

# The New York Times

## Best Art Exhibitions of 2021

Ambitious museum shows in Tulsa, Richmond, and Louisville left an imprint. Jasper Johns, Maya Lin and Latino artists shone. And the high quality of gallery shows of women was dizzying and gratifying.

By **Holland Cotter and Roberta Smith**

Published Dec. 7, 2021 Updated Dec. 9, 2021



Outstanding art shows of 2021 offered works by Emma Amos, Jasper Johns (at two museums) and Alice Neel. Details from left: Emma Amos and Ryan Lee Gallery; Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, Charlie Rubin for The New York Times; Estate of Alice Neel

**Holland Cotter | Roberta Smith**

### HOLLAND COTTER

#### Most Memorable Art and Image-Makers of 2021

The year 2021 was about recovery — slow, partial, tentative, ongoing — from lockdown. Over the summer, museums and galleries rebooted, but with masking and distancing in place. After a year of social isolation, a market trend in easy-to-like figure painting had natural appeal, with portrait shows everywhere. (New York had Medicis and Alice Neel; Hans Holbein and the Obamas currently hold court in Los Angeles) But for me, many of the most memorable events were either outside bicoastal centers or in unusual locations and forms within them.

#### African American South

Several of the year's most ambitious museums were in cities below the Mason-Dixon line. "The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse," an engrossing survey of work by 120 Black artists organized by Valerie Cassel Oliver at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Va., mined a particularly rich vein of its regional subject through a focus on music: gospel, blues, free-jazz, soul, hip-hop, Mardi Gras marches, all embodied in fabulous visuals. The exhibition (now at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston) was installed just blocks from Richmond's Monument Avenue, a residential thoroughfare once dotted with Jim Crow-era statues of Confederate heroes. In September, the last, a statue of Robert E. Lee, was craned-lifted and trucked away.

In Tulsa, Okla., a new, truth-telling monument was unveiled. Called Greenwood Rising, it's a museum and cultural center devoted to documenting three nested narratives: the long record of racist violence in the United States; the shorter history of a once-thriving African American neighborhood in a city that, for a time, managed to escape that violence; and the explosive story of what happened when that violence finally hit. Over two successive days in the spring of 1921, the Greenwood neighborhood, known as "Black Wall Street," was the scene of one of the largest and deadliest episodes of white-on-Black terrorism yet recorded in the United States. Greenwood Rising takes you back to that moment and place, and forward into a present that has its own traumas.

(Read our reviews of "The Dirty South" and Greenwood Rising.)

Unusual Business in Museums

During the forced closures of the past year, museums had to contemplate the future and worry about what they were seeing, including the prospect of diminishing public relevance. Some understood that the solution lay not in a return to pre-Covid routine, but in change. The Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Ky., took a step in this direction with “Promise, Witness, Remembrance,” a big, impressive group loan show dedicated to the memory of Breonna Taylor, a Louisville native killed by city police officers in March 2020. Under its curator, Allison Glenn, the show was assembled in four months — warp speed in museum-time — and created a prototype for institutional responses to history-as-it’s-happening.

New York’s Guggenheim Museum floated a different model. With a fast-tracked suite of summer shows, it turned a Modernist monolith into the equivalent of an alternative space. In the atmosphere of pandemic-induced uncertainty, its young curators filled the museum’s central spiral with offbeat wonders: the Manhattan solo debut of audio and video work by the Rwandan-born Dutch artist Christian Nyampeta; an extraordinary floor-to-ceiling video by Wu Tsang of the trans singer and songwriter Beverly-Glenn Copeland; and, for four precious days in July, a socially distanced performance called “Romantic Songs of the Patriarchy,” conceived by the Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson.

