

Meliksetian MB Briggs

The New York Times

WHITNEY BIENNIAL

The Whitney Biennial Called. How Will They Answer?

For these eight first-time artists participating in the biennial, it's a surefire résumé builder. But it also exposes them to heightened scrutiny.

By Siddhartha Mitter
May 9, 2019



Todd Gray: Photograph by Brian Guido

Meliksetian MB Briggs

Todd Gray

“The act of resistance is to keep changing.”



Mr. Gray at his studio in Los Angeles. Brian Guido for The New York Times



“Pax 3” juxtaposes archival prints by Mr. Gray.
Todd Gray and Meliksetian Briggs, Los Angeles

Meliksetian MB Briggs

When the Biennial curators asked to visit, Todd Gray said he fought back tears. “It’s so late in my life, and I’ve been making work for so long,” Mr. Gray, a photographer, said.

A youthful 64, Mr. Gray is a lifelong Angeleno, with a studio in Leimert Park. He attended CalArts in the late 1970s, and a decade later for his M.F.A. But he lived from commercial work.

Notably, he was Michael Jackson’s photographer in the early 1980s. He preferred not to comment on Jackson’s private behavior. “He’s part of the culture,” he said.

Each of his works in the Biennial — and in a solo show now at David Lewis Gallery in New York — juxtaposes photos on disparate themes, set in vintage frames, creating a puzzle of ovals, rectangles, and allusions.

His Jackson trove provides some of the material. There are also images of European formal gardens, signifying imperial power and wealth; photographs from rural Ghana, where he lives half the year. Pictures from the Hubble Space Telescope add an interstellar dimension. “It tells us we’re all stardust,” he said.

Mr. Gray began making these combination works five years ago at a time of growing disconnection between his career in the black American music industry and his new understandings from living in Africa. He invoked the British-Jamaican thinker Stuart Hall, who argued that cultural identity evolves in response to power.

“The act of resistance is to keep changing,” Mr. Gray said.