

# NEW ART examiner

Established 1973

The Independent Voice  
of the Visual Arts

Vol. 37 No. 4, July 2023

## IN THIS ISSUE

LGBTQ+ PRIDE MONTH

Where I Find Ourselves

Apocalypse Sky

Take My Picture

Tongue & Nails

## ART FAIRS

Expo Chicago 2023

40 ChatGPT AI Questions  
for CHICAGO EXPO

Art Basel, Miami Beach 2022

## INTERVIEW

Ted Stanuga

## REVIEWS

Envision: Michigan  
Artist Initiative 2023

Lonnie Holley

House Set Sun

The Alchemists



\$20 U.S.





### COVER IMAGES

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (Sagitario), 1994–1995. Installation view at David Zwinner Gallery. Image courtesy David Zwinner Gallery.

## Contents

### 3 Introduction

#### LGBTQ+ PRIDE MONTH



#### 4 Where I Find Ourselves

PAUL MORENO reviews three shows of three artists that mark moments in LGBTQ+ history, Tom of Finland, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Dean Samashima.



#### 12 "Apocalypse Sky"

DOMINICK LOMBARDI looks at this historical exhibition of the AIDS activism in NYC during the 1980s.



#### 16 "Take My Picture"

REBECCA MEMOLI reviews this historic view of the Chicago Black gay scene as photographed by Patric McCoy.



#### 19 "Tongue & Nails"

ANNETTE LEPIQUE ponders this exhibition that examines the relationship between the body and the definition of one's self.

#### ART FAIRS



#### 22 Expo Chicago 2023

MICHEL SÉGARD, and EVAN CARTER, each give their take on this year's fair.



#### 30 40 ChatGPT AI Generated Questions for CHICAGO EXPO

STEVIE HANLEY experiments with ChatGPT to suggest future improvements to the fair.



#### 34 Art Basal Miami Beach 2022

DIANE THODOS analyses the economics and social politics of art fairs.

#### INTERVIEW



#### 41 On the Road: an Interview with Ted Stanuga

NEIL GOODMAN interviews Ted Stanuga, etc. etc.

#### REVIEWS



#### 47 Envision: The Michigan Artist Initiative 2023

K.A. LETTS examines the work of the three finalists in this competition.



#### 51 Lonnie Holley

SEAN ROBERTS looks at Holley's art and his music.



#### 58 House Set Sun

MARISSA JEZAK assesses this show of works by Anne Speier and Lucie Stahl



#### 61 The Alchemists

DESTINY GRAY reviews this Atlanta show of 28 Black artists.

## NEW ART EXAMINER

The *New Art Examiner* is published by the New Art Association. The name “New Art Examiner” is a registered trademarks of the New Art Association. Copyright 2020 by New Art Association; all rights reserved. Authors retain copyright to their essays.

### Editorial Staff:

Editor in Chief—Michel Ségard  
 Assistant Editor—Evan Carter  
 Great Lakes Region Editor—K.A. Letts  
 Southeast Region Editor—Kelli Wood  
 South Central California Region Editor—  
 Neil Goodman  
 New York City Editor—Paul Moreno  
 New Media Producer—Diane Thodos  
 Consulting Editor—Ed Roberson  
 Editorial Advisor—Tom Mullaney

### Correspondents:

Sara Rouse—Los Angeles  
 Dominick Lombardi—Northeast Region  
 Danielle Paswaters—Milwaukee

Design and Layout—Michel Ségard  
 Proofreading—Anne Ségard

### Website:

[www.newartexaminer.org](http://www.newartexaminer.org)

### Office:

5555 N. Sheridan Rd., Unit 1415A,  
 Chicago, IL 60640, USA.

### Inquiries:

[nae.msegard@gmail.com](mailto:nae.msegard@gmail.com)

All Letters to the editor are printed. Send to:  
[nae.msegard@gmail.com](mailto:nae.msegard@gmail.com)

## NEW ART EXAMINER—ABOUT US

At New Art Examiner we are dedicated to the in-depth criticism of contemporary art and culture. We are here to not only produce content, but also to foster a community for intellectual discourse and critical inquiry that holds visual art to a high standard of both formal and conceptual vigor. We put the artist and the artwork above the markets of monetary, social, and political capital so that we may interrogate the experience an artwork generates for a viewing audience and the impact of that experience on shaping thought and meaning in the world.

In addition to examining the artist and artwork, we critique the institutions that determine what artwork is deemed worthy of exhibition. We do not limit this analysis to institutions with outsize resources and rich legacies. Instead, we cover exhibitions spaces large and small, ranging from blue chip galleries and major museums to artist run workspaces and DIY pop-ups. Artworks and

venues are treated with the same level of scrutiny, focusing on the experiential impact generated by their formal and conceptual quality.

New Art Examiner is a platform for the curious and the critical to explore ideas the art world has to offer. It is a platform that reflects upon the experiences we have as people who engage with the publication. Our contributing writers and editors are invited to participate in our rigorous approach to critical inquiry and to bring their own literary and artistic voices to the content we produce. Above all, we are committed to perpetuating the legacy of NAE co-founders, Jane Addams Allen and Derek Guthrie in maintaining an open forum for the serious discussion of issues in the arts. We invite anyone who is interested in participating in this forum to explore what we have to offer in our digital and printed content and if so desired to reach out to us with thoughts, questions, and concerns.

# Introduction

With the close of this quarterly edition at the end of June we also wrap up Pride month, celebrating the culture, history, and lives of LGBTQ+ people and their contributions to society at large. But in an age where this celebration is dominated by the commodification of queer symbols by major corporations and ever-growing reductionist and hostile views of what it means to be part of this community, the details of LGBTQ+ history are often overshadowed or even lost. Furthermore, it is within artistic practice that this history and culture was not only defined but preserved.

Paul Moreno examines three exhibitions dealing with the lives of gay men across different generations and media. He discusses the drawings of Tom Finland, the conceptual sculptures and installations of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and the black and white photography of Dean Sameshima. Rebecca Memoli reviews Wrightwood 659's exhibition of photography by Patric McCoy, who documented life for gay black men on Chicago's South Side in the 1980's. And Dominick Lombardi takes a jaunt to Vassar College, where an exhibition of art design from the period of the AIDS crisis captures the feelings of both hopelessness and righteous anger that drove an ongoing fight for equality.

Spring and Summer were also the season of art fairs. Chicago's annual EXPO returned to Navy Pier with ever so slight developments from the previous year and we provide three perspectives on that—one may or may not be human. And Diane Thodos tackles Miami Basel 2022 through her signature lens of criticality toward the absorption of art into the maelstrom of late-stage capitalism.

All of this is complemented by what we do best at the New Art Examiner: looking at the art that exists outside of the mainstream in places that have only recently been considered relevant to contemporary art in the United States. K.A. Letts and Marissa Jezak continue the work of critiquing what is on display in Detroit. First-time contributors Destiny Gray and Sean Roberts cover fascinating exhibitions in Atlanta, Georgia and Knoxville Tennessee, and Neil Goodman interviews Ted Stanuga, who bucked the artistic trends of Chicago in the 70's and 80's.

As always, thank you for being a part of our community of thinkers. Stay tuned for some upcoming developments and enjoy the rest of the summer!

*The Editors*



Since 1972, Lawers of the Creative Arts has provided pro bono legal services for artists and grass roots arts organization. The staff of the *New Art Examiner* and the board of the New Art Association wish to express profound gratitude for their expertise and generosity in giving advice and help with a variety of legal issues over the years.

# Where I Find Ourselves

A reaction to: "Tom of Finland: Highway Patrol, Greasy Rider, and Other Selected Works," at David Kordansky Gallery (January 13–February 25, 2023); Felix Gonzalez-Torres, at David Zwirner (January 12–February 25, 2023); Dean Sameshima: Being Alone, at Queer Thoughts (February 1–March 18, 2023).

by Paul Moreno

At the end of winter in New York City this year, three exhibitions by three queer men, working in different times and places, all took place at once. In viewing all these shows within days of each other, I found myself asking how these works all connected, and taken together, what picture they make. They formed a monochromatic landscape: the black and white drawings of Tom of Finland, the black candy, the monotone photos, and water on gray concrete of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and the high contrast black and white photographs of Dean

Sameshima. I also asked some friends (and myself) how they felt these works related to their own lives as gay men.

One of these friends, in the spirit of Lent, had given up posting nude selfies on the internet. He dealt with his urges to lay himself bare on the web by taking the pictures, (it is not the taking of the pictures that is the issue) and sending them to me privately (forsaking the excitement, the danger, and the subsequent likes and lurid comments from the many approbating eyes that come upon the pictures my friend posts on-line. At the same time that I was the recipient of his exhibitionism, I was presented with the challenge of explaining, to readers and my editors, how the drawings of **Tom of Finland** are not simply pornography. I do think they are pornographic in the sense that they are depictions of sex and sometimes quite explicit, but because they are so much more, I do not think they are pornography. I asked my aforementioned friend, what he thought of Tom of Finland. He admitted that he didn't know much about the context in which the drawings were made but that they were sexy and, in a way, cute, that they were nostalgic and felt commercial (I'm paraphrasing).

This was already enough to explain how the Tom of Finland images are not so purely prurient. His drawings, specifically the ones in the recent exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery in New York, were part of illustrative narratives about man-on-man intimacy and were intended to be



Tom of Finland, *Untitled (from "Setting Sail")*, 1974.  
Graphite on paper, (framed) 17 5/8 x 14 x 1 1/2 inches.  
Photo: David Kordansky Gallery, NYC.



Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, c. 1966–1990. Graphite, marker, guache and mixed media on paper, (framed 16 3/8 x 13 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches. Photo: David Kordansky )Gallery, NYC.



viewed as such within the context of publications. Presenting these images in a gallery context makes the steamiest of the drawings less steamy, as they are viewed alongside the sweeter ones. For example, the first drawing in the show, *Untitled (from "Setting Sail")*, 1974, depicts two figures: the first, a light-haired and shirtless man aggressively smiles as he rests languorously in a double ender, his legs overboard, his billowing flared pants tilting in the breeze. The other figure is almost identical to the first, but with darker hair. He is nude—very nude—and appears to be pushing the dinghy with all his might. The image is sexy—one could imagine it being used to advertise a party at a gay bar. But the humor of this scenario takes the image to a place of cuteness in the sense that there is no threat of harm from these muscle men. No embarrassment or shame clouds their endeavor; no one in this image has tasted forbidden fruit, for the fruit was never forbidden here. But cuteness can also prick the darkest parts of us, inspiring a sense of abjection or violence for the guileless joy we are witnessing. Tom of Finland provokes a discomfort in a viewer who does not enjoy a man using his muscles in the romantic service of another man and if that man uses those muscles openly and with a smile, the discomfort can become a rage. These images are powerful not because of the oversized penises but because of the blatant smiles. I do not think a smile can be pornography.

