Christopher Y. Lew on curating

October 5, 2017 - Christopher Y. Lew is an American art curator, an associate curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and a co-curator of the 2017 edition of the Whitney Biennial. Prior to his position at the Whitney he was an assistant curator at MoMA PS1. Here he discusses how it feels to present art to the world that invites controversy, what it actually means to be an emerging artist, and why good work always involves an element of risk.

As told to Katy Diamond Hamer, 1582 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Focus, Inspiration, Education.

Tell us about your experience as a curator and when you started at the Whitney.

I started at the Whitney about three years ago, when the staff moved into the new building. It was an exciting moment to join the team, setting up protocols of how to work with the space, asking, "How do we use these galleries?" One of the first shows I worked on was with Jared Madere, and he was the first living artist to use the lobby gallery. It's great to come in and start to learn what we could do here, in the sense of pushing the building to its limits. Because of the flexibility, literally all the walls can be taken out and facilitate a run of shows like what [the exhibition] *Open Plan* was, or be built to accommodate an exhibition. We've got everything at our fingertips in that sense and it's a challenge, too, because there's no fixed architecture to work with. When you have almost every option available, then you're thinking in a different way.

The 2017 Whitney Biennial you curated with Mia Locks included the work of 63 artists, but didn't feel overly installed. How did you come up with the installation plan?

A lot of it was Mia and I using old-school foam core models. We also have our exhibition design team and Scott Rothkopf, our Chief Curator, would weigh in quite a bit and lead the way—he had worked on so many shows in the building already.

I think one of the challenges with the Biennial, is that so many artists are making new work. So, as you're trying to figure out what space can accommodate different works, you're getting more information about those works in terms of how big they are and how small and how many.

We already had certain anchors in place such as site-specific installations by Samara Golden, on the west windows, and Raúl de Nieves' stained-glass installation on the east windows.

There were moments of controversy throughout the duration of the Biennial and I wanted to ask, what's it been like in the aftermath? What was that experience like for you?

Fundamentally people were arguing and debating artworks in the exhibition, and asking questions about what art can do. I think for people to do that, regardless of how they feel about works in the show or the Biennial in general, that the exhibition is doing its job, [considering] the fact that people are spending time to think about all of these things. During research for the show and the ideas that it encapsulated, [there] was this sense of tumult and divisiveness that's ongoing sadly. The Biennial touched on and tried to investigate these things, and in that sense, I think it continues to resonate.

Artist Jordan Wolfson's VR piece "Real Violence" (2017) raised eyebrows, and of course many people had an issue with "Open Casket" (2016) a painting by Dana Schutz.

There are a number of works that we knew could be upsetting to people. Our intentions were never to make something that was going to be traumatic or painful for visitors. We wanted to raise questions, even difficult questions, and not run away from them. The Biennial typically speaks to the moment that we're in, and we're in a really hard moment.

Was this the first time in your career as a curator that you experienced this kind of controversy regarding art that you've chosen to put in an exhibition?

This is probably the most heightened sense of that. When I was at MoMA PS1, I'd done a show with Clifford Owens called "Anthology." That show carried some of its own controversy. People were misreading his work, thinking that they would go to a certain extreme that wasn't there. He was talking about the black male body years before Black Lives Matter, and embodying this history of African American performance. His work doesn't run away from provocation or controversy.

Currently on view in the Whitney is "An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney's Collection, 1940-2017", an exhibition that's a collection-drawn show that still speaks to where we are today as much as it does to the moments in which those different works are made over the decades.

What are you working on now?

I oversee the Emerging Artist Exhibition programs, a slice of the museum's temporary exhibitions. We have a working group that is put together with some of the other curators. It's a kind of forum or think tank that allows us not just to think about future exhibitions or proposals, but to discuss these things, asking: What are the themes? What are artists thinking about? Where are these links that are made? I'm not working on a show of my own immediately, but taking a step back and looking at where we are today and who are the exciting new voices that we can look towards.

How would you define an emerging artist?

The definition, or what we keep in mind here, is to think about an artist who appeals to a casual visitor who comes to the Whitney, but also to a certain extent, the most insider people in the art world may know that person's name or not at all, and then it really becomes a platform to learn about the work or to be introduced to the work.

It could be somebody that we've read about. Maybe we've seen one piece in a group show, but we haven't had the opportunity to really think about what that artistic practice is, and to create a platform that allows for that. Which doesn't mean that it's just necessarily solo exhibitions either, but also group shows that give context to what a number of artists are doing, or to tie it to what's going on at a certain moment. I see it very much as a way to really introduce a new and exciting voice.

How do you see technology, as far as existing within the realm of the museum, and going forward, affecting viewer experience?

Artists are always interested in working with different materials or mediums. The kind of work that's most interesting to me is one that doesn't just use technology for the sake of the technology, but is actually interested in trying to do something with it. What can you say with new technology that you can't say with something else? I think it's when an artist like Jordan Wolfson is doing something with technology that doesn't just fetishize as a technology for itself.

How do you avoid burnout?

I think I have a high threshold for it, which I guess helps, or doesn't. I need those nights where I don't go out. I grew up in Brooklyn, so I have family here in the city, too. It's nice to have that balance.

Has there been a particular curator or someone that you've followed and enjoy the way they've used space?

Having spent time at MoMA PS1, I got to work with a number of different curators, such as Founder Alanna Heiss, Klaus Biesenbach (Director), and Peter Eleey (Chief Curator) as well as Franklin Sirmans and Lia Gangitano who were curatorial advisors. They all had different ways of approaching the space curatorially or inquiring as to how to tell a story through artworks.

For an exhibition, where you're bringing together specific artworks and artists with a certain logic to it, then you want to be able to create a space, whether it's physical space or intellectual space, to comprehend it and appreciate it. There's a reason why we all still come to gallery spaces. It's a physical, bodily experience that we have.

How would you define failure, and are you able to turn failure into success?

I think to do something that's exciting and ambitious, no matter what the scale, if it's a small show or a large one, or that when you're working with an artist who's creating something new, that there is always the risk of failure. You're never going to get everything right. I think that's part of it. Not every work made is going to be successful, and so that's always built into it. Especially when you're working with living artists, that's part of the excitement, but that's also the risk. I think the success is that you have to take the chance. You can't succeed without taking that chance.

What makes a good curator?

One of the important things, I think, is to be sensitive to how artworks are presented in physical space, to be conscious of the space around it and to be mindful of how viewers move through the gallery. A great work can be displayed in a way that appears less than what it is. On the other hand a well installed show can guide viewers to things they might have overlooked otherwise.

Top 5 albums/EPs I've been listening to recently in no particular order by Chris Lew:

Jlin, *Black Origami*

Kamasi Washington, *The Epic*

Jay-Z, *4:44*

Tinashe, *Nightride*

Skype Williams, *Baby Boy EP*

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Vocation
Curator

Fact

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ART HISTORY
IDEAS CAN BE DANGEROUS
McLuhan