

Whitney museum: America Is Hard to See exhibition tells the stories of a nation

Filled with anger and beauty, pleasure and confrontation, the new Whitney's inaugural show reveals a museum unafraid to let the light – and the city – into the building and its art

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Barbara Kruger's Untitled (We Don't Need Another Hero) is displayed with Donald Moffett's He Kills Me at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Photograph: Mark Lennihan/AP

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Fri 24 Apr 2015 00.44 BST

Last modified on Tue 13 Nov 2018 03.32 GMT

Too many museums suffer too much architecture, most of which is intrusive, space wasting and attention-grabbing. [The new Whitney Museum of American Art](#) feels like a place for art rather than a museum in which the architecture itself tries too hard to compete. Good heavens, [Renzo Piano's](#) new building doesn't even have a giant atrium.

But it does have swanky elevators decorated by the late [Richard Artschwager](#), perhaps the most flamboyant gesture in a building that

succeeds almost by its overall reticence. Most of the time you forget about the building altogether and it's the art that does the talking.

You have to spend time in the new Whitney to appreciate how good it is as a space to see the museum's collection – which now fills the building until 27 September – and how flexible it will have to become for its temporary shows and for the [Whitney Biennial](#), which is always a bit of a zoo and one of the most picked-over exhibitions in the calendar.



People walk past a Chuck Close portrait at the press preview.

Photograph: Justin Lane/EPA

The core of the New York museum is its collection. From this, everything flows. Yet the museum itself has to be more than a giant container. It is not a warehouse. Filling all the galleries from lobby level to the top-lit eighth floor, the exhibition [America Is Hard to See](#) (based on a line of a [Robert Frost](#) poem) tells the story of America over the past 150 years. Or rather, it tells 23 stories, each named after an artwork: Raw War; Get Rid of Yourself; Course of Empire; Threat and Sanctuary. You get the drift, and although movements and catch-all groupings have their say, America Is Hard to See is more concerned with tracing the troubled history of a nation than retelling the copybook stories of abstract expressionism, pop, minimalism and so on. In any case, the art is more complicated than labels suggest. This exhibition tries to make things more interesting.

There are great and expansive set pieces here, including a killer display of abstract expressionism, with [Lee Krasner](#) and [Willem de Kooning](#) beating all comers, but also darker, troubled sections focusing on the Aids crisis, on the war in Vietnam, and to the US adventures in the Middle

East since 9/11. But this is more than an exhibition about issues. It is about the art and how it responds to its inescapable social conditions. There are also wars over the picture plane, and whether or not abstract art can have a spiritual dimension. Somehow all this and more gets a voice here. The building feels alive.

In any case, the politics were always there in the art, sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit, whether it is in a Warhol portrait print of Richard Nixon that tells us to vote for McGovern, in Felix Gonzalez-Torres's fall of lightbulbs and cable that illuminates one of the Whitney staircases, in Martha Rosler's hilarious video *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, or in David Hammons' great 1992 explosion of Afro-American human hair. *America Is Hard to See* is filled with surprises, odd juxtapositions and stuff that rarely sees the light of day. I think the curators themselves were often surprised by what they found.



Claes Oldenburg's Giant Fagends in front of works by Malcolm Bailey, Allan D'Arcangelo, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol. Photograph: Mark Lennihan/AP

That the galleries are filled with more than 600 works, and yet you don't feel crushed or overwhelmed, says a lot about both the new building and the Whitney's curatorial direction. Beginning with a section devoted to the origins of the museum itself, [founded in 1914 by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney](#) in a townhouse at 8 West 8th Street, we soon find ourselves mired in stories of gross inequality, of America's increasing industrialisation and the after-effects of the great depression. Each section of America Is Hard to See is a kind of mini essay, filled with anger and beauty, pleasure and confrontation. There are also quiet moments, with the light coming in and complicating a sculpture with its own shadows. Tomorrow something else might snag me.

Fond as I was of the old Whitney on Madison Avenue, [Renzo Piano's new home for the museum, downtown in the meatpacking district](#), right at the bottom end of the High Line, surpasses it. The exhibition spaces are generous and flexible, the reclaimed pine floors delicious, while the elevated outdoor terraces and staircases – reminding us of New York's fire escapes and ship's decks on the Hudson – feel integrated in the museum's surroundings in a way that [Marcel Breuer's building](#) never really was.



Boy by Charles Ray. Photograph: Timothy A Clary/AFP/Getty Images

How well this works is obvious from street level – looking up at the people strolling and standing on the High Line, and above them the silhouetted figures on the terraces, gantries and observation points on the upper levels of the museum. Inside, views of the city and the river greet you through the museum's large windows, which bring the city inside. On the terraces, the art goes out to meet it – sculptures by [David Smith](#), [Robert Morris](#), a whole terrace of brightly coloured chairs by Mary Heilmann. This is a museum that isn't afraid to let the light in, or to let it fall on some of the darker and more troubling issues facing US society, seen through the eyes of its artists.

However different the new Whitney is, I think artists will like it here, not just for the kinds of spaces it has to offer. You can have sightlines running the length of the building, east to west, dark spaces and light. The building flows and feels more open. Yet it also has all kinds of watertight submarine doors and seals in advance of another Hurricane Sandy and the overall rise in sea levels. How it will cope with the tides of mass tourism is another matter.

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