The drawings of Tom of Finland not only address the fear one may have of queers but also addresses the fear a

queer may have of the non-queer, in particular the man in uniform. The cop, the soldier, the sailor, etc., symbolize the most extreme version of an existence in the world that gets called manly: the guy who gets jobs done and does not make a fuss and does not think too deeply about it. These men are banal. But the drag of their uniforms announces them fabulously. Many queers have harbored a fear of a man in uniform, but fear can be an aphrodisiac, and Tom of Finland shows us that. His fetishization for masculine drag that plays out through the characters in his drawings emerges from collages he made. These tidy and organized groupings of found and personal photographs, sometimes amended in pencil or ink, are group images of police, soldiers, bikers, cowboys, all glued down to pages of drawing paper. One such collage from the exhibition, *Untitled*, c. 1966–1990, is a gathering of men mostly cut from newspapers. He augments the images, adding boots, enhancing the thighs to jodhpur proportions, eliminating distracting background details. We see his mind at work, taking quotidian images and creating a personal *mise en scène*—literally moving the banal to a world of fetishization.

One day, my aforementioned friend sent me a handful of images of himself. We were a week and change into Lent at this point. He had sent me any number of pictures in the past, but somehow these were suddenly subtly different. They were less “look at me” and more “look at this.” They were more aware of composition or light or detail. They depicted fantasies being enacted. These images spurred in me a further realization of how Tom of Finland drawings transcend their sexual content. His drawings are

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled"* (*Public Opinion*), 1991. Black rod licorice candies in clear wrappers, endless supply. Overall dimensions vary with installation; ideal weight 700 lbs. Photo: David Zwirner Gallery.



not so much about wide open exploits of sexual abandon. Rather, they are the most private, intimate, vulnerable fantasies of an artist whose own experiences were restricted by the mores, laws, and plagues of his lifetime. He reacts to compulsory secret-keeping by making public gesture of aggressive pleasure. When we look at Tom of Finland's collages and the subsequent sketches and final drawings, the images only feel salacious when their consumption is clandestine. When they are on the wall of a major U.S. gallery, when they are in the collection of MoMA and LACMA, they don't lose their erotic power, but they open up and demand to be seen as the materials of an artist working in solitude to bring the world of his private life to the world of honest, open, public expression.

The liminal space where public rubs up against private is an exciting place for art to occur. **Felix Gonzalez-Torres** was an artist who deftly exposed the potential of this space. The most immediate way we witness this is in observing the ephemeral nature of his work, and the

frequent resistance to there being an original object. For example, in the show at David Zwirner there was an example of his candy spill pieces, *"Untitled"* (*Public Opinion*), 1991. In one gallery a large rectangular carpet of the black licorice filled the center of the room. In a sitting area outside the gallery, a small mound of the candies was nestled into a corner. The sculpture was in two places at once but remains a single work. Viewers are invited to take from the piles of black candy, some were sucking away on their candies, and some slid the candies into their pockets. Some delicately took one; some would take a handful, disrupting the clean edge of the rectangle. Once the gallery was closed, the rectangle was corrected, and more candy might be added. Ideally the piece consists of 700 pounds of the black missile-shaped treats. This installation, which belongs to the collection of the Guggenheim, resists ownership, relying on its owner to execute it regularly according to its instructions, and allow, if not encourage, it be continuously dismantled by its audience.

The title *"Untitled"* (*Public Opinion*) already evokes



Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled"* (*Sagitario*), 1994–1995. Medium varies with installation, water, 24 x 12 feet overall; two parts 12 feet in diameter each. Photo David Zwirner Gallery.





Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991. Two identical clocks hanging on the wall, set in synchronized manner at the same start time, operating with identical batteries. The clocks touch while showing the time which is running out. Inevitably, at some point they will stop; one of them will stop ahead of the other. MoMA. Photo: tripimprover.com.

something about one's relationship to the community. Its "endless supply" of components are evocative of the many voices one hears in social media, the news cycle, word on the street. Just like in our participation in those realities where we hear what we need or want to hear, here we pick the ones, the candy we want to consume. A slightly different read evokes something more ominous that was in the air during the artist's life and is looming once again: the government being a pill that is poisoning the queer community through legislation and the judicial system. We are asked to swallow this, or we can ignore it, despite its undeniable determining force in our private lives.

The installation of *"Untitled" (Sagitario)*, 1994–1995 is a work that the artist planned in the 90s but was being presented for the first time in the US at this exhibition. Two shallow circular pools of water are embedded in the floor; they are almost, but not quite, touching. The title, Sagitario, references a centaur, a creature that is half this and half that—two halves reliant on each other to make a whole. The double circle is a leitmotif throughout Gon-

zalez-Torres's work. In two iterations of a sculpture called *"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)*, 1987–1990, and 1990, two clocks are placed side by side on the wall and started at the same moment and allowed to run until their times are no longer identical and perhaps even stop. In *"Untitled" (March 5th) #1*, 1991, two 12-inch mirrors are embedded into the wall at head height, forming an ever-changing split portrait. In *"Untitled" (Double Portrait)* a stack of posters printed with two gold rings, just touching, printed on a white field, is depleted, and replenished as viewers are asked to take a poster from the stack.

*"Untitled" (Sagitario)* also operates as mirror, we see the reflection of others walking around it. As the water is "imperceptibly" exchanged between one pool and the other, we understand the metaphor about relationships between lovers, but it occurred to me for the first time when seeing this show, that Felix Gonzalez-Torres has established a relationship with me. But not only me. I have been making pilgrimages to see his work since I first encountered it in the 1995 Public Information exhibition at San Francisco



Felix Gonzalez-Torres *"Untitled" (Death by Gun)*, 1990. Print on paper, endless copies. Stack: 9 inches ideal height x 44 15/16 x 32 15/16. Photo: moma.org.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres (installation view),  
*"Untitled"*, 1994–1995.  
 Mixed media; dimensions vary with installation. Photo: David Zwirner Gallery.



Museum of Modern Art where I picked up a poster from *"Untitled" (Death by Gun)*, 1990. I have a collection of Felix Gonzalez-Torres posters rolled up in a tube somewhere. I have a small basket filled with candies from various candy spills. I have lingered in galleries waiting for the go-go dancer to show up to activate *"Untitled" (Go-Go Dancing Platform)*, 1991. I visited *"Untitled" (Sagitario)*, with a friend, another fan of the work of FGT, as we affectionally call him. He activated the work by splashing water from one pool to another. I thought that was a bit silly and almost sacrilegious, but what I realized is that he, like me, desires our relationship with Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Those of us who really love his work have a relationship with him that is profound. It is almost as though his work is made for us, and we are part of it, it is almost eucharistic, if that is not too overstated. But if God is a circle, as they say, it is the circle drawn by Felix in which we see ourselves.

*"Untitled"*, 1994–1995, a second piece in this exhibition that was unrealized while the artist was alive, was also being presented for the first time. Filling a large dimly lit gallery, two freestanding billboard structures were situat-

ed side by side but facing in opposite directions, so that one could see the front of one and the back of the other. Janus-like, these are two faces looking in opposite directions, keeping sentinel, or just observing the crowd of on-lookers. The act of bringing a billboard inside echoes the way in which one internalizes public opinion. Felix Gonzalez-Torres's work is periodically exhibited outdoors on actual roadside billboards and this act of bringing them inside also felt like the artist was pulling you aside to tell you something directly. Each billboard depicts one of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's iconic images of a bird in flight against a cloudy sky. This wistful vision stirs feelings of lovers lost. Periodically, the viewing of these billboards was interrupted by a disconcerting racket—staticky, reverberating, hard to define. This noise was in fact a recording of the audience's applause at a Carnegie Hall concert given by Kathleen Battle and Jessye Norman. This crowd sound shocks us out of our viewing relationship with this image of the sky. Once it ends, we reconnects to the image, or quietly exit alone.



Dean Sameshima, *Being Alone (No. 13)*, 2022. Archival inkjet print, 23.4 x 16.5 inches. Photo: Queer Thoughts Gallery.

The images of the birds in flight formed a connection for me to the images in Dean Sameshima's "Being Alone." In this show Sameshima shares a selection of fourteen pictures from a twenty-five-image series, *Being Alone*. Sameshima started these in 2015 and shot them until the onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic. They are strikingly high contrast. Each is a cave of deep blacks, and each has a bright white rectangle where the illuminated screen would be in an otherwise small, dark, porn theater. Shot from the rear of the theaters, the screen backlights the seats, the occasional box of tissues, the trash cans here and there, maybe a soda can or an ashtray, and, in each one, a solitary viewer that we see in silhouette as he gazes at the screen. The lone figures are like the silhouetted birds against Felix Gonzalez-Torres's sky.

The solitude of the men in these photos resonates with work of Tom of Finland and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. In *Being Alone (No. 13)*, 2022, a man is slouched deep into his seat, we see the white of the sneakers he wears, elevated, ankles crossed, resting on some structure in front of him. He is relaxed, restfully watching the show. He has escaped the public sphere and retreated here where he is maybe not

even in the depths of an erotic throe, but just alone, in his thoughts or perhaps with no thoughts at all. *Being Alone (No. 14)*, 2022, is shot from a shallow passage, at the end of which we see a figure leaning against the wall, he has not quite entered the space but is viewing it. He is at the edge of this space that simultaneously possesses the premise of anonymity and/or connection and/or continued solitude, or to put it another way, a venue where the potential of his private self may be realized in public.

Dean Sameshima and I were born the same year, about 500 miles apart in the western US. His work evokes many of the same fascinations I had as a teen and younger man. The coded queerness of icons such as British musician Morrissey or the French theorist Roland Barthes. Sameshima fetishizes vintage porn and public sex as objects and ideas beyond their intended goal of immediate gratification. He and I came of age at a moment when the party of 1970s queer liberation had ended, and suddenly sex could kill you. I felt as though the wild life that I had



Dean Sameshima, *Being Alone (No. 14)*, 2022. Archival inkjet print, 23.4 x 16.5 inches. Photo: Queer Thoughts Gallery.

Dean Sameshima, *Being Alone (No. 9)*, 2022. Archival inkjet print, 23.4 x 16.5 inches. Photo: Queer Thoughts Gallery.

been waiting to live was canceled and was replaced with waiting two weeks for the results of your anonymous testing. Sameshima's work speaks to this. There is the fantasy of public sex being the outlet for private desire. There is the desolation that one might find once one has arrived at the public sex space. There is the realization that the public lives of the queers who came before us were not all hunky-dory. Not every gay man was at the orgies but there is always the hope that one will meet the perfect lover. Even if only fleetingly. Or maybe you don't. There is no shame in being alone.

The picture, *Being Alone (No. 9)*, 2022, is one of the strangest pictures in the bunch. The seated figure we see from behind is basically dead center. On either side of his head a sort of "air-quotes" shape rises over the chair. One assumes they are hands, but whose hands are they and what are they doing, what are they about to touch, or what are they carefully not touching? Is this figure being alone? There is the photographer. There is we the viewer. We are watching this private moment play out in public. At this exhibition we are actually in the midst of a crowd of four-



teen figures, all facing the other way, all publicly lounging in their private lives. How we interpret this action, whatever scenario we provide ourselves, that is what we individually project into the white box before the guy in each picture. It may only be a bird in flight against a cloudy sky.

