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The Whitney Biennial: 75 Artists Are In, and One Dissenter Steps Out



The Whitney Biennial co-curators, Rujeko Hockley (left) and Jane Panetta (right), say the group of artists who participate will include those under pressure from debt and the spiraling costs of studio space. Credit Scott Rudd

By Jillian Steinhauer

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This year's [Whitney Biennial](#), considered the country's most important showcase of contemporary art, has 75 participating artists — and one who has already withdrawn.

The biennial, no stranger to controversy, is an indicator of currents in the field as well as a career booster for the artists included. Past editions have sparked debates over identity and representation, but this year, before the list of participants was even released, a Chicago-based artist, [Michael Rakowitz](#), pulled out of the exhibition in a protest against a museum vice chairman, Warren Kanders. Mr. Kanders is the chief executive of a company that manufactures equipment, including body armor and tear gas, for law

enforcement agencies and militaries. The New York Times received a copy of Mr. Rakowitz's letter to the curators, dated Dec. 18, withdrawing from the show.

The exhibition's curators, Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta — both of whom work at the Whitney — said in an interview Sunday that they respected Mr. Rakowitz's decision and regret that he won't be involved in the biennial's 79th iteration, for which they tried to bring together “as broad a range of artists as we could in all kind of senses of that word, whether that's medium-wise, interest-wise, geographically, demographically, generationally,” in Ms. Hockley's words.

Indeed, the list of participants, which The Times has previewed, is very diverse. Among the more high-profile names are [Nicole Eisenman](#), [Jeffrey Gibson](#), [Barbara Hammer](#) and [Wangechi Mutu](#). People of color are a majority, and it's one of the youngest groups in the biennial's history, with three-quarters of the participants under the age of 40. Only five have ever exhibited in a Whitney Biennial before.

Ms. Hockley explained that these choices weren't due to a fascination with all things “hot, young, new,” but rather grew out of traveling around the country and seeing how many artists were facing “an incredible amount of pressure coming from all sides,” including the burden of debt from M.F.A. programs, the collapse of smaller galleries that might help launch their careers and the difficulty of finding and keeping affordable studio space.



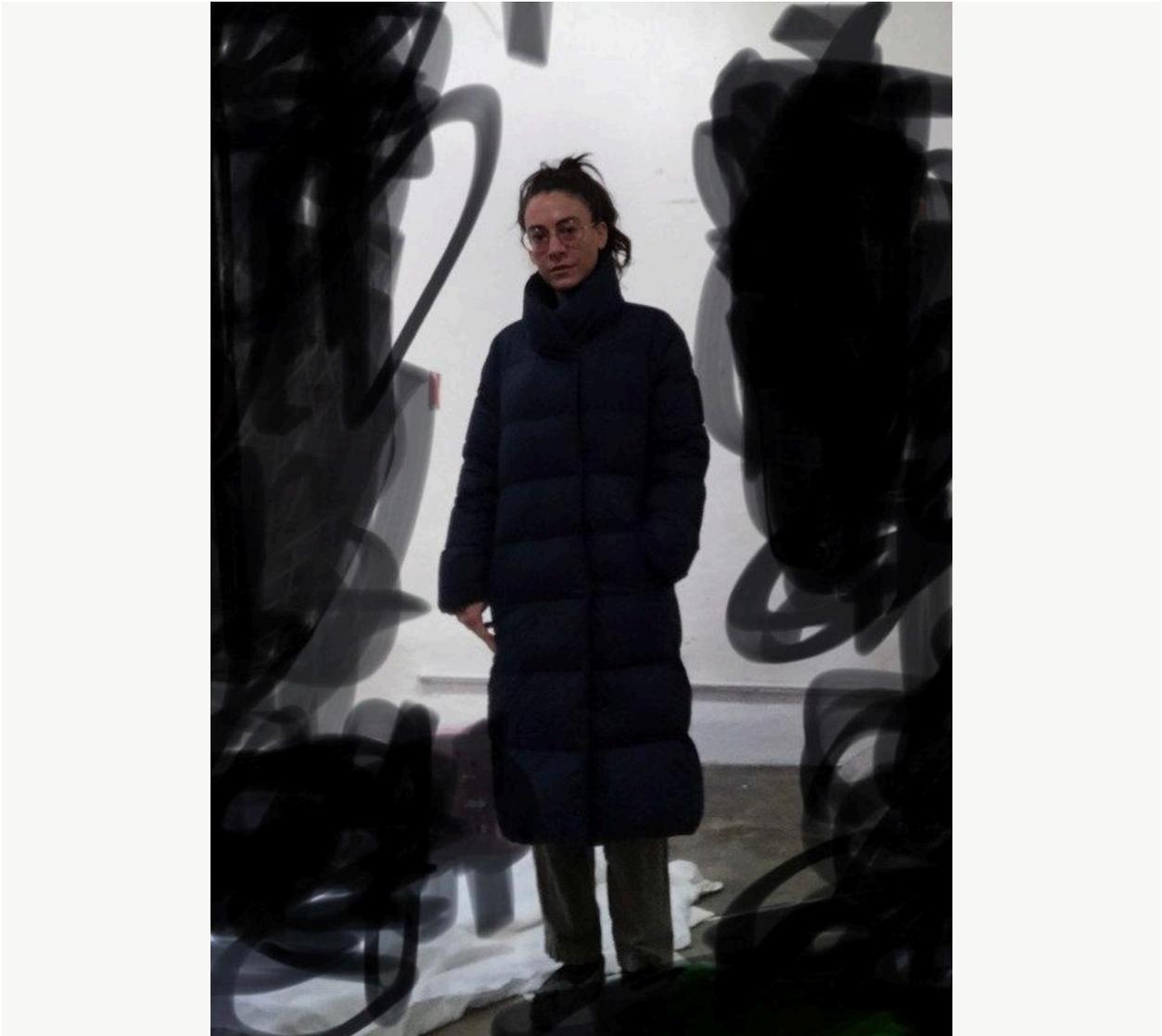
Brendan Fernandes, who will be in the upcoming Whitney Biennial. Credit Luke Davis



