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The Whitney Biennial Can't Go on Like This Forever

"Even Better Than the Real Thing" feels steeped in a larger climate of retreat and exhaustion.

by Ben Davis



Sharon Hayes, *Ricerche: four* (2024). Photo by Ben Davis.

What's on the Whitney Biennial's mind this year?

In the museum's ground-floor gallery, the show begins with an American flag, crumpled and dead on a grimy piece of sectional sofa, courtesy the youngest artist in the galleries, the budding art star Ser Serpas (born 1995). It feels like a found-object political cartoon for "the exhaustion of the American dream," a sentiment felt by a lot of the rising generation.

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The show comes to a climax in one of its few truly photo-worthy images, Kiyon Williams's *Ruins of Empire II or The Earth Swallows the Master's House* (2024), a sculpture of the north facade of the White House, made of earth, listing like a ship going under. An upside-down American flag flutters in the wind.

At first, I thought Williams's sculpture was a little obvious. On second thought, I realized it was very ambiguous. What, exactly, is being pulled down here? The "master's house" of the title—as in the bad, corrupt, bigoted America?

Maybe. But the White House seems *made* of earth, not being swallowed *by* the earth. This double of the White House—the alternative, the reversal, the imagined negative image of the bad, corrupt, bigoted America—is what appears to be in the process of collapsing, like the limp flag on Serpas's couch.

This kind of ambiguity—intentional and unintentional—permeates the 2024 Whitney Biennial, which is called "Even Better Than the Real Thing" and curated by Chrissie Iles, a veteran Whitney curator who also co-organized the 2004 and 2006 biennials, and Meg Olni, a curator-at-large there. The artists here seem to both claim art as a form of resistance and feel all resisted out. Which fits the moment where art's core audience seems both transfixed by politics and exhausted, oscillating between urgency and futility.

Everything here feels slightly withdrawn, alluding to an experience held out of range. Big or small, the sculpture of the 2024 Whitney Biennial is a sculpture of fragments, ruins, and quirky bits of things that telegraph absences or aspire to a material state so specific that it is hard to describe or explain.

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As for the film, it is almost uniformly in a vein of historical lecture or healing ritual, ranging from flatly didactic to lightly lyrical, with a lot of hushed, halting narration. The painting is all abstract or abstract-adjacent.

Notable trends include casting body parts (B. Ingrid Olson, Jes Fan, Julia Phillips) and the taking of rubbings (Dala Nasser, Dora Budor)—both techniques that are about expressing an intimate, direct experience of something past, bearing the trace of that experience but suggesting rather than representing it.

Sharon Hayes has a video here, *Ricerche: four* (2024), unspooling a group conversation with queer elders in Tennessee, where demagogic politics targeting gender nonconforming people are ascendant. There's a moment that hit me, as they recall the loss of spaces of community—how there used to be many gay bars and how the options are now so limited. (Incidentally, the 2022 biennial also had a Nayland Blake work that was a tribute to a lost gay club.) Hayes's installation is ringed by chairs where visitors can gather to watch this conversation, and in general the installation captures the sense of an art trying, through the force of its good intentions, to make up for lost real spaces of possibility.