Or perhaps that screen is filled with an image from Tom of Finland's *Kake vol. 22—Highway Patrol*, 1980. In this series of twenty-one drawings, two highway patrol officers, concealed in some shrubbery, spy a leatherman passing by on his motorcycle. Kake, the name of Tom of Finland's frequent protagonist, is written across a roadside billboard. The officers take the biker behind the billboard where they have their way with him—the biker is more than willing to oblige. Once they are all satisfied that the law has been laid, we have a final drawing in which the spent biker smiles and waves at the departing cops. A truck passes by with the name "Tom" in large letters on its trailer. I can imagine the disconcerting racket it makes as our trio make their farewells.



Dean Sameshima, *Being Alone (No. 8)*, 2022. Archival inkjet print, 23.4 x 16.5 inches. Photo: Queer Thoughts Gallery.



Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1979. graphite on paper, 21 7/8 x 17 1/8 x 1 1/2 inches (framed). Photo: Jeff McLane, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

It is clearly not only gay men who struggle with an aporia between their private lives and public selves, between the inner workings of their psyche and the persons they portray at the office. Queers however have had to force that divide especially profoundly. It is one thing if a straight white male discusses his peccadilloes at the office water cooler, because he is afforded the dignity of choosing privacy. A queer man during Tom of Finland's era did not dare disclose his encounters for fear of censure, brutality, or even death. In a video on the website for the Tom of Finland Foundation, Touko Valio Laaksonen, Tom of Finland's actual name, explains that he had always said he only intended his drawing for the audience that enjoyed them, but that he realized that was not true, that he wanted "so-called straight people" to see them, to understand that gay men had the right to enjoy sex and enjoy each other. Here he makes a strange distinction between a private public (his fans) and a public public (those who

would be offended by his work). This private public is not dissimilar to the porn theaters in Dean Sameshima's photographs. This public public is not dissimilar to a roadside billboard of a bird in flight against a cloudy sky, a billboard that anyone can see but only those who know the code will understand. In the time span from Tom of Finland's first drawing to Felix Gonzalez-Torres's dying of AIDS at age 38, with work unrealized, to Dean Sameshima's theater-goers, queer people are still grappling with the public/private dichotomy. We attempt to conjure anonymity—simply being left to one's devices, while at the same time evoking visibility, the resistance to having to operate behind closed doors. We do this by making art that leaves little to the imagination but that also leaves everything to the imagination. ■

**Paul Moreno** is an artist, designer and writer working in Brooklyn, New York. He is a founder and organizer of the New York Queer Zine Fair. His work can be found on Instagram @bathedinafterthought. He is the New York City editor of the *New Art Examiner*.



Tom of Finland, *Kake vol. 22-Highway Patrol*, 1980. Pen and ink on paper, one of 20 parts, each: 18 3/8 x 14 7/8 x 1 1/2 inches (framed). Photo: David Kordansky Gallery.



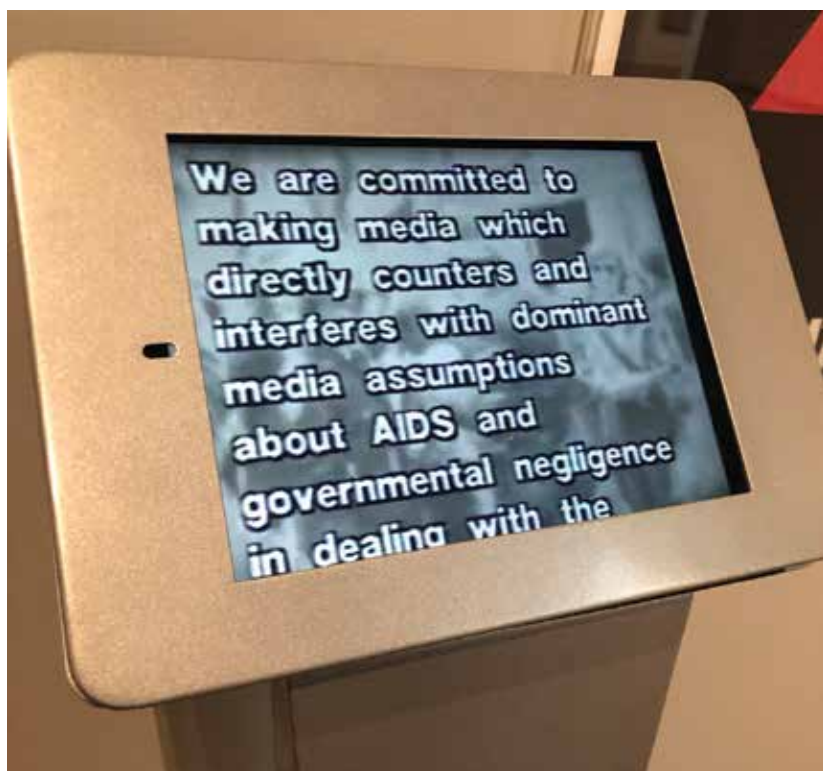
# “Apocalypse Sky: Art, AIDS, and Activism in New York City, 1982–1992”

by D. Dominick Lombardi

Co-curated by Hiram Perez and Elizabeth Nograd, “Apocalypse Sky: Art, AIDS, and Activism in New York City, 1982–1992” brings us a glimpse of what the gay and lesbian community experienced from the early days of the AIDS epidemic, most specifically in New York City. Notably, the exhibition is comprised entirely of works selected from Vassar’s Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center collection, which has holdings of over 19,000 works that go as far back as the *Head of Viceroy Merymose from his Outer Sarcophagus* (1375 BCE) to the recent acquisitions from such contemporary luminaries as Martin Puryear.

With “Apocalypse Sky,” the specific works selected focus on the AIDS crisis, especially the mindboggling lack of recognition and support from the Ronald Reagan administration in the first three years of the epidemic. It’s hard to believe, looking back at President Regan’s behavior, that he would not utter the word AIDS until September of 1985, a delay that surely increased the severity of

the crisis, a fact that is well documented in this exhibition with the video *Be a DIVA!*. *Be a DIVA!* was produced by the Damned Interfering Video Activists Television (DIVA TV), a group of independent artists associated with ACT UP. One main purpose of the video was to document the very troubling lack of urgency, as our government minimized early concerns for the epidemic, referring to it as “gay cancer.” In *Be a DIVA!*, there can be seen such things as the protests at New York’s City Hall, demonstrations on how to be safe during sex, plus other issues centered on the best ways to display civil disobedience while preparing those individuals for the resulting blowback from police and other groups prompted by fear from the lack of information.



*Be a DIVA!* (1990), Run time 28:00 minutes, Deep Dish TV Network, Damned Interfering Video Activists Television (DIVA TV) and Act Up. Photo courtesy of the author





*Assorted Ephemera* (1980s–90s), (top) Louis Clyde Stoumen, *Poster Shop, Times Square* (1985), Gelatin Silver Print. (bottom) *Bush Aids Flag*, Political Sticker (1989–93). Photos courtesy of the author.



In a display case nearby is a grouping of items collectively titled *Assorted Ephemera* (1980s–90s). Gathered here is a good sampling of what was produced by artists and activists to raise awareness, including an image of Nancy and President Reagan laughing as they strike a pose mimicking Grant Wood's *American Gothic* (1930) under a headline that refers to jellybeans (Reagan's favorite snack). George H. W. Bush, Reagan's V.P. and presidential successor did do more to bring AIDS forward as a serious concern while somewhat reducing the stigma attached to it, but unfortunately, when looking at his overall efforts, he was very lacking in such things as setting aside real money for research and development in the production of life saving drugs.

Dominating the gallery space is a collaboration between the iconic artist Keith Haring and the formidable, Beat Generation author William Burroughs. *The Apocalypse Series* (1988), which is composed of four pairs of texts and images, projects a dizzying apocalyptic view of their time. In one, the words of Burroughs begin the top row of the installation:

William Burroughs and Keith Haring, *The Apocalypse Series* (1988), Screenprint mounted on two-ply Museum Board, printed by Rupert Jasen Smith Inc., New York, published by George Mulder Fine Arts, New York, Installation view(s) of "Apocalypse Sky: Art, AIDS, and Activism in New York City, 1982-1992," a 2023 exhibition at the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center. Photo: On Location Studios.





Billy Name, *Palladium, Backstage, NYC* (1992), gelatin silver print. Photo courtesy of the author.

"Last act, the End, this is where we all came in. The final Apocalypse is when everyman sees what he sees, feels what he feels, hears what he hears. The creatures of all your dreams and nightmares are right here, right now, solid as they ever were or ever will be, electric vitality of careening subways faster faster stations flash in a blur. Pan God of Panic, whips screaming crowds, as millions of faces look up at the torn Sky: OFF THE TRACK! OFF THE TRACK!"

Below it is Haring's imagery; a red phallus splitting twin Mona Lisa reproductions sporting dead, exed-out eyes and culminating in an atomic explosion as deadly, horned sperm fan out to either side. The two together, Burroughs and Haring, create a vision that hits hard at a state of anger, exhaustion, and desperation with no end in sight, implying if AIDS takes over the world, there is no need for history, art or beauty. It's all over.

Billy Name, who was a collaborator with Andy Warhol at the time Warhol was shot by Valerie Solanas in 1968, has one photograph in the exhibition, *Palladium, Backstage, NYC* (1992). I was lucky enough to have met and known Name before he passed in 2016, and it is important to note how great a chronicler of the time of AIDS he was, capturing the vibrancy and vitality of the time, as well as the tragedy. In *Palladium, Backstage*, Name shoots from the hip, capturing a moment in a performer's life where arresting thoughts override reality and time truly freezes.

There is an excellent image of Warhol by Ari Marcopoulis, the Dutch born photographer, who was also a collaborator with Warhol. In *Andy Warhol, 1981*, Marcopoulis captures his subject in full makeup and wig holding a recorder and blankly staring into space. What looks like a bedsheet covers most of Warhol's body, making the image all that more striking, even strangely angelic.

There are other intriguing photographs by Duane Michals, Robert Mapplethorpe and Nan Goldin, but what really holds this representation of an era are the various



Ari Marcopoulos, *Andy Warhol, 1981* (2008)  
Source: <https://grupakok.tumblr.com/post/189939582214/ari-marcopoulos-andy-warhol-1981-2008>.

posters that dot the walls. One of the more ubiquitous images was created by *Gran Fury*, a group of activists who built a very effective ad campaign that appeared on numerous New York City buses. The 12 x 3 foot poster with the headline *KISSING DOESN'T KILL: GREED AND INDIFFERENCE DO* not only increased awareness of the AIDS crisis, it also pointed out how, as stated on the poster, that "Corporate Greed, Government Inaction and Public Indifference Make AIDS a Political Crisis." The smart design of the poster, which at first looked like a current day fashion ad, caught the eye of everyone.

The main poster that really hit me in the gut at the time was *SILENCE = DEATH*. The subtext on the poster addressed the lack of response from the Centers for Disease Control, the Food and Drug Administration and the Vatican, asking "Gays and lesbians" to "turn anger, fear and grief into action."