*(Read our reviews of “Promise, Witness, Remembrance”; Wu Tsang and Ragnar Kjartansson at the Guggenheim and our interview with Allison Glenn.)*

Climate Conscience

This was the year when public awareness of ecocide reached at least an orange alert level. Direct response from museums and galleries remained muted, with notable exceptions being “Diane Burko: Seeing Climate Change,” a solo exhibition of paintings at the Katzen Arts Center of American University in Washington (through Dec. 12); and a survey of early work by the ecofeminist artist Betsy Damon at La MaMa Galleria in Manhattan. In New York, the major statement on the theme of present and future catastrophe took place, appropriately, outdoors, in Madison Square Park, where Maya Lin’s “Ghost Forest,” a grove of dead and salvaged Atlantic white cedars, all victims of environmental damage, was installed last Spring. Surrounded by the park’s lush greenery the lifeless trees made for a starkly majestic cautionary tableau, an arboreal “Burghers of Calais.” (And when they finally came down, they were given new life by teenagers learning to build boats.)

*(Read our review of “Ghost Forest” and our interview with Maya Lin.)*

Outstanding Solos

“Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror,” a doubleheader retrospective divided between the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, was one of the season’s most hotly anticipated blockbusters. Enough to say that it lived up to expectations. (It continues at both venues through Feb. 13.) The same went for “Titian: Women, Myth & Power” at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, featuring a cycle of six monumental paintings on mythological scenes produced late in this Venetian artist’s career. Just to get these pictures together under one roof represented a staggering institutional coup, one unlikely to be repeated anywhere else anytime soon. (The show is on view through Jan. 2)

On the contemporary front, “Lorraine O’Grady: Both/And” brought a long overdue career survey of a supersmart American conceptual artist and writer to the Brooklyn Museum. (A book of her essays, “Lorraine O’Grady: Writing in Space 1973-2019,” was a vital supplement to the show.) Company, a gallery on the Lower East Side, inaugurated a new space with “Barbara Hammer: Tell me there is a lesbian forever ...” a museum-ready selection of the late, great filmmaker’s early work on paper, organized by the artist Tiona Nekkie McClodden. And in a strong solo called “Amerika. God Bless You If It’s Good to You” at the Bronx Museum of the Arts — celebrating its 50th anniversary — Wardell Milan showed masterly drawings of white supremacist nightmares and collaborated on a theater piece with the trans performer Zachary Tye Richardson and the sculptor Billy Ray Morgan.

*(Read our reviews of Jasper Johns and Titian and our interview with Lorraine O’Grady.)*



At Greenwood Rising, a museum reflecting the history of the community in Tulsa, Okla., a circa 1921 barbershop brings to life holographic barbers and their hopes for economic success. Joshua Rashaad McFadden for The New York Times



Maya Lin’s “Ghost Forest” in Madison Square Park, a cautionary tableau. Madeline Cass for The New York Times





"Three Flags" (1958) by Jasper Johns, at the Whitney Museum of Art, through Feb. 13. Johns used encaustic, a mixture of pigment suspended in warm wax that shows each stroke. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

### Photojournalists on the Ground

I'll end, though, on a high note, with a salute to some of 2021's truly great, and often minimally rewarded, image-makers: the photojournalists, professional or otherwise, on the ground everywhere this year — the ones who caught every freakish twist of the right-wing uprising in Washington, who walked straight into the fiery furnace that is increasingly our planetary landscape and who recorded the wrenching chaos in Afghanistan, right up to, and beyond, the minute the last-exit planes took off, and who captured the collective jubilation when the Ahmaud Arbery verdict came in. No artists produced more important work.

### Latino/Latina/Latinx

In New York, Latino art, with its various monikers and meanings, continued to gain visibility. Four years late and not a moment too soon, a retrospective of the Chicana artist Laura Aguilar traveled from Los Angeles to the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art in Manhattan last Spring. An identity-scrambling contemporary survey, "Estamos Bien: La Trienal 20/21," filled a reinvigorated El Museo del Barrio. Americas Society put together an invaluable two-part historical show called "This Must Be the Place: Latin American Artists in New York, 1965-1975" (through May 14). And there was more, a lot. There will always be.

(Read our review of Laura Aguilar.)

### The Speculating Class

As the Covid crisis goes on, some elements of the art world are already operating at a pumped-up version of prepandemic normal. I'm talking about the presence of private money. The year may have left museums and galleries (never mind artists) scrambling, but the collecting, speculating class grew unimaginably richer, and the VIP lounge at the top of the art world is bursting with cash. We got a glimpse of this in the triumphalist spectacle of the fall auctions, and, somewhat lower down the slope, in the gold-rush surge in NFTs, which is already starting to look like a viral pandemic of its own. (Read our coverage of the recent auctions of the Macklowe estate and a Frida Kahlo painting.)



