

WHITNEY

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PRESS RELEASE

PAT OLESZKO RECEIVES THE WHITNEY MUSEUM'S 2026 BUCKSBAUM AWARD



Pat Oleszko's installation in Whitney Biennial 2026 remains on view through August 23.

New York, NY, July 16, 2026 — The Whitney Museum of American Art announces that Pat Oleszko is the recipient of the 2026 Bucksbaum Award. Oleszko was selected from the group of 56 intergenerational artists and collectives working across disciplines and mediums in *Whitney Biennial 2026*.

For more than five decades, Oleszko has developed compelling bodies of work in contemporary American art, combining sculpture, performance, costume, installation, film, and public participation into exuberant, genre-defying spectacles. Through humor, satire, and elaborate handcrafted environments, Oleszko transforms absurdity into a powerful, critical, and thought-provoking language, using amusement to examine systems of politics, gender, labor, environmental crisis, and the folkways that shape everyday life.

In *Whitney Biennial 2026*, Oleszko's immersive installation includes two aspects of her expansive performance practice: a giant handmade inflatable sculpture along with an early film. *Blow Hard* (1995), a clown head blowing fire through a trumpet, debuted as a 1995 commission for the World Trade Center Plaza. These inflatables were often used as sets and props for Oleszko's performances during the 1980s and 1990s. At a much smaller scale, the short black-and-white film *Footsi* (1979) follows a

pair of fingers dressed in doll socks and shoes as they traverse the artist's body and the streets of New York.

Equal parts carnival, theater, and creative resistance, Oleszko's work demonstrates her extraordinary ability to collapse distinctions between three-dimensional form and performance, audience and participant, and comedy and drama. Throughout her extensive career, she has embraced spectacle not as a distraction but as a powerful means of confronting urgent social questions with wit, generosity, and invention.

"Pat Oleszko is a singular force in American art, who has delighted, inspired, and challenged her audiences for half a century," said Scott Rothkopf, the Alice Pratt Brown Director of the Whitney Museum. "By honoring Oleszko with the Bucksbaum Award, we continue the Whitney's longstanding commitment to recognizing artists whose work expands the field, animates the present, and opens new ways of seeing the world around us."

"The jury was unanimous in its enthusiasm for the opportunity to honor an artist whose originality and commitment to her vision have produced one of the most distinctive bodies of work in contemporary American art," said *Whitney Biennial 2026* co-curators Marcela Guerrero and Drew Sawyer.

"Throughout the Biennial, it became clear that Oleszko's work resonated not only with audiences but with many of the participating artists, who recognized in her practice a remarkable model of artistic freedom and invention. The Bucksbaum Award affirms not only the significance of Oleszko's achievements but also the timeliness of this long-deserved recognition."



The 2026 Bucksbaum Award jury is comprised of Rothkopf; Kim Conaty, Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator, Whitney Museum of American Art; Marcela Guerrero, the DeMartini Family Curator, Whitney Museum of American Art; Drew Sawyer, the Sondra Gilman Curator of Photography, Whitney Museum of American Art; Myriam Ben Salah, Director and Chief Curator, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago; Joan Kee, Judy and Michael Steinhardt Director, the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University; and Manuela Moscoso, Executive and Artistic Director, Center for Art, Research and Alliances.

Melva Bucksbaum (1933–2015), a patron of the arts, collector, and Whitney trustee from 1996 until her death, launched the Bucksbaum Award in 2000. The award is given in each Biennial year in recognition of an artist featured in the Biennial whose work demonstrates a singular combination of talent and imagination. The selected artist is considered by the jurors to have the potential to make a lasting impact on the history of American art, based on the excellence of their past work, as well as of their present work in the Biennial. The award is accompanied by a check for \$100,000. Oleszko is the 13th Bucksbaum laureate to be named since the award was introduced.

The previous Bucksbaum recipients are Paul Pfeiffer (2000), Irit Batsry (2002), Raymond Pettibon (2004), Mark Bradford (2006), Omer Fast (2008), Michael Asher (2010), Sarah Michelson (2012), Zoe Leonard (2014), Pope.L (2017), Tiona Nekkia McClodden (2019), Ralph Lemon (2022), and Nikita Gale (2024).

Funding for the Bucksbaum Award is provided by an endowment from the Martin Bucksbaum Family Foundation.

About Pat Oleszko

Pat Oleszko (b. 1947, Detroit, Michigan) lives and works in New York. Across more than fifty years, she has built an interdisciplinary practice that merges sculpture, performance, costume, installation, film, and public intervention through an irreverent visual language rooted in satire, parody, and social critique. Working across museums, streets, festivals, and public spaces, Oleszko transforms elaborate handmade costumes, inflatables, props, and sculptural environments into immersive performances that invite audiences to reconsider political, cultural, and environmental realities through humor.

Since the early 1970s, Oleszko has consistently challenged disciplinary boundaries, developing a distinctive practice in which sculpture is activated through movement, language, and public participation. Her work addresses subjects ranging from feminism and consumer culture to nationalism, ecological collapse, and the absurdities of political spectacle, demonstrating how comedy can function as a powerful vehicle for civic engagement and institutional critique.

Oleszko's work recently been featured in ***Whitney Biennial 2026***, *Fool Disclosure* at Sculpture Center, New York (2026), *Pat's Imperfect Present Tense* at David Peter Francis, New York (2024), and exhibitions at Brandeis University's Kniznick Gallery, JTT, Carnegie Mellon University, the National Museum of Women in the Arts, the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, and numerous international festivals and museums. She is the recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, the Rome Prize, four National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, four New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowships, the DAAD Berlin Artists-in-Residence Fellowship, and a New York Dance and Performance ("Bessie") Award for Sustained Achievement.

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ABOUT THE WHITNEY

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for ninety years. The core of the Whitney’s mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

Whitney Museum Land Acknowledgment

The Whitney is located in Lenapehoking, the ancestral homeland of the Lenape. The name Manhattan comes from their word Mannahatta, meaning “island of many hills.” The Museum’s current site is close to land that was a Lenape fishing and planting site called Sapponckanikan (“tobacco field”). The Whitney acknowledges the displacement of this region’s original inhabitants and the Lenape diaspora that exists today.

As a museum of American art in a city with vital and diverse communities of Indigenous people, the Whitney recognizes the historical exclusion of Indigenous artists from its collection and program. The Museum is committed to addressing these erasures and honoring the perspectives of Indigenous artists and communities as we work for a more equitable future. To read more about the Museum’s Land Acknowledgment, visit the Museum’s website.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Public hours are Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 10:30 am–6 pm;

Friday, 10:30 am–10 pm; and Saturday and Sunday, 10:30 am–6 pm. Closed Tuesday. Visitors twenty-five years and under and Whitney members: FREE. The Museum offers FREE admission and special programming for visitors of all ages every Friday evening from 5–10 pm and on the second Sunday of every month.

Image credit:

Biennial Opening Night, March 3, 2026. Pat Oleszko. Photograph by Darian DiCianno/BFA.com © BFA 2026

Installation view of *Whitney Biennial 2026* (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, March 8–August 23, 2026). From left to right: Pat Oleszko, *Blowhard*, 1995; Pat Oleszko, *Footsi*, 1979. Photograph by Ron Amstutz

Second Sunday, April 12, 2026. Pat Oleszko and Jazz at Lincoln Center. Photograph by Filip Wolak

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