The response to COVID, which was equally troubling at the beginning of the pandemic, should give many an idea of how scary the AIDS epidemic was just 40 years ago. The lack of leadership, complicated by the ridiculous politicization of science and procedure made the delays a little different between COVID and the AIDS crisis, but the devastation, and the unnecessary loss of life created by the delays is something that should make all the decision makers and leaders take a step back and learn from their mistakes. But as we all know, history tends to repeat and there is no other reason to think otherwise since we are now no less greedy, politically unhinged or manipulative. ■

D. Dominick Lombardi is a visual artist, art writer, and curator. A 45-year retrospective of his art recently traveled to galleries at Murray State University, Kentucky in 2019; to University of Colorado, Colorado Springs in 2021; and the State University of New York at Cortland in 2022.



Various posters by Gran Fury.  
Photo courtesy of the author.



# “Take My Picture”

## Photography by Patric McCoy at Wrightwood 659

by Rebecca Memoli

**Editor's Note:** Patric McCoy is a member of the Board of the New Art Association, the publisher of the *New Art Examiner*. The reviewer has never met Mr. McCoy and does not know him.

“Take My Picture” is the title of a photography exhibition at Wrightwood 659 and the prompt for how the photographs were created. Patric McCoy’s photographs provide an intimate view of Chicago’s Black gay community in the mid 80s. At a time of economic recession, the public perception of Black men was not favorable. The photographs on view, however, offer a different perspective of Black men than the stereotypes

propagated in art and media. McCoy’s exhibition documents the lives of individuals, many of whom have been taken by the AIDS/HIV epidemic.

Coming from a line of photographers in his family, McCoy is self-taught. The project is not over conceptualized; it started as a written commitment McCoy made to himself, to take his camera everywhere and take a picture of anyone who asked. The trust these men have in the photographer is apparent. They are not set up nor are the subjects posed. They are not polished or pristine, but they are authentic. The moments McCoy has caught radiate through the dark shadows, or they have been arrested in the light of a flash.

Wrightwood’s small second-floor north gallery is packed with portraits hung salon style like clusters of memories. Many of the images were shot at the Rialto Tap, a gay bar in the South Loop. The Rialto was a haven for those who were not welcome in the northside gay bars in Chicago. McCoy and his camera became a staple at the Rialto and along his bike route. He would make prints and give them away if he ever saw the person again. In an interview with Assistant Curator Ashley Janke, McCoy discusses the desire to have a good photograph, “I think every individual has a



Patric McCoy, *Rialto*, 1985. Digital archive print. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Patric McCoy, *Three Ways to Buy*, 1985. Digital archive print. Photo courtesy of the artist.

hunger to be depicted in a recognizable and positive light. People want to see themselves and be represented. That's why we go to museums to look at images. They help us reflect on who we are."

Art photography from the 80s tended to be from a white perspective. The most notable gay photographers of that time were white—for example, Vincent Cianni, Peter Hujar, Robert Maplethorpe, Duane Michaels, Harvey Milk, and Stanley Stellar. Photography of Black men in the 80's, and certainly gay Black men, examine and often eroticize their bodies. Robert Maplethorpe's stunning

studio portraits examine the Black body in terms of form, tone, and contrast, but they do not give the viewer a sense of who the men are as individuals. McCoy's photographs portray gay Black men in a much more nuanced way. The subjects are strong, confident, but not guarded, which reflects a unique relationship between McCoy and the men he photographs. They have asked to have their picture taken, and this initiation creates a unique partnership between photographer and subject.

The men in McCoy's photographs are portrayed as complex individuals rather than exotic or dangerous. They are not all "hustlers" like in Philip Lorca DiCorcia's 90s project, although some may be. DiCorcia's subjects are solicited in the same way, and for the same price—sex. He directs his hustlers to look moody and forlorn. Each scene is designed with cinematic lighting, the images read more like romantic era paintings than photographs of an underground community. McCoy's men in contrast engage with the viewer in genuine and often playful ways. Like in the photograph *Five*, a man sits perched atop a bench that reads, "Rent Me I'm Ready!" with his fingers open, indicating five... something.



Patric McCoy, *Five*, 1985. Digital archive print. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Patric McCoy, *Window Look*, 1985. Digital archive print. Photo courtesy of the artist.

exhibiting these photographs now, Wrightwood 659 is following a positive trend of bringing attention and voice to black gay artists. What is most exciting is the historical implication of the work. In the 80s and 90s it is not that intimate photographs of Black gay men were not being taken, they were just not being shown. Just as Blacks were unwelcome in white gay bars; the interest and inclusion of gay artists was still primarily from a white perspective. Now the art world is looking back and finding what it has left behind. ■

McCoy's approach to sexuality is far less sensationalized than that of DiCorcia and Mapplethorpe. The section called "The Look" contains photographs that subvert the power of gaze. The photographer is offered "the look" and thus the viewer is "transformed from spectator to prey" creating a completely shifted dynamic. In the photograph *Window Look* the subject gives the look directly into the lens, illuminated by soft window light. The intimacy conveyed in the look makes it stand out from the other more street style images.

McCoy's photographs of the gay community are far less sexualized than works by other photographers at that time. By

**Rebecca Memoli is a Chicago-based photographer and curator. She received her BFA from Pratt Institute and her MFA in Photography from Columbia College. Her work has been featured in several national and international group shows.**



Patric McCoy, *Z in a Box*, 1985. Digital archive print. Photo courtesy of the artist.



# “Tongue and Nail” at Iceberg Projects, Chicago

by Annette LePique

In Iceberg Projects’ spring show “Tongue and Nail,” artist Tarik Kentouche’s sculptures of Carlo Mollino’s “Gaudi” chair inundated a gallery antechamber with surprising sinew and reaching, deceptively delicate, movement. Kentouche’s sculptures, in all their exoskeletal pleasures, brought to mind the chair-like apparatus at the heart of David Cronenberg’s film *Crimes of the Future*. In the film, humanity *en masse* seems to be changing; some can no longer eat food (instead hungering for plastic), feel pain, or have penetrative sex. How we relate to one another and how we relate to our surroundings is initially framed as inextricably, irreversibly alien. We soon align ourselves with one of the story’s protagonists, Saul. Saul is an artist who cannot feel pain and has intense difficulty chewing, swallowing, and digesting food. In order to eat, Saul utilizes a LifeFormWare digestion-assistance chair—a



Kat Bawden, *Tongue Tie*, 2022. Video (1:00 min).  
Photo: Iceberg Projects.



tendon-snapping machine that becomes both a part of his body, tongue and teeth, but remains something other, different than meaty gums and slick esophagus. The LifeFormWare chair and Saul are thrown into a liminal bond where the demarcations of Saul are blurred, the boundaries between his inside and outside merged.

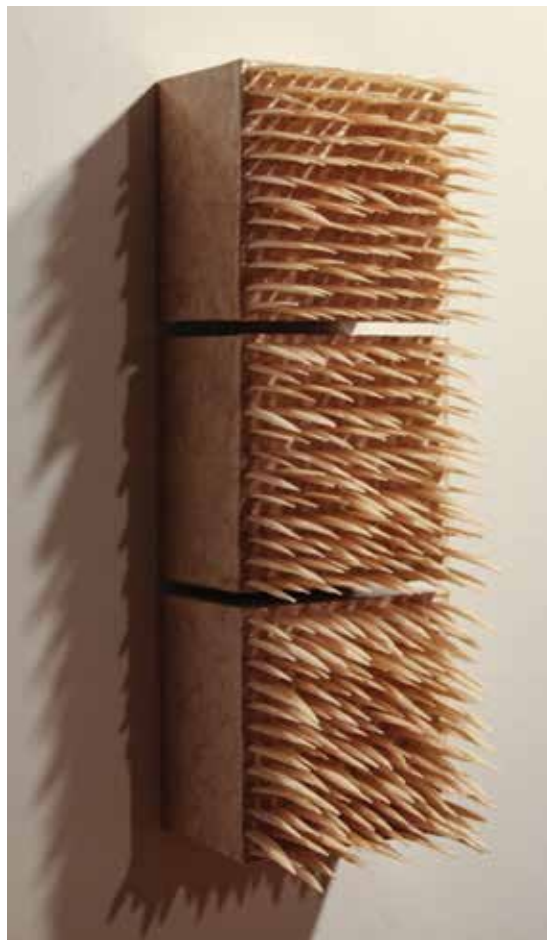
Yet, isn't that alienation, the sheer strange luck of inhabiting a body, the defining condition of flesh? Isn't the very fact that flesh degrades, that it's ephemeral, penetrative and porous, is what makes it possible to form the vocabulary of one's existence?

Tarik Kentouche, *Avantgard*, 2022. Resin, painted wooden pearls, metal joints, 16" x 16" x 32" inches, approximately.  
Photo: Iceberg Projects

Le Hien Minh, *Ornamentalism*, 2022 - ongoing. Traditional Vietnamese handmade Dó paper, wood, acrylic, 28 x 8 x 11 inches. Photo: Iceberg Projects.

Curated by John Neff and Daniel Berger, “Tongue and Nail” embraces the permeability between the horrors and sublime experiences of occupying a body, those sensations frequently being one and the same—the sensations that Cronenberg explores in his films. Taking the tongue as their touchstone from a viewing of Kate Bawden’s video piece *Tongue Tie* (2022) (alongside Kentouche’s sculptures), Neff and Berger assembled a cadre of artists—including Doron Langberg, Le Hien Minh, Jeff Prokash, David Sprecher, Tom of Finland, and Maggie Wong—whose work both expands and contracts notions of what a tongue is, to explore what it means to live within, to move within, to be a person within flesh.

Bawden’s *Tongue Tie*, a one-minute video piece, is one of the show’s catalysts. The work is projected on the gallery’s back wall, easily the first piece to catch one’s eye



upon entering the exhibition. The video opens on a close up shot of a tongue. The tongue, bound by vertical and horizontal strands of twine, occupies the center of the filmic space, and the events of the film occur entirely in silence. The camera’s lens stays trained on this tongue, while the individual who possesses said tongue pulls tighter and tighter on the strands of twine. Their hands remain slightly off screen, as does the face of the individual. All viewers see throughout the video is this tongue; all we’re asked to see is this tongue. Rivulets of spit drip off the tongue as the twine contorts it into shapes both alien and familiar. The flesh is bound into pockets of soft, wet, meat.

Doron Langberg, *Zach and Craig #4*, 2019. Oil on linen, 61 x 45.7 inches. Photo: Iceberg Projects.



David Sprecher and Jeff Prokash, *Well*, 2023. Plaster, parakeet feather. Photo: Iceberg Projects.

In Bawden's artist statement they write that they have an interest in interrogating the relationship between the body, time, and memory in the aftermath of traumatic experiences. There's an implicit understanding that when a tongue is tied, it cannot aid in the act of speech. A subject's ability to speak, to form consciousness through language, is hampered or otherwise slowed down. In Greek myth, Philomela is a young noble woman who was raped, and her tongue cut out by her assailant. Yet, there are many ways to speak, to communicate pain, pleasure, and the untold varieties of sensation that lie between the two. Philomela wove her story and sent the resulting tapestry to her sister to identify her attacker and seek revenge. I tell this story alongside Bawden's artist statement as there is power in binding oneself, in giving up power freely on one's terms. The body once again becomes one's own, a teller of stories and those stories of infinite, untold variety. Such is the mark, the burden, the gift of being human.

