



View of the Whitney Biennial 2022. Steve Cannon's library and *A Gathering of the Tribes* archival material. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

Whitney Biennial 2022

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Curated by David Breslin and Adrienne Edwards

SPLENDOR. That's the word that comes to mind as one walks—sails—through the 2022 Whitney Biennial. Splendor as a transformative experience, affecting soul and spirit. Curated with visual alacrity, emotional commitment, and historical heft by Adrienne Edwards and David Breslin, this exhibition, which is so much about loss, discovery, and opening our eyes to the possibility of art in space, also destabilizes the museum-as-institution's relationship to what makes an exhibition. No more walls, the curators seem to be saying throughout the show—specifically on the largely open fifth floor—and, while we're at it, let's have more trust in the viewer's ability to “get” work that may be challenging, and so what? We're all in this together.



Coco Fusco, *Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word*, 2021, HD video, color, sound, 12 minutes.

It's a democratic ethos, requiring discipline and vision, and one rarely seen in a museum context. Is it too much to ask that the viewer work with the art as opposed to letting the art “just” happen? Breslin and Edwards create a wonderful stage for this possibility—one that encourages either/or acceptance of the material they've gathered with such rigor and love. By “acceptance,” I don't mean to suggest that there is something about art we should or shouldn't accept: If we look at a thing, it becomes part of us, no matter what; the viewer's job is to remain porous to the experience of looking. Still, there are artifacts in the world, on our screens, in our minds—Holocaust photographs, pictures that document female mutilation, lynchings, and so on—that we don't know what to do with, or how to be a part of, because we still don't know what to do with our terrible hand in any of it. The critical but never puritanical curation of Breslin and Edwards creates a context for pain as well as joy; they help us bear what is ugly within us all, to learn and take from it what we can to make new art, new experiences.

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Part of the ugliness or difficulty is loneliness. Loneliness as a universal wound: That's what one sees in artist and writer Coco Fusco's twelve-minute video *Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word*, 2021. The work, a response to Covid-19 and the quick and slow erosion of life as she knew it, is as much an inquiry into how to visualize death as anything else. Fusco doesn't rely on pictures of scourges and pandemics past to achieve her captivating, mournful effects; she evokes grief through images of water—of the sea, which the poet Marianne Moore likened to a “well-excavated grave,” in that we take from the sea more than we give or have given. Fusco's bodies of water are filled with the dead, a horror show of waves and flowers. In certain shots, petals are scattered on the water's surface, but in remembrance of what? The eternal whirlpool, or bodies cast overboard, the better to keep moving through time and thus history? We don't know what's beneath the surface of anything, not really, but part of the power of vision is how we use it. When we are very brave, we want to dive past surfaces to get at what we humans mean when we create something that's meant to be seen, despair and joy included. But what if you've been denied the privilege, been “lost to vision altogether,” to invoke the title of Tom Kalin's now historic and always relevant 1989 video about AIDS, grief, and fear? What if your vision is a memory in the museum of your mind?



Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *A Ble Wail*, 1975. Performance view, Worth Ryder Gallery, University of California, Berkeley, 1975.

In 1981, the writer Steve Cannon was just back from a trip to Nicaragua when he noticed how messed up his vision was becoming. He had glaucoma and eight years later went blind. Blindness did not kill his spirit. Indeed, it seems to have opened up his trusting soul even more. A collaborator at heart, Cannon made work with his friend David Hammons and supported the writers Eileen Myles and Paul Beatty, among others; he also founded, in 1991, the important journal *A Gathering of the Tribes*, which grew out of the energy Cannon felt at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and other performance venues that were making noise in his beloved East Village. The writer, who died in 2019, lived at the axis where word and performance and sound converged, just as this Biennial does. One could view the show as curating-as-performance, or as curating that has the immediacy of a performance, a show where the artists—great artists, ranging from Theresa Hak Kyung Cha to Ralph Lemon to Matt Connors—are involved with music, performance, and language, too.

Intuition and the spirit of improvisation—controlled freedom—are the order of the day in this display, and that’s what one feels looking at those bits of Cannon’s apartment, arrayed in a special corner of the Whitney’s fifth floor, so filled with ideas and the junk of life and framed copies of *A Gathering of the Tribes*: a galaxy that no doubt influenced the curators’ own. How did Cannon see in order to make this world? What replaced his vision, he said, was the “kindness of strangers”—friends who read to him and who described what was happening in the seeing world. Cannon’s story and presence, his haunted trust, imbue this vivid exhibition, which is haunted by the power of artistic presence, and of the viewer’s eye, and of other exchanges of trust we cannot see but feel as life carries us all from darkness to light and back again.

Whitney Biennial 2022: “Quiet as It’s Kept” is on view through September 5.

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