Frida Kahlo, "Diego y yo (Diego and I)," from 1949, at Sotheby's. Sotheby's

## ROBERTA SMITH

### The Best Art Shows of 2021 Were in Galleries

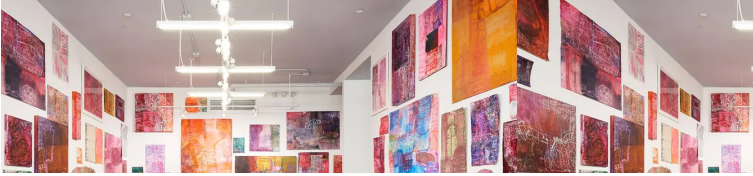
This fall a mood of elation was palpable in certain quarters of Manhattan, namely those neighborhoods dense with commercial art galleries. People giddily commented on the unusually high quality of the gallery scene as if art dealers had recommitted themselves to their calling and were bent on making up for the deprivations of lockdown. Several men had impressive shows — Philip Guston, Beauford Delaney (through Dec. 23), David Salle and Alvaro Barrington come to mind. But what moved me most was the high frequency of outstanding solo presentations of art by women — more than I could possibly mention here, even if I had been able to see them all. The shows touched on all phases of artistic development — early, middle, late — and the cumulative message concerned longevity: women have always been here, dedicating their lives to art.

(Read our reviews of Philip Guston, Beauford Delaney, David Salle and Alvaro Barrington.)

#### 1. Some Impressive Beginnings: Rachel Eulena Williams, Garrett Bradley, Cathy Lebowitz, Nicole Storm

The very beginning of the year brought signs that excellent debuts might be in the offing. Canada introduced Rachel Eulena Williams's colorful, irregular wall pieces, which combined discarded pieces of paper and plastic, using string, into collages unhinged and set free (among their predecessors: the shaped paintings of Elizabeth Murray, the attenuated sand and

fabric sculptures of Senga Nengudi and the cut-tin constructions of the outsider artist David Butler). At the Museum of Modern Art, in a collaboration with the Studio Museum, the filmmaker Garrett Bradley presented “America,” two intersecting screens hanging in the middle of a gallery, onto and through which she projected combinations of found and made footage, forming a majestic reimagining of African American culture and history. Another standout, and something of a sleeper, was the debut of Cathy Lebowitz at Skoto Gallery. The artist, for two decades an editor at Art in America, had previously kept her marvelous drawings to herself. Executed in colored pencil, they are modest, completely riveting and highly unstable. Their surfaces are filled with interlocking shapes and textures that reflect the influence of Gorky and, oddly, Morandi. They refuse to coalesce into legibility, continually hinting at different possibilities: abstraction, overgrown garden, messy studio, a naturalist’s curio cabinet.



Cathy Lebowitz's “Deliberation - Orange,” 2020, executed in colored pencil. Cathy Lebowitz and Skoto Gallery

Installation view of Nicole Storm’s 2021 solo show at White Columns. Her drawings and collages feature fluorescent color and many varieties of automatic drawing in black ink. Nicole Storm, White Columns and Creative Growth; Marc Tatti