The variety of pieces included in the show are wide ranging in material and subject matter. Some are non-representational, like Le Hien Minh's wall sculpture, while others like Langberg's paintings or Tom of Finland's sketched scenes, portray couples in varying states of passionate embraces. There's a unifying interest in what it means to be present in a body capable of giving and receiving pleasure, pain, and care. This is an investigation that transcends differences in material and form to make generative use of the unavoidable frictions that occur in such endeavors. For the tongue, the body, and the contours of one's personhood are also landscapes of those friction-filled liminal spaces. It's there you might not only find relief, but also understanding, a sense of self. ■

**Annette LePique** is an arts writer. Her interests include the moving image and psychoanalysis. She has written for *Newcity*, *ArtReview*, *Chicago Reader*, *Stillpoint Magazine*, *Spectator Film Journal*, and others.



# EXPO CHICAGO 2023

by Michel Ségard and Evan Carter

This year, we have dispatched two critics to review EXPO CHICAGO. Michel Ségard, our editor in chief, examined two trends that he found particularly noteworthy. Evan Carter, our assistant editor, took a broader look and comments on the economic and art political issues that drive the fair.

## Color and Sculpture Takes the Stage

A Look at CHICAGO EXPO 2023

by Michel Ségard

This year's CHICAGO EXPO stood out in two major ways from past years. It was the most colorful fair in recent years, and it contained an unusually large number of small-scale sculptures. In addition, it was attended by the most diverse audience I have seen at this fair (and its predecessors) for more than 35 years. This phenomenon has corresponded to the increase in recent years of Black artists' works from around the world on display and works of art whose subject matter resonates with the African American community. The diversity of this year's fair is a welcome evolution.

Starting with the astonishing prevalence of brightly colored paintings: there were always a number of paintings at the fair that advertised their presence with bright, saturated colors. But this year, color seems to have become a trend. Several galleries showed works that were dominated

by primary colors. It seemed that Renoir's maxim to be a successful artist, one must learn to paint a pretty picture is being followed by 21st century artists in an attempt to garner more of the market. These works also have their roots in the Fauve movement of the early 20th century and, especially, the work of Matisse. Then, this approach to color was considered vulgar and unsophisticated, hence the name *Fauve*, French for wild ones. Navot Miller's *Nadav and Alex in Zipolite*, presented by Braverman Gallery from Tel Aviv is a prime example of this trend in the 21st century. The piece not only uses saturated blues, greens, and oranges, but it pays homage to David Hockney's swim-



Navot Miller, *Nadav and Alex in Zipolite*, 2023. Oil on canvas, 78.75 x 67 inches. Braverman Gallery, Tel Aviv.



(Left) Alex Scott, *Hippo Eating a Watermelon*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 40 inches. Arts of Life/Circle Contemporary, Chicago.  
(Right) Peter Halley, *Beyond the Edge*, 2018. Acrylic, fluorescent acrylic and Roll-A-Tex on canvas, 77.88 x 59.12 inches. Rosenbaum Contemporary, Boca Raton/Palm Beach.



ming pool paintings. But in Miller's painting, the figures are older with middle-age spreads and graying hair—a nod to life's reality.

My favorite painting of the entire fair is in the bright color category. It is Alex Scott's *Hippo Eating a Watermelon*, presented by Arts of Life/Circle Contemporary, a workshop and gallery devoted to artists of intellectual and physical disabilities. The child-like execution and humor of the piece is irresistibly endearing. Its display on a bright yellow wall adds to the feeling of well-being. My second favorite in the bright color category are three paintings by Hugh Byrne. These three large pieces, *Cast Around*, *Shakedown*, and *Turn Up the Heat* make a striking trio. They

show how a talented colorist can combine many saturated colors and make them work.

Saturated color treatment is not new. Peter Halley has made a career of it. He even uses fluorescent acrylic paint in his works. Starting in the mid 1980s, Halley has produced a nearly homogeneous body of work consisting of orthogonally placed rectangles of varying colors connected with thick, straight lines. Rosenbaum Contemporary showed his piece, *Beyond the Edge*.

On the international front, Alia Ali (Arabic: *عاليه علي*) is a Yemeni-Bosnian-US multi-media artist. Her work was presented by Foto Relevance, a version of *Pomm* from 2022 being the featured work of their booth. In her work,

Hugh Byrne (from left), *Cast Around*, *Shakedown*, and *Turn Up the Heat*. Each: acrylic and pigment on sewn canvas, 71 x 51 inches. Ebony Curated, Cape Town.







(Left) Alia Ali, *Pomm*, 2022. Pigment print on photo Rag 310gsm with UV laminate mounted on aluminum dibond in wooden frame upholstered in silk velvet, 57 x 45 x 3 inches. Foto Relevance, Houston. (Right) Yowshien Kuo, *Channel Surfing*, 2023. Acrylic, bone ash, glitter, plastic, and synthetic fibers on aluminum, 72 x 72 inches. Luce Gallery, Turin,

we see how bright colors are traditional to some cultures. In contrast, Yowshien Kuo's *Channel Surfing* uses his bright, garish colors to critique our American culture.

Bright coloration is also a major factor in the politics of the LGBTQ+ community. Tandem Press used a piece by Derrick Adams as the background to their booth. The piece, *Eye Candy*, is a row of six images of a Black male modeling basic underwear and rendered in the six colors

of the Pride flag. Adams also designed the swirling, multi-colored custom wallpaper background wall on which they hang. It was one of the most visually dramatic pieces in the fair.

The other phenomenon that stood out in this year's fair was the large number of modestly sized sculptures. There have always been a few three-dimensional pieces

Derrick Adams, *Eye Candy*, 2023. Six-panel screen print with relief and collage on Coventry Rag and Arches 88 with licensing for custom wallpaper, edition of 24. Each panel is 45 x 30 inches unframed, overall installation dimensions 12 x 24 feet. Tandem Press, Madison, WI.







(Left) Jesse Krimes, *Of Beauty and Decay; or, not (yellow)*, 2018. Glass, steel, tree root, artificial plant, transparency film, digital print, acrylic, 36 x 21 x 60 inches. Malin Gallery. (Right) Alejandra Seeber, *House Purse*, 2019. Ceramic, 12 x 9 x 15 inches. Barro/New York, Buenos Aires.

available, but in the early years of the fair, the emphasis was on large-scale sculpture, installed outside along the end of Navy Pier and in the parkland at the entrance to the Pier. This year, the emphasis was on sculptural pieces for interiors. This suggests an economic motive; smaller sculptures tend to cost less and are easier to place and, therefore, more marketable. There was quite a variety of sculptural styles and ranging in size and medium.



A rather large-scale piece for an interior was a sculpture by Diane Simpson, *Apron X*, at the Corbett vs. Dempsey booth. Simpson's shapes are often based on items of clothing. This work is based on the shape of an apron. Simpson, a Chicago area native, had an entire room devoted to her sculpture in the 2019 Whitney Biennial. Continuing with famous names, Deborah Butterfield had one of her ubiquitous horses, albeit a very small one, at the Vallarino Fine Art booth. More interesting was Jesse Krimes's *Of Beauty and Decay; or, not (yellow)* at the Malin Gallery booth. This multi-media piece of modest size, part animal, part plant, in spite of its serious title, has a playful tone that, again, provoked a smile like the reaction to the painting *Hippo Eating a Watermelon* by Alex Scott discussed earlier.

Ceramic pieces were a notable segment of this category. The ceramic sculpture *Venus of Earth* by Malcolm Mobutu Smith was an intriguing piece presented by the Wexler Gallery. The front of the work is the image of a woman rendered in white glaze with black accents and surrounded by a gold, irregularly shaped "halo." But the back, seen from certain angles, suggests the form of an

Diane Simpson, *Apron X*, 2005. Aluminum and leather, 75 x 36 x 8 1/2 inches. Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.



Malcolm Mobutu Smith (front and back), *Venus of Earth*, 2023. Stoneware, slip, glaze, 19 x 14 x 17 inches. Wexler Gallery.

almost buddha-shaped, seated body. In a more whimsical tone, Alejandra Seeber had a ceramic piece called *House Purse*. Barro of New York and Buenos Aires devoted their entire booth to her work which included seven paintings and two ceramic sculptures.

Sculptures by nonwhite artists demonstrated distinction in materials and theme. Two that stood out to this writer were Reginald Madison's wooden wall hanging of a ceremonial head that recalled pieces in the Art Institute of Chicago's recent exhibition "The Language of Beauty in African Art." Equally noteworthy was Shaqui Reed's *For the*

*Culture: Product Jacket*, a clear plastic "raincoat" encrusted with pockets that contained beads, combs, hair clips, buttons, colored rubberbands, scrunchies, and hair extensions, among other things. Its play with the tools of Black women's hair care, again, brought a smile as it reminded us that our social differences can be approached in a good-natured way. The piece was in the booth of the Museum of Science and Industry's Black Creativity program.

This year's fair was more inclusive and diverse than those in past years. It made for a broader awareness of how the art world is evolving and a more interesting visit.



(Left) Reginald Madison, *Facelift*, 2013. Oil on salvaged wood, 37 x 31 x 11.5 inches. Photo: September Gallery, Kinderhook, NY..(Right) Shaqui Reed, *For the Culture: Product Jacket*, 2021. Vinyl, plastic hair clips, combs, barrettes, and beads. Museum of Science of Industry, Chicago, Black Creativity program.



## More is less...again.

by Evan Carter

In the way that art is a kind of mirror that reflects and reveals our humanity, the art fair is a kind of mirror that reflects the state-of-the-art world. This state, post covid, seems to be confused. Perhaps this was the case before covid but EXPO Chicago prior to 2020 seemed to revel in this confusion more than it was beaten down by it.

One particular quality of Chicago's art scene is the desire to both engage with the high value art market while also wanting to elevate artists and artwork that dare to rebel against it. Chicago has a long history of social activism and the promotion of workers' rights, so it is no wonder that an art fair which is typically designed to generate profits for galleries and investments for buyers would, at least, present itself as trying to have it both ways. However, in a culture gradually dragging itself out of the political and social doldrums that have been the past 4–7 years, EXPO Chicago 2023 edition shows us just how much the social and political drives of contemporary art are being strained through the filter of big capital.

This is not new. We have observed in our past reviews of art EXPO that the event has leaned heavily toward the money side of things. This was evident this year in the omission of installation and performance art on the upper level of the expo center now replaced by an excess of artworks packed into crates and gallery attendants sitting at folding tables waiting patiently to show buyers their catalogs. Spaces for performance and interactive work were once again limited but in one case expanded. Jennifer Wen Ma's *Turn of the Tide* was a performance within an installation staged in the garage underneath the EXPO center. This somewhat traditional work of paper sculpture and modern interpretive dance seemed to be a mediation on ephemera and a lamentation of the earth's climate. The text presented at the site of the piece fails to mention the presence of an actual human being interacting with the work, tearing paper from the illustrative waves, and mourning them as though they were living

creatures dying from pollution. Instead, the text describes the sculptural portion as "designed to deteriorate over the duration of the art fair." This assessment is rife with cognitive dissonance, given the fact that this installation is quite large, occupying a space that could fit one of the many restaurants on Navy pier. Since the art fair only runs for barely four days it seems that the stated goal of the work was itself performative and not put fully into practice. There is also a sad irony to the fact that this artwork about climate change is literally beneath an event that not only requires the consumption and disposal of vast amounts of material in the form of wood, drywall, paint, etc. but also caters to a demographic that no doubt contributes a great deal to the climate crisis through their investment in fossil fuels.