A performance view of Brendan Fernandes's "The Master and Form," from 2018. He is updating the work for the Whitney. Credit Brendan Fernandes and Monique Meloche Gallery; Brendan Leo Merea

For most artists, inclusion in the 2019 Whitney Biennial is not only a tangible milestone but also an affirmation of their work and an encouragement to keep going. "It's a huge deal, because it allows me to move forward in a greater way," said [Brendan Fernandes](#), whose installations and performances combine visual art and dance. For the biennial, Mr. Fernandes, a former ballet dancer who is based in Chicago, will present a new version of a piece titled "The Master and Form," which consists of archaic-looking wooden scaffolding and devices that allow performers to hold the five basic ballet positions for long periods of time. "For me it is a social-political space, a piece that questions the agency of the body, the agency of the dancer and our labor," said Mr. Fernandes.

The Los Angeles-based artist [Ragen Moss](#) is also concerned with the body and how it functions within society — what she describes as the "beautiful tension that we each experience as this round, awkward, spatial, embodied being that is also inscribed by language." Ms. Moss makes hanging, transparent sculptures that she embeds with layers and paints and that are evocative of human forms. For the Whitney Biennial, she made nine sculptures representing types, including a lawmaker, a laborer and a rule breaker, that were her answer to the question, "What are the characters or ways of being that our particularized moment are forcing us to reckon with?"



Ragen Moss is a Los Angeles-based artist chosen for the Whitney Biennial.

To its curators, the 2019 biennial feels very much like a product of its time, with artists “grappling with questions about race, gender, financial inequality, gentrification, the vulnerability of the body,” said Ms. Panetta. But she added that the work in the show mostly strikes a tone that’s less “agitprop-like or angry” than one might expect in 2019. “It’s really work that feels more productive, forward looking, with a kind of optimistic and hopeful tenor to it.”

Her hopeful tone is somewhat at odds with the controversy that has been dogging the Whitney in recent months — and that led [Mr. Rakowitz](#) to pull out of the biennial.

The protests over Mr. Kanders’s presence on the Whitney’s board began last November, when [Hyperallergic](#) reported that U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents had used Safariland’s tear gas on asylum seekers at the Mexican border. In response, 95 members

of the Whitney staff signed a letter to the museum’s leadership demanding that the board of trustees “consider asking” for Mr. Kanders’s resignation and requesting “the development and distribution of a clear policy around trustee participation.” Ms. Hockley signed the letter; Ms. Panetta did not.

Adam Weinberg, the Whitney’s director, responded with a [letter to the staff and trustees](#) that said the institution “is first and foremost a museum. It cannot right all the ills of an unjust world, nor is that its role.”

Mr. Kanders also wrote a [letter](#) defending his company as a manufacturer and supplier of “nonlethal products.”



Michael Rakowitz withdrew from the Whitney Biennial to protest against a member of the board. Last July, his installation at the SPACES gallery in Cleveland focused on the killing of 12-year-old Tamir Rice. Credit Andrew Spear for The New York Times

Mr. Rakowitz, who makes conceptual art projects that often focus on vulnerable people and communities, saw the photographs from the border as a disturbingly clear visualization of what he called “toxic philanthropy.”

“I felt like I’d be betraying everything that I’ve ever cared about in the work that I make” had he participated in the exhibition, he said in an interview. “You wouldn’t compromise the integrity of a work on paper by showing it in unsafe conditions. You

should not compromise the integrity of an artist and ask them to show with funding and permission from people that make conditions unsafe for others.”

Commissioned for the biennial to create new work for a project re-creating the artifacts and sites destroyed in the Iraq War, Mr. Rakowitz said he decided that the best way to support the Whitney’s employees was to withdraw from the show as an act of both protest and solidarity. “I felt like the only way to truly leverage any kind of voice was to say that often times what an artist doesn’t do is more important than what they said they will do,” he explained.



The artist Jeffrey Gibson, one of 75 artists in the 2019 Whitney Biennial. Credit Kevin J. Miyazaki

There has been closer scrutiny in recent years of whom museums pick to serve on their boards. In January the labor-focused organization Working Artists and the Greater Economy (WAGE) put out [a call inviting artists](#) in the 2019 Whitney Biennial to “put [their] exceptionality to work” by withholding their art from the show until they got paid for their participation and the demands laid out in the Whitney staff letter were met. The Whitney confirmed that participants in the 2019 biennial are being paid. (The Times later learned the amount is \$1,500, the fee WAGE suggested.)

The activist movement [Decolonize This Place](#) has also been leading protests at the Whitney, beginning with a gathering and burning of sage in the museum’s lobby in

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December. The following month, the group held a town hall meeting that was attended by more than 200 people, including employees of the Whitney. In an interview, Amin Husain, an organizer with the group, called the Whitney Biennial “a Band-Aid of representation.”

His co-organizer, the artist Nitasha Dhillon, said, “What we’re saying is that this structure needs to change, and it needs to begin somewhere.”

Asked about the protests, Mr. Fernandes said that they had resonated with him, leading him to ask, “What is my responsibility as an artist that’s in this biennial within this museum?” Ultimately, though, he decided he could be most effective by remaining in the exhibition and speaking through this work. “I am an artist that has a political voice, and my voice needs to be heard,” he said.