

# SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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## A Biennial in the Making

BY TED LOOS | 07 FEB 2014

**NEW YORK** – As the Whitney Museum of Art prepares to install the last Biennial in its Marcel Breuer-designed home on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, Ted Loos discovers just exactly how the event comes to life – and the twist that makes this year's edition special.



2014 curators Stuart Comer, Michelle Grabner and Anthony Elms. Photography by Ethan Hill/Redux.

Every two years, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York takes a snapshot of the contemporary art scene and offers up a Biennial, the institution's signature show and one that is argued about, analysed, dissected and pondered. Love it or hate it – and critics have done both pretty much every time – no one thinks it doesn't matter, which is perhaps the greatest compliment that can be given to an exhibition.

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The 77th edition opens 7 March (the series started out annually in the hands of founder Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney) and runs until 25 May, and will be the last Biennial in architect Marcel Breuer's quirky Brutalist landmark; by the time the next one opens, the Whitney will be ensconced in its new Meatpacking District building, designed by Renzo Piano. So this show will mark an historic passage.

Some 103 participants (a number that includes a few multi-person collectives, so the number is actually higher) will be presenting gender-bending performance art, quiet and thoughtful sculptures, sumptuous paintings and lovingly sweated-over craftworks. There are some artists you have likely heard of – the painters Amy Sillman and Laura Owens – and some you most likely have not, like Lisa Anne Auerbach, who will be presenting knitted sweaters, and Taisha Paggett, who will be doing daily performances in the lobby.



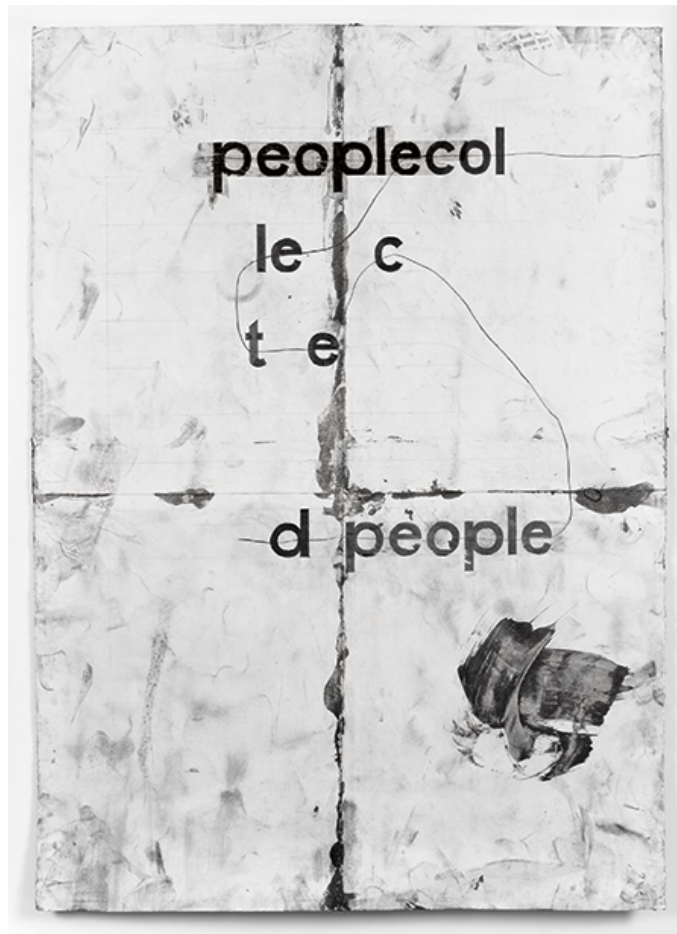
Charline von Heyl's *Folk Tales* (2013), selected for the Biennial by Elms.

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What will not be apparent to most visitors is that the highly complex show comes together with surprising speed. “It’s always down to the wire,” says the museum’s director, Adam Weinberg, now in his eleventh year on the job (six Biennials). “Every time it’s reinventing the Biennial.” These days, museums routinely take three or four years to pull off a big exhibition, but the Biennial is put together in about a year and a half. “We usually don’t select the next curators until after the current one closes,” says Weinberg. Though it causes stress, this also allows the organisers to respond to trends. As Weinberg puts it, “The approach should feel fresh.”