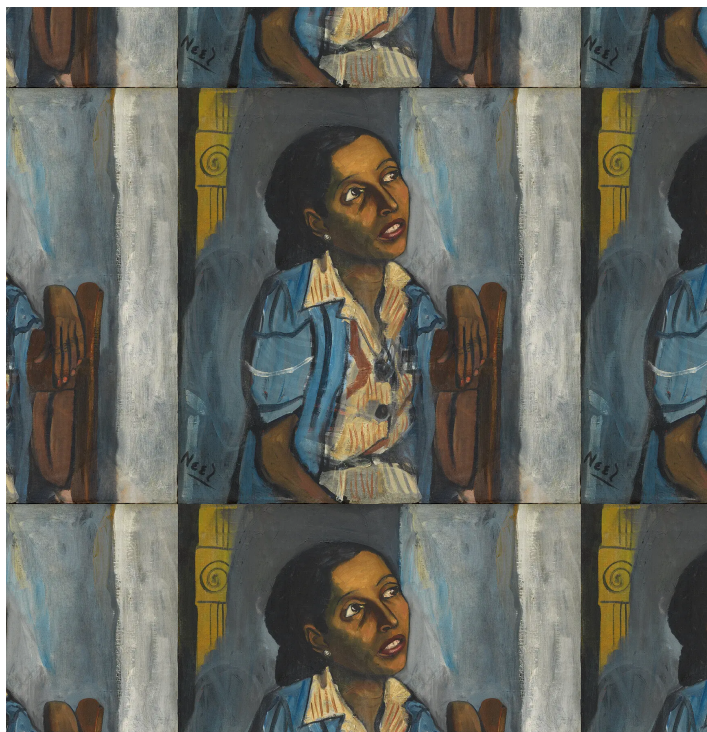
White Columns started the fall by introducing Nicole Storm, another talent nurtured at the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, Calif. (along with Judith Scott and Dan Miller). Storm’s drawings and collages feature fluorescent color and many varieties of automatic drawing in black ink. At White Columns, she orchestrated a vibrant installation, lining a small gallery with her efforts, often painting over the gaps of white wall between them. Finally, new paintings by the Somalia-born artist Uman at Fierman, alive with color and mystical beings, leapt so far beyond her first show there as to feel like a debut.

## 2. Beginnings Seen from the End: Alice Neel, Maria Lassnig

Sometimes artists start out on a high level and improve. The point was made by an exemplary show of Alice Neel’s early paintings from the 1930s and ’40s at Zwirner, an elaboration on her acclaimed retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And sometimes artists start better than they end up. Another singular show was “Maria Lassnig: The Paris Years, 1960-1968,” an valuable glimpse of the early career of the Austrian painter at Petzel (through Dec. 17). I’ve always found Lassnig’s mature figurative paintings arch and repetitive. Her climb to maturity was a delightful exploration of line and color infused with animation and humor. These early works are, to my mind, better than what came after.

*(Read our review of Alice Neel’s early paintings.)*



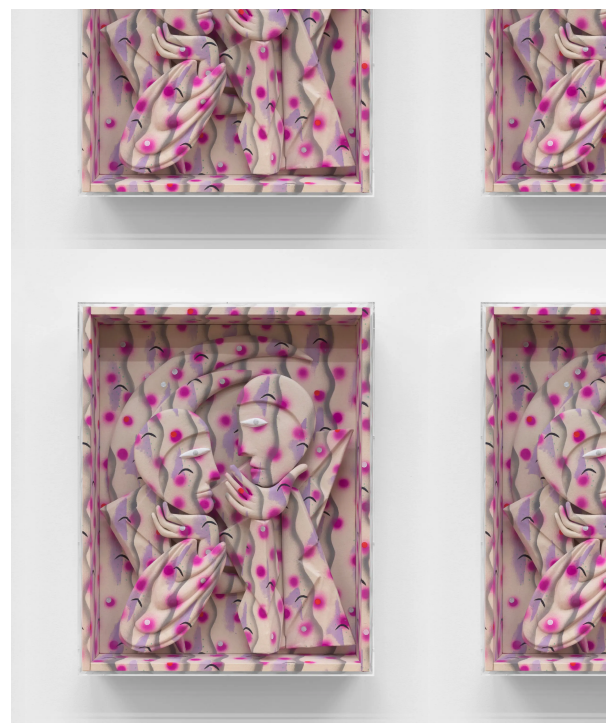


Alice Neel's painting "Mercedes Arroyo," from 1952. Estate of Alice Neel

### 3. Midcareer Standouts: Huma Bhabha, Anya Kielar, Mira Dancy

Among the inspiring examples of midcareer artists building on their earlier work: Salon 94 unveiled its swank uptown building by devoting two floors to Huma Bhabha's latest bronze female power figures; some were nearly architectural in size, while others maintained their force at a smaller scale. At Rachel Uffner, Anya Kielar has her first New York gallery show since 2012 (through Jan. 8); her shadow boxes of women made of carved Styrofoam and covered in patterned fabric are better than ever and a precedent for the current interest, among younger female painters, in depicting the lives of women. In her fourth solo at Chapter NY, Mira Dancy continued to pressure her Cubo-Futurist figures — rendered in shards of brilliant neon color — into evermore tightly wound compositions that deftly pit early modernism against kitsch (through Dec. 18).

