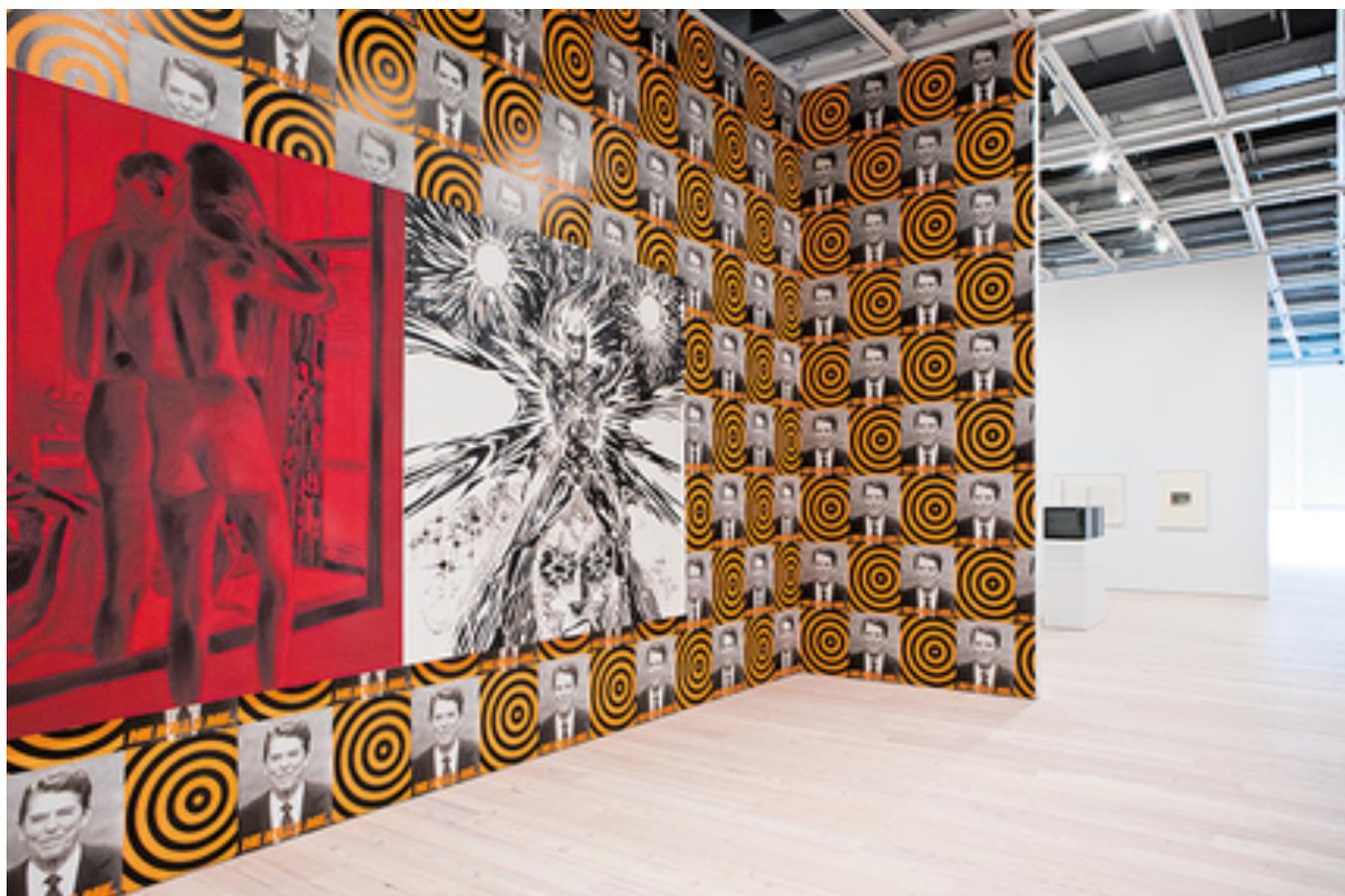


"America Is Hard to See"

Focus Preview



View of "America Is Hard to See," Whitney Museum of American Art, 2015. Wallpaper: Donald Moffett, *He Kills Me*, 1987. On wall: David Salle, *Splinter Man*, 1982. © David Salle/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Chandra Glick.

TO MARK ITS MUCH-ANTICIPATED MOVE from Marcel Breuer's uptown edifice to the Renzo Piano–designed building at the base of the High Line in the Meatpacking District, the Whitney Museum of American Art will present a banner exhibition of some six hundred artworks from the permanent collection, spanning from 1900 to today. Proposing a revised history of American art, "America Is Hard to See" mixes perennial favorites (Alexander Calder's *Circus*, 1926–31; Edward Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning*, 1930) with rarely seen works, such as an antilynching print José Clemente Orozco made while visiting the US in 1933 and a 1967 Vietnam War protest drawing by Judith Bernstein, in which military

tombstones have been refashioned into phallic silhouettes crowned with American flags. And we see many genres and movements anew: Minimalism, for example, is not simply represented by the usual suspects; instead, works that traffic in illusion and optical trickery are mixed in with spare primary structures, and Donald Judd rubs elbows with David Novros and the little-known Thomas Downing.

As these inclusions suggest, the exhibition examines the fault lines and social conflicts within the country's culture, as well as the aesthetic innovations of a diverse range of individual makers and movements. Divided into twenty-three sections, or "chapters," unfolding in loosely chronological fashion throughout the approximately sixty-three thousand square feet of the new interior and exterior galleries, the show provides a more expansive display of the museum's holdings than ever before possible.

Even the building's transitional spaces will have art: On view will be Richard Artschwager's site-specific project commissioned for Gansevoort Street, the final significant work the artist completed before his death in 2013. Situated within the museum's four elevators, *Six in Four* offers a series of environments in which visitors feel as though they are confronting, standing on, or being contained by one of the six subjects Artschwager continually returned to throughout his career: a mirror, window, basket, door, rug, or table. This commission bespeaks the Whitney's interest in testing the divide between art, design, and immersive experience.

The Whitney's move downtown is a return of sorts. The institution was established more than a century ago as a Greenwich Village exhibition space and studio club founded by the artist and collector Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney; in a famous (and by now surely regretted) episode in 1929, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art refused Mrs. Whitney's proposed gift of more than five hundred works by living American artists

on the grounds of aesthetic inferiority, so she founded a stand-alone museum devoted to American modern art.

The new building's inaugural exhibition takes its title from a 1951 poem by Robert Frost in which a bemused Christopher Columbus continually misrecognizes the land he is said to have discovered. In a different kind of poetic turn, the Met has now taken over the Whitney's former home on Madison Avenue, where it plans to highlight modern and contemporary art—including works by some of the artists it once deemed unworthy of collecting. While America may be hard to see, its art is becoming ever more visible in New York.

—[*Richard Meyer*](#)