more, to become the living museum of history-in-nowness this city has been waiting for.

Meanwhile, it gives us some of the most luminous indoor-outdoor art spaces in town in which to think about all of this.