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Grad Research: Natalie Zelt on The New Whitney

by American

Studies

AMS :: ATX is a blog dedicated to representing the many activities and interests of the department of American Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Together with the department's Twitter feed, this blog exists to serve the AMS and Austin communities by acting as a hub for up-to-date information on events and opportunities at UT and beyond.



Exhibition photo by Natalie Zelt



Over the summer, AMS grad student Natalie Zelt took a trip to New York, where she saw the opening exhibition, called America is Hard to See at the Whitney Museum of Art's brand new building. Here's her review.

This spring, the **Whitney Museum of American Art** opened a new, eight-story building right off the **Highline** in New York's meatpacking district. The museum has been dedicated to collecting art of the Americas since its founder, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, started a "Studio Club" in 1918 to exhibit some of her favorite artists. Until recently its collection has had a decidedly limited definition of what might count as "American" in American art. Still, the inaugural exhibition in the new building, titled *America is Hard to See*, made a distinct effort to acknowledge both the contested history of the Whitney's collecting practices and the art history of the US more broadly. The installation of over 600 artworks was organized across all curatorial departments; painting specialists worked with curators of drawing, film, sculpture, photography and education and public programs staff in an attempt to weave a semi-chronological narrative across the four major gallery floors of the building. The resulting installation was admittedly jumbled. But, with the goal of examining the entire history of art in the



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US since 1910, the visual conversation should not be cohesive. Each floor showcased a series of touchstone themes, or what the Whitney termed “chapters,” that centered on an artwork that might pull objects across media together. At times this method of orbiting the selections around a specific object worked. For example, in the 1925-1960 galleries on the seventh floor, “The Circus” an installation of Alexander Calder’s *Circus* juxtaposed with George Bellow’s sizable 1924 painting *Dempsey and Firpo*, was an effort to suggest the ways artists were engaging with mass culture and spectacle in the era. Other chapters, though, proved to function more like containers, keeping like works from infiltrating other themes or time periods. “Guarded View,” which included a selection of objects from the now (in)famous 1993 Biennial and 1994 exhibition *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, which specifically canonized the museum’s importance in art history. The section, named after Fred Wilson’s installation of four headless black mannequins dressed in the uniforms of museum guards from the Jewish Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Museum of Modern Art, embraced artists’ acerbic institutional critiques as part of its evolution and asserted the importance of the identity politics in art, but kept the assertions of the artists bound to the early 1990s, rather than putting them in conversation with the

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histories they challenge.



Exhibition photo by Natalie Zelt

With walls of salon-style hangs that integrated multiple media, thematic chapters bumped up into one another, as did viewers, crowding to read object labels and exhibition text that was too sparse or oddly placed to make real sense of what dynamic contextual conversation might be happening. Making my way through the exhibition I got the distinct sense that there was disagreement among the organizers as to the amount of contextual information that is necessary in the physical gallery space. The full record of the exhibition and its 23 chapters is available [online](#), and therefore already in the pocket of each visitor with a smart phone. So why spend the money and wall space on repeating yourself? Why try to keep eyes up on the wall away from the phone? Often it was a challenge to see the artworks speak to one another behind so many hunkered down smartphone zombies. And selfies were rampant, with selfie sticks flying everywhere, folks posing in front of a

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Basquiat or Pollock, immediately distributing it on social media and moving on to the next most famous name. As my companion and I made our way through each floor it became clear that the America on view was particularly hard to see, not just because of the complex discourse of visual art, but because, at times, it is physically impossible to see past each other.

Sweeping surveys, for all their flaws, create space for more specific conversations. They are always a starting point to dive deeper and make resources available. The pointed acknowledgment of the infinitely complex history of American art discourse at the Whitney was encouraging. Hopefully the revamped exhibition space and website will allow for the pursuit of many tightly crafted dialogues in the future.

America is Hard to See

Now closed

The Whitney Museum of Art

For full exhibition record online see:

<http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/AmericaIsHardToSee>

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