This iteration of EXPO was once again dominated by painting, the most viable art form on the market. There was however an increase in the presence of sculpture, but it was almost exclusively the kind made to fit on a countertop or small pedestal in an urban apartment. It has been some time since one could walk into the expo center at Navy Pier and see something like Jessica Stockholder's colorful laundry baskets stacked to the high ceiling as was the case in 2014's *Once Upon a Time*. The risks of scale and temporality were once par for the course in the world of modern art and its venues. These were gifts to the viewing public who simply wanted to see and be dazzled by art, leaving them with a memory of a moment in which they were invited to see and think differently about the world around them. Though that appetite for risk is gone from the organizers of this event, it does not seem to be entirely lost in the minds and hands of the artists. There was interesting and exciting work to see this year, much of which came in the form of painting. Here are some highlights.



(Left) Armani Howard, *Fourth Ascension (I)*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas. Photo: Evan Carter.





Wadsworth Jarrell, *Zulu Sunday*, 1980. Photo: Evan Carter.



(Left) Jennifer Wen Ma, *Turn of the Tide*, 2023. Cut paper and pigment. (Right) Magalie Guérin, *Untitled*, 2021. Oil on canvas on panel. Photos: Evan Carter.







Valerie Campos , *White Tulips*, 2022. Oil on linen. Photo: Evan Carter.

Sarah Dwyer, *Rhino Cave*, 2021. Oil and pastel on linen.



Karl Wirsum (Top), *Untitled*, 1974. Colored pencil and wax pencil on notebook paper. (Middle), *Untitled*, 1974. Wax pencil, graphite and marker on notebook paper. (Bottom), *Untitled*, 1974. Red ballpoint pen, ink, colored pencil, and wax pencil on notebook paper. Photo: Evan Carter.

# 40 ChatGPT AI Generated Questions for CHICAGO EXPO

## In Collaboration with SCR2W (Surviving Capitalism Ready 2 Wear)

These questions were generated by ChatGPT under the guidance of Chicago artist Stevie Hanley as part of his SCR2W (Surviving Capitalism Ready to Wear) project. The questions are meant to highlight the economic, social, and political issues that accompany art fairs such as CHICAGO EXPO. Our editor in chief, Michel Ségard, selected images he took at EXPO CHICAGO 2023 that address the the issues in each section.

### Section 1: Addressing Systemic Racial Inequalities and Empowering Under-represented Voices

1. How can CHICAGO EXPO use its platform to challenge racial inequalities within the art world and amplify the voices of artists of color?
2. In what ways can CHICAGO EXPO empower under-represented artists and create a space where their work is celebrated and valued?
3. How might CHICAGO EXPO embrace diversity and inclusivity, ensuring that artists from all backgrounds have equal opportunities to showcase their talent?
4. What steps can CHICAGO EXPO take to foster an environment that values and promotes artistic expressions that challenge traditional norms and celebrate diverse identities?

### Section 2: Promoting Inclusivity and Accessibility

5. How can CHICAGO EXPO ensure that individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds can engage with and appreciate the art on display?
6. In what ways can CHICAGO EXPO make the art fair accessible to people with disabilities and create an inclusive environment for all visitors?
7. What initiatives can CHICAGO EXPO undertake to engage communities that have historically been excluded from the art world and bridge the accessibility gap?
8. How might CHICAGO EXPO collaborate with local organizations to provide art education and outreach programs that promote inclusivity?

**Section 1:** Holley Wilson, *Bloodline, Keeper of the Seeds*, 2021. Unique cast bronze with patina, cedar, and steel, 30 × 98 × 18 inches. Presented by Center for Native Futures/Chicago.







**Section 2:** Alex Scott, *Hippo Eating a Watermelon*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 30 × 40 inches. Presented by Arts of Life–Circle Contemporary, a studio and gallery devoted to artists with intellectual and physical handicaps.

### Section 3: Embracing Gender Representation and Challenging Norms

9. How can CHICAGO EXPO showcase artworks that challenge traditional gender norms and celebrate the spectrum of gender identities?
10. In what ways can CHICAGO EXPO support and promote gender diversity among artists, curators, and art professionals?
11. What financial opportunities exist for CHICAGO EXPO to collaborate with artists and organizations that are at the forefront of advocating for gender equality in the art world?
12. How might CHICAGO EXPO create spaces and events that foster dialogue and exploration of gender representation in art?



**Section 3:** Wole LAGUNJU, *Comfortable in My Own Skin*. Oil on Canvas, 73 1/2 × 56 inches. Presented by Montague Contemporary.



**Section 4:** Suchitra Mattai, *Rags to Riches*, 2023. Vintage saris, ribbon, and fringe, 100 x 100 inches. Born in Guyana, the work relates to Mattai's heritage as an Indo-Caribbean woman. Presented by Kavi Gupta Gallery.

### Section 4: Fostering Cross-Cultural Exchange and Dialogue

13. How can CHICAGO EXPO create an environment that encourages cross-cultural exchange and dialogue among artists and visitors?
14. In what ways can CHICAGO EXPO celebrate and showcase the diverse cultural perspectives represented in the art world?
15. What initiatives can CHICAGO EXPO undertake to promote understanding and appreciation of different cultural traditions and artistic expressions?
16. How might CHICAGO EXPO collaborate with international artists and organizations to foster global artistic connections and exchange?

## Section 5: Inspiring Empathy and Social Connection

17. How can CHICAGO EXPO engage visitors in interactive art installations and immersive experiences that inspire reflection, empathy, and dialogue?
18. In what ways can CHICAGO EXPO create opportunities for visitors to connect emotionally with the art and the stories behind it?
19. What role can art play in fostering empathy and understanding among individuals from diverse backgrounds?
20. How might CHICAGO EXPO collaborate with artists and organizations that use art as a medium for social change and community engagement?



**Section 6:** Richard Bell, *Emory Douglas*, 2023. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Bell's art practice exists in parallel with the ongoing struggle for First Nations rights in Australia.

## Section 6: Addressing Pressing Social Issues through Art

21. How can CHICAGO EXPO highlight artists whose work addresses pressing social issues such as climate change, inequality, and human rights?
22. In what ways can CHICAGO EXPO ignite conversations and raise awareness around important social topics through the power of art?
23. What platforms and events can CHICAGO EXPO create to encourage dialogue and action on social issues within the art community and beyond?
24. How might CHICAGO EXPO collaborate with local activists and organizations to create art projects that drive positive change in the community?



**Section 5:** One of several collaborative pieces created by incarcerated youth that were featured in the "Can you see me?" exhibition at Weinberg/Newton Gallery 2022. Presented by SkyArt/Chicago.

## Section 7: Collaborating with Local Communities and Educational Institutions

25. What opportunities exist for CHICAGO EXPO to collaborate with local schools and educational institutions to promote art education and engage young artists?
26. In what ways can CHICAGO EXPO partner with local communities to co-create art installations and events that reflect the identity and aspirations of the region?
27. How can CHICAGO EXPO involve local businesses and organizations in supporting and sponsoring art initiatives that benefit the community?
28. What initiatives can CHICAGO EXPO undertake to ensure that the benefits and opportunities of the art fair extend beyond the event itself and have a lasting impact on the local community?



**Section 7:** The booth of the University of Chicago, Department of Visual Arts/Chicago at EXPO CHICAGO 2023.





(Left) **Section 8:** Mads Christensen, *Fluidity*, 2023. Aluminum, steel, LEDs, acrylic, custom software, 2023 72 × 57 × 57 inches. Presented by Timothy Yarger Fine Arts.

(Below-right) **Section 10:** Phyllis Stephens, *Travel Advisor*, 2023 Richard Beaver Gallery

### Section 8: Exploring New Digital Frontiers in Art

29. How can CHICAGO EXPO leverage digital technologies to enhance the exhibition experience and reach a wider audience?
30. In what ways can CHICAGO EXPO incorporate virtual and augmented reality to create immersive art experiences for visitors?
31. What opportunities exist for CHICAGO EXPO to collaborate with digital artists and innovators pushing the boundaries of art and technology?
32. How might CHICAGO EXPO balance the use of digital platforms with the preservation and appreciation of traditional artistic mediums?
38. In what ways can CHICAGO EXPO explore the intersection of Dolly Parton's music, persona, Lipstick Feminism in participation with surviving capitalism, and artistic influence?
39. What opportunities exist for CHICAGO EXPO to collaborate with artists who have been inspired by Dolly Parton's work or share similar themes in their creations?
40. How might CHICAGO EXPO honor Dolly Parton's philanthropic efforts and use her legacy to inspire social change through art?

*Let me know if there's anything else I can assist you with!*  
ChatGPT

### Section 9: Sustaining and Supporting Artists in the Post-Pandemic Era

33. How can CHICAGO EXPO support artists in overcoming the challenges and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?
34. In what ways can CHICAGO EXPO contribute to the recovery and revitalization of the art industry in the aftermath of the pandemic?
35. What initiatives can CHICAGO EXPO undertake to provide artists with sustainable income and career development opportunities?
36. How might CHICAGO EXPO collaborate with art galleries, collectors, and patrons to create a supportive ecosystem for artists?

### Section 10: Celebrating the Legacy of Dolly Parton and Her Impact on Art and Culture

37. How can CHICAGO EXPO pay homage to Dolly Parton's contributions to art and culture through exhibitions, performances, or dedicated events?



# Art Basel, Miami Beach 2022: Spectacle of and for the 1%

by Diane Thodos

*The art world is affected by this slaughterhouse of the fairs, as it is changing the structure of how galleries function, and how artists produce work.... The agribusiness-like quality and pace of what is happening at art fairs, and how that affects the whole of the art world is frankly ghastly, demoralizing, and revolting.*

—Jamie Sterns Art Fairs are Slaughterhouses<sup>1</sup>

*Art's willingness, even eagerness, to be absorbed by money— to aestheticize money, as it were—suggests that art like every other enterprise, from the cultural to the technological...is a way of making and worshipping money—a way of affirming capitalism.*

—Donald Kuspit Art Values or Money Values?<sup>2</sup>

*A final rule for art is the self-replication of ruling class ideology about art itself—the dominant values given to art, serve, not only to enact ruling-class values directly, but also to subjugate, within the sphere of the art, other possible values of art.*

—Ben Davis 9.5 Theses on Art and Class<sup>3</sup>

So very much has been written about Art Basel, Miami Beach—America's most famous and decadent of art fairs: the jet setting high wealth collectors, the flocks of dealers that scurry in attention to their every whim, the property developers waiting to hook a client, the endless cocktail parties for schmoozing, and of course the tsunami of people restlessly seeking endless entertainment. I did not cover the ancillary fairs that sprouted up around the signature event at the Miami convention center—the big one was enough. Of course, the glitter kitsch of Miami Basel's brand was well on display, from Tony Craig's and Linda Benglis's shiny silver glob sculptures to Xu Zhen's metal mirror pretentiously titled *Inspiration! I'm Just Not Feelin' it yet!* Yes. Exactly my thought. Olafur Eliasson's giant metal sphere construction upstaged them all, hanging like an overblown disco mirror ball strategically placed next to the central rest area. Jack Pierson's slapdash array of mounted



Lynda Benglis, *Power Tower*, 2019. White bronze.  
Photo: Diane Thodos.





