

Soboleva, Ksenia. "Looking Back / the 12th White Columns Annual." *The Brooklyn Rail*, 2 Mar. 2022, <https://brooklynrail.org/2022/02/artseen/Looking-Back-The-12th-White-Columns-Annual>.

Looking Back / The 12th White Columns Annual Selected by Mary Manning

After a five-year hiatus, White Columns has reinstated their annual exhibition *Looking Back*, in which an individual or collaborative team is invited "to organize an exhibition based on their personal experiences and interactions with art in New York City during the previous year," as the press release reminds us. This emphasis on personal experience as a driving force for curatorial selection is a rare and welcome treat, giving the endeavor a diaristic quality. This year, the annual is organized by Mary Manning, an artist whose own practice revolves around mindful observation and the poetics of sequencing. Venturing out to see art during the pandemic became a welcome escape for Manning, while at the same time offering a space to contemplate everyday reality. Working through the loss of their father, who passed away to COVID-19 in November 2020, the artist used "love as a guiding metric" for their selections, as they convey in their short exhibition statement.

Upon first entering White Columns, the viewer is met by Frederick Weston's *Barry* (1993–96) awaiting atop a small flight of stairs. This grid of 144 polaroids depicts the same man dressed in a variety of outfits, from casual to formal, largely in shades of white and black. I remember Weston telling me about this work, explaining his theory that you only need a certain number of clothing items to dress up or dress down for any occasion. The first time I saw *Barry* was in *Souls Grown Diaspora*, curated by Sam Gordon at *apexart* in January 2020. Weston was at the opening, radiant as ever. The second time I saw the work, he was no longer with us, and his exhibition at Ortuzar Projects (Dec. 2020–Feb. 2021) had the gravity and sacred atmosphere of a memorial—its palpable love, too.



Frederick Weston, *Barry* (144 Polaroids), 1993–96. Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody. Courtesy Gordon Robichaux, New York.

On the wall to the left of Weston's *Barry* hangs an untitled piece by Jacob Robichaux (2016), who along with Sam Gordon runs Gordon Robichaux gallery (they represented—and were dear friends to—Weston). Visually reminiscent of the 1980s block breaker game *Arkanoid*, the piece features ten horizontal rows of tiny bricks in white, red, and yellow, arranged atop a bright blue wool background. Stretched over it are ten rows of thread held together by steel pins. I remember seeing this work in *Downtown 2021* at La MaMa Galleria (also curated by Gordon), and wondering what the rules for this imaginary game might be. Playful and vibrant while abstract and mysterious, the piece captures Robichaux's character and personality.

These two works alone, encountered so quickly upon arrival, confirm what I had hoped to find: Manning has presented a portrait of a community. By this I don't mean they simply gathered works made by friends, although many of the artists in the show are indeed Manning's friends. (Too often in the art world, we are made to pretend that our opinion of artworks is entirely separate from our opinion of the people who produce them... as if the two aren't inherently intertwined.) Here, Manning's selection has allowed for a dialogue that speaks to the ways in which shared tastes and mutual attractions organically develop within social threads. Walking through the exhibition, I know that I'm not the only one able to tell exactly in which 2021 show they must've encountered this or that work, and grateful for the unexpected opportunity to physically engage with them one more time. Certain choices and pairings particularly stand out. The androgynous character in Brassai's *Au Monocle, Jeune Invertie* (1932) yearningly gazes at the moon in Ann Craven's painting *Moon (Silent Magenta over saint George's River)* (2021), hung on the adjacent wall. While the majority of the works in this Annual were made during the last two years, the addition of Brassai's photograph sets the starting date of the exhibition to 1932. I can grasp Manning's personal investment in this *Jeune Invertie*, described by Brassai as a "woman dressed as a man." Having embarked on their own discovery of non-binary identity in late 2020, Manning undoubtedly understands the unrecognized complexity of the subject's gender. Their staged glance at Craven's moon comes to represent a longing for unknown landscapes of all kinds.

Then there are works I was not aware of, but that spark instant curiosity. This is the case with Aria Dean's *Eraser (that's the abattoir!)* (2021), a cryogenically engraved crepe rubber on aluminum that somehow conjures deeply satisfying sensations, like carving into candle wax with your nails, while at the same time evoking the texture of animal hides (perhaps I've watched *The Power of the Dog* one too many times at this point...). I also find myself surprised to see a work by Nicole Eisenman that I do not recall encountering anywhere last year. An untitled piece from 2021, this largely abstract composition suggests the outlines of a head and torso, reminiscent of a Keith Haring figure, while the inside is filled with frottage-like scribbles and ambiguous symbols. Manning admits that this piece was indeed not on view in any 2021 exhibition, but was offered by Eisenman for this exhibition in place of something drawn from Eisenman's and Keith Boadwee's exhibition at FLAG Art Foundation. Cleverly juxtaposed with an abstract aluminum wall-sculpture by Matt Paweski, the work makes me wonder if Eisenman is dipping their toes into the non-figurative realm.

And finally, there is the piece that will add 45 minutes to your visit, worth every second. Neil Greenberg's *Disco Project* (1995) is presented here for the first time as a three-channel video installation (*The Disco Project Installation, 2021–2022*), thus adding another life stage to a work that began as dance choreography, then continued as video documentation, and was first exhibited in a gallery context as a video projection in Greene Naftali's 2021 show *From Disco to Disco*. The work includes text offering narrative facts about the dancers' lives—a signature

Canada

60 Lispenard Street
New York, NY
10013

P: 212 925 4631
E: gallery@canadanewyork.com
www.canadanewyork.com

technique of Greenberg's—and functions as a poignant performative record of the AIDS crisis. The artist has now updated the script, shown on a separate monitor, to reflect this new iteration in Manning's show. "This is not my first pandemic," Greenberg repeats. Throughout the text, the artist discloses the challenges that the afterlife of a performance living on as an artwork prone to commodification has posed for him. "This is documentation. This is not the work," the text reads. Yet, after discussing Manning's invitation and the updated format, Greenberg ends with the question: "Is it an artwork now?"

One has only to think of Orpheus to be reminded that looking back can be a painful act. The events that have unfolded over the past two years, which many love to call "unprecedented," have certainly left a painful trail. Yet an exhibition such as this reminds us that through the adversity we have continued to create and view art, and in so doing continued to create community and collective mechanisms of support. Sometimes the overused cliché that we are all connected holds up.