This year, another layer of complexity has been added, since there are actually three curators putting on the show: Michelle Grabner, an accomplished artist in her own right who has never curated before; Anthony Elms, an associate curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia; and Stuart Comer, the curator of media and performance art at the Museum of Modern Art.



Tony Lewis's *peoplecol* (2013), selected for the Biennial by Grabner.

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Ken Okiishi's *gesture/data* (2013),  
selected for the Biennial by Comer.

The Whitney's deputy director, Donna de Salvo, has referred to the exhibition as a "layer cake," since each curator is taking over one floor of the museum. So it is not exactly a collaboration per se, and the way these three independent-minded curators think about their mini-shows reveals much about the exhibition and the incredibly varied art world these days. That approach adds some complications, of course. What if all three curators chose to include the same artist – would that be over-representing one person? "Initially, there were people that we shared," says Grabner. "And then it fell away – we did some horse-trading." Chicago-based Elijah Burgher (one of many Windy City artists in the show), known for his coloured pencil drawings, was on Grabner's list as well as Elms's. But since Elms has fewer artists represented by more work, "I let Anthony have him," Grabner says. Despite doing their own thing, in other words, the process was collegial among the curators.

The process for the three started in late summer 2012. "We were all asked to make proposals," says Stuart Comer, "and it was made clear we'd each do a

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show within a show.” Whitney curators Elisabeth Sussman and Jay Sanders initiated the requests, keeping De Salvo and Weinberg in the loop. Once the decisions were made and then announced about who would be putting together the exhibition, the art world wasted no time in gossiping, commenting and taking action.

“I had 400 Facebook friend requests in 24 hours,” says Comer with a chuckle. “Most of them were completely random. And I got a lot of submissions by mail.” But he did not let the distracting attention deter him from some of the territory he wanted to explore, which includes a look at the first generation of artists lost to AIDS. Comer is including the work of painter Tony Greene, who died in 1990. “I started with a cluster of artists I believe in and I built it out from there,” he says. “I didn’t want too much of a conceit – I wanted the themes to come out of the work. I am trying to avoid the feeling of a checklist or a hotlist of artists.”



Dashiell Manley's Scene 3 Version B 2 (2013),  
selected for the Biennial by Comer.

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The gig of Biennial curator is not easy, considering that all three of this year's organisers have other responsibilities. "Our regular jobs get in the way," jokes Elms. For Comer, it came at a particularly busy moment. "At one point I had three jobs: I was shutting down a position I created at Tate and was starting a department at MoMA, too." Comer echoes Weinberg about the schedule being rough, but also beneficial: "It's a tiny time frame – the Whitney is relentless. But it allows you to be responsive to what's happening out there."

Elms knew he had to get a jump on things as soon as he was selected. "My first studio visit was about one hour after finding out that I got it," he says, noting that the particular artist wasn't included in the end. Soon thereafter he visited with Zoe Leonard, the New York-based photographer-sculptor who explores subjective vantage points in her work; she did make the final cut. "I thought it was so interesting that she's been doing these camera obscuras lately," he says. "And so she'll be doing one in one of the Breuer windows on the 4th floor."

All of the curators travelled extensively to make studio visits, relying on a demanding and time-consuming process that yields huge benefits because of the understanding that can come from first-hand experience of an artist's work. "There was a lot of staring, a lot of looking – and a lot of looking just to the left or right of where you're looking, just to make sure you're not missing something," says Elms. And as always, there was a premium put on new names and artists who have gotten less attention of late. "If I know the



Dawoud Bey's Maxine Adams and Amelia Maxwell (from The Birmingham Project) (2012), selected for the Biennial by Grabner.