(Left) Jeff Koons, *Bowl with Eggs*, 1004–2009. polyethylene. (Right) Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Dropped Bowl with Scattered Orange Slices and Peels*, Miami Dade Park. Photos: Diane Thodos.

letters *This is What You Came Here For* reminds me of my regrets for having come. A predictably banal giant bowl of eggs by Jeff Koons would have been better placed at the Miami Metro Dade Park next to Claus Oldenburg's and Coosje van Bruggen's much more imaginatively conceived public sculpture *Dropped Bowl with Scattered Orange Slices and Peels*. John Baldessari's six-foot polyethene penguin in, of course Larry Gagosian's booth, comes in at a close second for sensationalized hokum, simply begging to be placed next to the penguin house at the zoo. The pretense of such overblown circus kitsch as precious art makes the guards charged with keeping the hands of little children off them rather hilarious.

Year after year there has been plenty of *reportage* on this mass glitz blitz event which I will not be adding to. First, I want to examine how mega fairs like Art Miami Basel are rigged by mega dealers to serve for the most part a tiny number of ultra-wealthy clients. How does the gravitational pull of these forces shape the basis for contemporary art production? Second, what role does the presence of the general public play in such art fair spectacles? Third I want to focus on exhibited art made in the pre-post-modern era, before the rise of billionaires that ended up driving the economics of the current art scene. How does this art from past movements require a different kind of relationship to its audience?



(Left) John Baldessari, *Penguin*, 2018. Polyurethane, steel, acrylic paint. (Below) Jonas Wood, *4 Seasons*, 2022. Screen print and acrylic on paper. Photos: Diane Thodos.



Jack Pierson *THIS IS WHAT YOU CAME HERE FOR*, 2022. Mixed media. Photo: Diane Thodos.

To understand Art Miami Basel, it is critical to expose the financial engine that feeds the explosion of art fairs today. Before the 1990s there were about 50 art fairs globally. Today there are over 300. The gravitational pull of vast wealth into the hands of the 1%—now even more concentrated in the hands of the 1/10 % or 1/100%—instigated a boom in art sales, setting off astronomical auction prices and of course massive spectacle-oriented art fairs. This phenomenon began in the Reagan-Thatcher era of 1980s when the deregulation of Wall Street and massive tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy opened the floodgates for torrents of cash to come spilling onto their laps. In time, competitive wealthy collectors would establish particular artworks as coveted tokens of monetized exchange between themselves. This explains the eternal fixing of high market values on arbitrarily chosen art commodities. Since the 1980s much art has been increasingly produced—even manufactured within a factory system—for speculative commodification in a market structure that exceeds anything that, art historically speaking, had preceded it. Art critic Robert Hughes delved deeply into this moment of transformation from 40 years ago.

*Although Art has always been a commodity, it loses its inherent value and its social use when it is treated only as such. To lock it into a market circus is to lock people out of contemplating it. This inexhaustible process tends to collapse the nuances of meaning and visual experience under the brute weight of price.... What strip mining is to nature, the art market has become to culture.<sup>4</sup>*



In the many years I have been attending art fairs I have noticed the changing trends and fashions of the contemporary art world seem to result in a tremendous amount of predictability, revealing a foreseeable pattern of standardization. Barbara Kruger sticks to her brand, doing today pretty much the same thing she did in the 1980s. Jona's Wood's giant billboard-sized basketball graphic looks like work that could hang in Metro Pictures, a Soho gallery established in the 1980s. The same goes for Michael



Richard Prince, *Untitled (detail)* 2010. Inkjet, charcoal and acrylic on canvas. Photo Diane Thodos.





Booth for Victoria Miro London, Venice.  
Photo: Diane Thodos.

Marjeus' giant video tape graphic, and you could certainly throw in Richard Prince's graffitied image of a nude with hats on her breasts which coordinates so well with the Miami Basel's addiction for bland sexual chic. The careers of past artists like Picasso and Matisse were marked by dynamic personal experimentation that matured into the movements of Cubism and Fauvism. This kind of vigorous investigation is discouraged in contemporary art, where artists must stick to their "brand" for the sake of their market in much the same way that a corporation does. This explains why there is often little change in the art produced based on signature styles, aside from occasional tweaks using gimmickry that aligns with ongoing trends.

The basis of this pattern, in both galleries and the art fair circuit, stems from the growth of wealth concentration dating back 40 years when billionaires began to appear in ever increasing numbers. To give a sense of this, in 1982 there were 13 billionaires in the US, by 1990 that number increased to 66, and today there are over 690 in the US and over 2,600 globally—19 times the amount there was in 1987. Mega art dealers with high luxury spac-

es such as Larry Gagosian, Arne Glimcher of Pace, David Zwirner, and Iwan Wirth gradually cultivated the patronage of ultra-wealthy collectors, setting the bar for what the standards of competition would be. Over time the number of art fairs increased, along with the cost of fees to participate, which became prohibitively high. The cost of a booth ran about \$30,000 on average, sometimes going as high as \$100,000. To be a gallery competing for market share in this mega-dealer dominated art world means attending 5 to 10 fairs a year. For small to mid-sized galleries this is time consuming, exhausting and very expensive. Most can't compete on the same economic footing as large well-established galleries. Cultural critic David Carrier notes that "The mega-dealers are becoming more powerful, while the medium-sized galleries are marginalized, and the museums have to work ever harder to fund themselves. It's abundantly clear that the present system is unsustainable."<sup>5</sup>

Because a great deal of international collecting happens at art fairs for a globally based ultra-wealthy clientele, the art fair circuit has had an impact on the sustain-

Spectator fashions. Photos: Diane Thodos.



(Left) Alice Neel, *Portrait of Hubert Satterfield*, 1954. Oil on canvas. Photo: Diane Thodos. (Right) Frank Auerbach, *Head of Gerda Boehm*, 1967. Oil on canvas. Photo courtesy of Marlborough Gallery.



ability of traditional galleries. The price of participation is too steep, particularly for smaller galleries with emerging artists. This situation is comparable to Amazon's monopolistic domination of internet sales that suppresses the growth of all other online businesses or Google's crushing of silicon-valley startups to keep out any competition. Like the big fish in the pond, only the biggest players can truly participate in the global game for the attention and purchases from top clients.

And what about the public? What kind of role does it play if any? Aside from paying a hefty \$65 entry fee per person the roving crowds seem to serve as a kind of publicity gloss for the event. They resemble a movable fashion display transferred from the South Beach boardwalk a few blocks away, an extension of the pop culture tourist attractions which Miami is famous for. I became aware of the large patterns and brightly colored fashion statements that people wore, often blending in with canvases of decorative "zombie" abstractions that were all over the place. People flowed with the pop spectacle phenomenon on its own level, saying as much about the art world really having become an extension of commercial fashion. A kitschy riff on a late Kandinsky abstraction printed on someone's shirt may just as well be the same as that \$100,000 painting around the corner—knocking off the same style—that a billionaire from Beijing is interested in buying.

Throughout the fair, I found interesting paintings by long neglected women artists such as Alice Neel, Miyoko Ito, and Gertrude Abercrombie. All had long careers that were for the most part neglected by the mainstream art world of their times. It is good to finally get an eyeful of their works and know that they are at last getting some well-deserved attention, even though none of them will see a penny of the astronomical prices their dealers are now hoping for. Prices on works can go up to a quarter million dollars. The irony is rather profound in the case of Alice Neel, a Communist sympathizer who led a hard-scrabble existence on the edge of poverty for most of her life. I once met her in 1984, and I can imagine what



Charles White, *Untitled* (detail), 1965. Photo: Diane Thodos.





(Left) Hangama Amiri, "A Homage to Home" (installation view), The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. Courtesy of the artist and COOPER COLE, Toronto, and T293, Rome. Photo: Jason Mandella. (Right) Miyoko Ito *Unitiled* (#118), 1975. Oil canvas. Photo: Diane Thodos.

she would have to say about the crassness of today's art market with her witty, ironic, and insightful sense of humor. I was also drawn to figurative works at the Michael Rosenfeld gallery, in particular the rendering of an African American farmer drawn by the famed WPA artist Charles White. The expressive *Head of Gerta Boehm* by Frank Auerbach accompanied by prints of Lucien Freud at Marlborough were a welcome, meditative respite from the fair's intensity. The Paulo Kuczynski Gallery featured the works of the innovative Brazilian Alfredo Vupli (1896–1988), whose luminescent tempera based geometric paintings flow with the buoyant spirit of the Brazilian Modernist art movement of the 20th century.

The works of all these artists ask for a different kind of relationship with the viewer, not as part of a roving crowd but as one-on-one experiences. They need time for contemplation and close looking—the opposite of what mass mediated art demands. Their work reacted to and absorbed Modernist art influences that were generated by changing cultural centers in the 20th century—movements that came out of cities such as Paris, Berlin, and New York. The rise of mass media, from TV and the internet, in tandem with the rise of financialized markets, changed all that. Robert Hughes has stated:

*There are extreme differences between the values of painting and sculpture, and those of mass media.... They can be contemplated, returned to, examined in the light of their own history. The work of art is layered and webbed with references to the inner and outer worlds that are not merely iconic.... Fine art is infinitely more than an array of social signs awaiting deconstruction. Its social reach is smaller than that of the mass media, and it finds the grounds for its survival in being what the mass media is not. It now seems that if one opens "art" to include more and more of the dominant media that have no relation to art, the alien goo takes over, and the result is, at best, a hybrid form of short impact conceptualism, trying to be spectacle.<sup>6</sup>*

He saw particular reasons why mass media and commercialism were so endemic to American culture, a tradition deeply rooted in our economic DNA that aggressively emerged in the 1980s.

*Here, avant-gardism embraced a more businesslike model of novelty and diversity, the fast obsolescence of products, the conquest of new markets. In the overcrowded art scene of the 80s this would accelerate to the point of hysteria.... The American idea of avant-garde activity became competitive and inflationary, swollen with excess claims for itself.<sup>7</sup>*

As I finish my marathon walk through the aisles, I come upon clusters of collectors standing in the southeast corner of the convention center, wearing expressions self-satisfaction while queuing up to pay for their purchases. They are a reminder that a tiny ultrawealthy class is the reason for most of this operation, and how the instrumentalization of the art world and its major institutions has resulted in catering to vast fortunes of unimaginable wealth at the expense of all of art's previous values, be they social, spiritual, cultural, critical, or historical.

