



A Trifurcated 2014 WHITNEY BIENNIAL Bids Farewell to its Madison Avenue Home (Excerpt)

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Peachy



“Its architecture is like a horror movie” wrote one particularly caustic critic, referring to the Marcel Breuer building which has housed the Whitney Museum of American Art for nearly half a century. “Stygian”, “menacing”, “bellicose”, “somber”, and “ornery” are some other choice words architecture critics have used to describe the structure. It has also been likened to a “three-tiered upside-down cake”. Yet many academics and other fans of Brutalist architecture championed the rather austere nature of the building and it certainly opened to much fanfare in 1966, with a celebrity A-list attending the ribbon-cutting including board member Jacqueline Kennedy. Indeed it was in this spare domicile that the Whitney Biennial was born in 1973. The 2014 show will be the final Biennial in the Breuer building as the Whitney decamps to its new Renzo Piano-designed home in the Meatpacking District next year, perhaps more suitable terroir for a contemporary museum than the buttoned-up upper east side.

Fittingly, there is a piece in this year’s Biennial which serves as an homage of sorts to the Breuer ziggurat. On the fourth floor, in a large windowed gallery, Zoe Leonard has created a capacious camera obscura using the museum’s signature trapezoidal window with its panorama of Madison Avenue as a prismatic lens. The window is covered save for a small hole which inverts the exterior scene and casts the image of the up-ended tableau onto the opposing wall of the gallery. One enters the dim space as the streetscape is projected on its head with traffic racing across the gallery ceiling, shoppers madly rushing topsy-turvy, and rooftops of brownstones skimming the floor.

While Leonard’s piece, cleverly titled 945 Madison Avenue, nods to the Whitney’s past, another work in the show, Artists Monument by Tony Tasset, looks to the museum’s future. The monumental sculpture is off-site on West 17th Street in Hudson River Park, cunningly placed just steps from the Whitney’s new home. Like a sculptural hybrid of Gerard Richter’s 4900 Colors and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the piece is a massive color block of tiles engraved with the names of 392,486 artists culled from the past two centuries—those included range from the obvious to the obscure. The artist commented that the piece is about removing hierarchy as each artist has the same billing on the piece. A bit ironic, as the work itself was selected for a curated show, but nonetheless it is refreshing that this rather democratic piece was chosen as, perhaps, a harbinger of things to come.

945 Madison Avenue and Artists Monument are two of the more successful pieces in this year’s Whitney Biennial, a show which, every other year, presents a curated snapshot of the state of contemporary art in America.