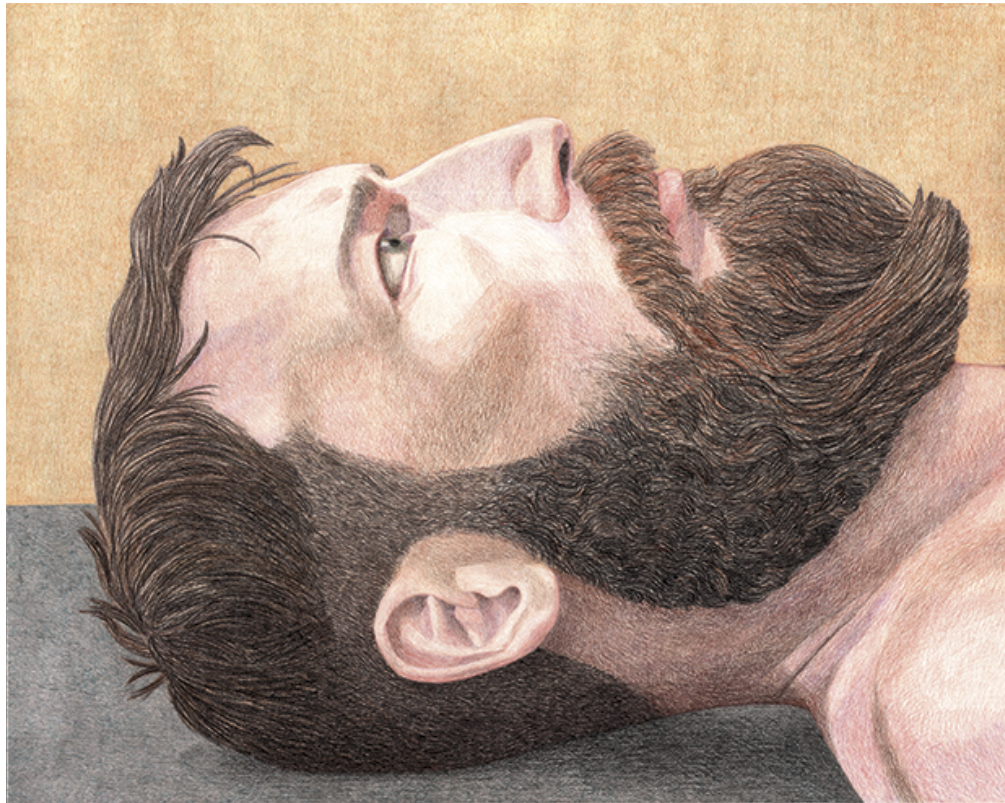
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names of all the artists in the Biennial, it's not a good sign," says Weinberg. "There should be surprises and there should be a lot of what's fresh to me."

The exhibition comes with great expectations, of course, something the curators are well aware of. "You can't really let yourself be intimidated," says Comer. "It's storied, but also despised. I'm definitely practising my skin-thickening exercises, since people love to hate this show." But Grabner feels a little less pressure. "I'm not a professional curator," she says. "I'm sure my heart will sink if Roberta [Smith, of the New York Times] says my floor stinks. But it's not a career-killer for me. I've always approached it with a certain freedom – the freedom that an artist has."



Elijah Burgher's Portrait of Jhon Balance as Talisman Against Suicide (2013),  
selected for the Biennial by Elms.

Of course, bad reviews sometimes fade over time, and opinions change. Perhaps the most infamous Biennial of the modern era was the 1993 edition, of which Times critic Michael Kimmelman plainly said in his review, "I hate the show." The exhibition was filled with button-pushing art, literally: Even the admission tags said "I Can't Imagine Ever Wanting To Be White," courtesy of artist Daniel J. Martinez, and artist Coco Fusco appeared in a

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locked cage dressed as a Native American. The show jangled every nerve about race, sexuality and gender – but 20 years later many critics who savaged it now recognise that it was a seminal, and overall very good grouping of artists.

“I thought it was truly memorable, and it was a turning point for the Whitney,” says Weinberg, who was the curator of the museum’s permanent collection at the time. “It marked the delineation of the long Tom Armstrong era and the beginning of the David Ross era” – two successive Whitney directors – “which were two very different approaches.”

This time around seems less likely to stir up that kind of controversy, but as always, the eccentricities and peculiarities could provoke any manner of reactions. As Grabner puts it, “It’s not fair, it’s not inclusive – it’s subjective.” One notable feature of this year’s show is an emphasis on publishing and text-based work, from organisations like Semiotext(e). Writers like the well-known Gary Indiana will be presenting their visual art, and quite a few artists will show text-based pieces. There will even be a manuscript of the late author David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*.

“I’m sure someone will say, ‘Why a publisher and not a sculptor?’” says Comer. “We’re giving three biased takes, but it’s what you do with it that counts.”

With all the controversy and acclaim that attends each edition, the Biennial endures. “Every year, artists come up to me and say that the show is genuinely transformative for them, and I mean artists from all over, not just those included in the show,” says Weinberg. “That’s pretty remarkable for an 80-year-old exhibition.”

*Ted Loos writes on art, architecture and wine for a variety of publications, including Vanity Fair, Departures, The New York Times and Vogue.*

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