*(Read an interview with Huma Bhabha.)*



Anya Kielar's "The Look" (2019), paint, linen fabric, foam, aqua resin, wood and plexiglass. Anya Kielar and Rachel Uffner Gallery

### 4. Long-Running Careers: Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Lois Dodd, Erna Rosenstein, Anne Chu

Several of the fall's shows devoted to long-running careers were memorable. At Garth Greenan, Jaune Quick-To-See Smith continued her incisive manipulations of the American map, turning it sideways, flanking it with patterns from Native American textiles and baskets, larding it with barbed comments (through Dec. 18). At Alexandre, Lois Dodd, 94, showed 50 years of plein-air paintings — mainly trees, flowers and buildings — whose combination of unpretentious, even awkward paint handling and descriptive accuracy is never less than fresh. Especially impressive is the museum-caliber show introducing the multifaceted Polish artist Erna Rosenstein (1913-2004), organized by the intrepid Alison M. Gingeras at Hauser & Wirth (through Dec. 23). More than 40 works range from 1946 to 2001, stretching Surrealism, realism, assemblage and even fairy tales into new shapes.

Of course, midcareer can tragically become late, as was the case with Anne Chu, a brilliant sculptor who died at 57 in 2016. White Columns is showing previously unexhibited works made during her final illness. They involve everything from cast aluminum to embroidery to glazed ceramic to two velvet rats — all handmade by the artist.

### 5. Museums Step Up

It added to the euphoric mood that the winning gallery shows occurred against a backdrop of outstanding monographic museum shows devoted to women, especially on the Eastern Seaboard. In March, New York saw the opening of the Metropolitan Museum's retrospective "Alice Neel: People Come First," an unexpected blockbuster. Three days later, the Whitney Museum opened a midcareer survey of Julie Mehretu's popular paintings organized with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. This fall brought surveys of the British photo and video artist Gillian Wearing at the Guggenheim Museum (through April 4) and the Modern's large retrospective of the great equalizer of art mediums, Sophie Taeuber-Arp (through March 12). Emma Amos's career is being feted by the Philadelphia Museum of Art (through Jan. 17) and Joan Semmel's by the Pennsylvania Academy of Art in Philadelphia (through April 3). In Atlanta, a retrospective at the High Museum exuberantly titled "Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe" honors the extraordinary work of the self-taught artist (through Jan. 9).

*(Read our reviews of Alice Neel, Julie Mehretu, Gillian Wearing and Emma Amos, and our interview with Mehretu.)*



Emma Amos's "To Sit (With Pochoir)," 1981, etching and aquatint with stenciled coloring (on view through Jan. 17). Emma Amos and Ryan Lee Gallery; Philadelphia Museum of Art

**Correction: Dec. 8, 2021**

*An earlier version of this article misidentified the object Jaune Quick-To-See Smith manipulates at Garth Greenan. It is the American map, not the American flag.*

**Correction: Dec. 9, 2021**

*An earlier version of this article misstated the year of the sculptor Anne Chu's death. It was 2016, not 2018. It also misstated the middle name of an artist. She was Nellie Mae Rowe, not Nellie May Rowe.*

Holland Cotter is the co-chief art critic. He writes on a wide range of art, old and new, and he has made extended trips to Africa and China. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 2009.

Roberta Smith, the co-chief art critic, regularly reviews museum exhibitions, art fairs and gallery shows in New York, North America and abroad. Her special areas of interest include ceramics textiles, folk and outsider art, design and video art.  
@robertasmithnyt

A version of this article appears in print on , Section AR, Page 24 of the New York edition with the headline: Best Art Exhibitions of 2021