

Forbes

10 Art Works You Must See At The 2017 Whitney Biennial

As a photographer, there are very few things in contemporary art that have more emotional impact on me than beautifully composed contemporary photographs with a powerful and unique aesthetic. And by any measure, Brooklyn-based photographer and Princeton photography professor Deana Lawson has one of the most singular photographic aesthetics in contemporary art. I first came across Lawson's work last year when her work graced the cover of experimental pop musician Blood Orange's excellent *Freetown Sound* album.

The photograph, a couple embracing on a bed with the woman staring towards the camera while a poster of (or perhaps the ghost of) Michael Jackson stares at the couple, is emblematic of the evocative poetry that Lawson is amble to imbue within minimal portraits inspired by domestic photography. In past works, Lawson has appropriated domestic portraits of black families, and in her photography she carefully composes these portraits to elevate this form of domestic photography and subvert the ways in which black bodies are often portrayed in American media.

Intimacy, commitment, and self-love all manifest in her photographs. For example, in one photograph included in the Biennial entitled *Sons of Cush* a black man heavily tattooed and wearing his underwear above his pants is shown to be a tender and loving father to his infant son, marking contrast to the typical Hollywood portrayal of this man as a violent gangster (the picture also reminded me of Mahershala Ali's portrayal of the drug dealer character Juan in the Best Picture Academy Award-winning *Moonlight*). Lawson's photography emphasizes how just the subtlest twisting and subverting of cultural stereotypes can be a resonant and radical act of creativity.

Leigh Ledare, Vozkal



Still captured from 'Vozkal' by Leigh Ledare

I have come to know and love Brooklyn-based artist Leigh Ledare's extremely confrontational photography, collage, and appropriated images culled from fashion editorials, pornography and commerce.

Ledare was once assistant to iconic photographer Larry Clark and has acquired his mentor's taste for using shocking and disturbing imagery to arouse conversation. His best known work, *Pretend You're Actually Alive*, presents a series of photographs that capture Leigh's mother (a former dancer) while posing in lingerie, masturbating, and having sex while chronicling her deteriorating health. In other words, Ledare's art is not for the faint of heart.

But his Biennial presentation, a video projection entitled *Vozkal*, felt like an aesthetic, if not a thematic, departure from the ultra-provocateur imagery Ledare got famous with. A film split into three 16 mm projections assembled randomly throughout a space, *Vozkal* captures the social interactions of hundreds of Russian citizens loitering, working in, or passing through a Moscow train station. What is so fascinating about the projections is that while you watch the citizens go about their days, they at first seem like they are free to do what they want. But a creeping sense of dread builds throughout the piece as you begin to notice perilous looking men lurking about, perhaps policing or spying on the area. It reminds the viewer that a modern society falls into chaos and fear quietly. With the Trump administration's dubious Russian dealings, the piece takes on an even more sinister tone.