Leaving the convention center I came across the Miami Holocaust Memorial nearby. A giant hand rises out of a pool of water. Clustered at its base are masses of struggling figures climbing its arm, like Rodin's tortured souls from his famous Gates of Hell multiplied dozens of times over. Here was a profound spiritual expression in art dealing with genocide and death. Here was a contemporary expression of the helplessness of great masses of people against the impossible odds for survival, even as the giant hand reached upward to the sky as though asking a question about the future. I was back in real life. The spectacle-buzz of Art Miami Basel melted away. I thought about the anti-Semitic neo-Nazi rallies taking place recently in Florida. Alice Neel had been an activist against the fascist forces of the 1930s in both her life and art. Lucien Freud and Frank Auerbach, who were both Jewish, had experienced anti-Semitism and escaped being murdered by the Nazis by being sent to England. In different fashions, both expressed the emotional toll of these traumas in their art. The German Expressionists Georg Grosz, Otto Dix and Max Beckmann of 1920's Weimar made art that expressed the decadence of capitalist excess, war, poverty, social chaos, and bellicose militarism that became the potent brew that fueled the fascism of WWII. Is there an art of our era that forgoes the seduction of market conformity to express the current threat of rising fascism in the U.S.? Where is there art that deals with contemporary consciousness about the menace of Christian fascism and religious suprematism that threaten democracy globally? I imagine those artists are out there somewhere, and I certainly hope they are—but you will not find them at Art Miami Basel. ■

Diane Thodos is an artist and art critic who lives in Evanston, IL. She is a Pollack Krasner Grant Recipient who exhibits internationally. Her work is in the collections of the Milwaukee Art Museum, the National Hellenic Museum, the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, the Block Museum at Northwestern University, and the Illinois Holocaust Museum among many others. For more information visit [dianethodos.com](http://dianethodos.com).

## Footnotes

1. Jamie Sterns, *Art Fairs Are Slaughterhouses*, ArtNews.com May 13, 2015.
2. Donald Kuspit, *Art Values or Money Values? Psychodrama: Modern Art as Group Therapy*, Trans-Atlantic Publications 2010, p. 359.
3. Ben Davis, *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*, Haymarket Books 2013, p. 28.
4. Robert Hughes, *The Decline of the City of Mahagonny, Nothing if not Critical* (Alfred Knopf 1991), p. 20.
5. David Carrier, *The Mega Dealers Who Ate the Art World*, Hyperallergic.com, August 17, 2019.
6. Robert Hughes, *The Decline of the City of Mahagonny, Nothing if not Critical* (Alfred Knopf 1991), pp. 15–16.
7. Ibid p. 27.

Holocaust Memorial, Miami Beach. Designed by architect Kenneth Trister. Photo: Diane Thodos.



## INTERVIEW

# “On the Road”

**“We had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life.”**

*Sal Paradise*

*by Neil Goodman*

There is a certain restlessness that personifies the paintings of Ted Stanuga. From the early representational works, through the later abstractions, there is a speed and intensity to the painting, where act and thought seem perpetually in motion. Like the characters Dean and Sal from Jack Kerouac’s book “On the Road,” the journey is the destination, with an endless horizon that forever remains in the distance. This is the pleasure of Ted’s paintings, a thin line where beauty is tenuous, and where the work travels through the rivers and valleys of generations before yet emerges with a voice distinctively his own.

Artists know each other through friendship and through their work. In most ways, we are each other’s first and perhaps most important audience, as our words of encouragement and questioning become the foundation of an ongoing dialogue that becomes part and parcel of the creative process.

Such is the case with Ted Stanuga. Upon my moving to Chicago in 1979, we shortly found ourselves as neighbors in Pilsen. Ted was working at the time as the crew manager at the MCA, and I had recently completed my MFA at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. Although our initial interests and experiences were quite different, the frequency of studio visits as well as a shared artistic community created both collegiality and comradeship, as we were both beginning our careers. For more than forty years, our paths have crossed in any number of ways, and we have continued to stay abreast of each other’s work through studio visits, exhibitions, emails, and exchanged images.

Ted is at a turning point. Facing stage four prostate cancer, this dialogue is my opportunity to publicly extend a conversation that has been with us for more than four decades. This interview is as follows:

(Top) Ted Stanuga. Photo courtesy of the artist.

(Bottom) Ted Stanuga, *Untitled*. 2017. Oil on Linen 76 x 80 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.





Ted Stanuga, *Mom and Dad*, 1981. Charcoal on Paper. Photo courtesy of the artist.



**Neil:** You were born in San Diego in 1947 and attended high school there. After high school you left and worked at the Anaconda zinc plant in Montana, then was drafted in 1967 and joined the marines. This was quite an unconventional start. What sparked your early interest in becoming an artist?

**Ted:** In high school, three teachers, Enid Miller for art, Ernie Neveu in track and field, and Harris Teller in Life Studies, were formative to my early artistic education. After the Marines and returning to Montana, I enrolled in The College of Great Falls, (a small liberal arts college) and studied for three years with the abstract painter Jack Franjevic. Jack had attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) as well as lived in New York City. Jack then helped me get into the SAIC. That was 1973.

**Neil:** You attended SAIC for several years. This was at the height of the “Hairy Who.” What was that like, and who were the teachers that influenced you at that time? It is also quite interesting, that as the artworld has changed so dramatically, we look upon that period as perhaps our history of coming of age in Chicago. But for the generations that have followed, it is more of a distant memory and part of a bygone era.

**Ted:** Not many teachers were interested in my abstract paintings when I arrived at SAIC. The exception was Tom Kapsalis who was very challenging and looked carefully at my drawings and paintings. My studies were focused on work both with Tom as well as the printmaking department. It was in printmaking classes that I began to explore

images of different kinds: portraits of my parents, dogs, landscapes, still life.

**Neil:** You worked as a printmaker at Jack Lemons studio (Landfall Press) for a number of years before working at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA). What was that like?



Ted Stanuga (Left), *Atlantic*, 1991. Oil on Canvas, 120 x 72 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.





Ted Stanuga, *Consequence*, 2008. Oil on Canvas  
79 x 76 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist.

**Neil:** Your first Chicago show was at Karen Lenox gallery in 1992. I remember the paintings of semi-rabid dogs. In some sense they might have been working out the violence in the military. They bring me back to the Cormac McCarthy novels, as images of a ravaged world. In retrospect, as your work has changed considerably, how do you feel about that body of work some forty years later?

**Ted:** As for that work, some of the original concepts continue to creep into the work especially in the last two years. You are correct in seeing that the Vet experience contributed to those early works. The edges are no longer as sharp but still linger in the later work, however less overtly.

**Neil:** We all lived in Podmajersky rentals around 18th and Halsted in the 1980's in Pilsen. The neighborhood

**Ted:** I got an opportunity to work at Landfall Press through a ten-week grant. After the 10 weeks I was offered a position as his assistant. Jack was tough but very kind and directed me both conceptually and technically. The first artist I met was Claus Oldenburg, the first edition was his "Bat Spinning at the Speed of Light." When I left, I realized that I wanted to do my own paintings, and that I was not a lithographer.

**Neil:** You worked at the MCA during the Mary Jane Jacobs years. What shows did you install?

**Ted:** Working at the MCA was an amazing experience. Nam June Paik, Phillip Guston, Malcolm Morely, "Kick out the Jams," Magdalena Abakanowicz, to name a few. I learned how to work with a crew, some of whom have become lifelong friends. The shows came often and demanded much from the staff and crew.



Ted Stanuga, *Still Life with Urn*, 1983. Oil on Canvas,  
64 x 64 inches. Photos courtesy of the artist.

Ted Stanuga, *Rodeo*, 1971. Oil on Linen.  
Photo courtesy of the artist.



was bereft of most amenities, yet for many of us, it was an introduction to a community of artists. Who do you remember from those years, and what was that community like for you?

**Ted:** I'll begin with Lupus and Peter Rosenbaum and their "Missouri Gallery", located in a loft building in Pilsen. They gave me a drawing show and a show of my still life paintings and along with Linda Lee, they were very close friends. For years we shared meals, trips, shows, and many Thanksgiving dinners. You were next door as was the ceramicist, Robert Rosenbaum. Watching both of you developing as artists influenced me profoundly.

**Neil:** Shortly after the Karen Lennox years, there seemed to be a large disjunction in your work. The Phillip Guston show at the MCA seemed to be a critical juncture for many Chicago artists, as he pointed to a new form of figuration. In many ways it had never really left the Chicago Art World. Did these exhibitions factor into your work? Also, there seems to be the beginning rumblings of your interest in Picasso, Braque, and DeKooning, as well as the color field painters—perhaps Joan Mitchell. When I look at your work, I see how much you admire other artists. I move through Conrad Marca-Relli, Paul Cezanne, Markus Lupertz, Mark Tobey, Jackson Pollack, Mark Rothko, to name a few. That is one of the things I admire about your paintings, they have a certain empathy and love of the tradition. Equally, as an active participant in the Chicago Art World, were there other Chicago based artists that influenced your work?

**Ted:** To name a few I would include Vera Clement, Dan Ramirez, Barry Tinsley, John Bannon, and Mike Helbing. Gary Justice influenced me with works that on my best day I couldn't even imagine, and still is doing it today. In sculpture I have always loved Richard Hunt's work, Linda Lee's, and yours.

**Neil:** On a more technical question, how do you start a painting—with drawing? And what materials do you work with—egg tempera, oil...? Also, do you have an image in your head, or do you find the image through the act of painting?

**Ted:** A new painting often comes from what I have just finished. Dreams are also the catalyst for new images. Most of the time, I have a hunch about where to go and then find it during the process. So, an initial application of an oil wash on a lead ground, becomes a drawing in charcoal or pastel, and then the serious paint application begins. If ever I have the entire painting decided at the beginning, it becomes something else anyway. Works on canvas or cradled panel have a lead ground and then are painted in oil.





Ted Stanuga, *Fractious*, 2020. Oil on Canvas.  
Photo courtesy of the artist.

**Neil:** How long do you work on a painting? The works seem a bit like a prize fight, as the record of everything that has happened seemed contained within them. They have a certain raw explosiveness, as the unresolved tensions reach a *détente*, yet never a real ease of cathartic resolution. This seems very much a metaphor for who you are and brings me back to that restlessness and unease within the American dream.

**Ted:** Thanks, I completely agree. They usually take 3-6 months with some hanging around for years before I get them resolved. You have a good eye. I try to leave a map of how the work is produced by leaving an example of every layer and decision change. The closer I can get to the initial inspiration the more readily I can open the image to reflect the world I live in and perhaps leave a path for the viewer to find their world. That connection, when it happens, is powerful.

**Neil:** Likewise, how do you know when you are finished with a painting?

**Ted:** I know it's finished when there is not a way to add another mark or color.

**Neil:** Some of your titles, reference a certain narrative, even though the later work is non-representational. Is there a lurking narrative behind the work, or is the work titled after completion?

**Ted:** Both, yes, as stated above, there is stuff lurking behind and driving every painting. Sometimes it leaks in at the beginning and gets a title, and other times, it comes much later, as I learn to understand the work. There will always be something to take me further or, for me, to find long after the painting is complete.

**Neil:** Your move from figuration to a more classical abstraction happened over several years. I remember some of the color field paintings, and their rich hues and almost translucent patinas. They were strikingly beautiful. How did you feel about that shift in relationship to the earlier work?

**Ted:** I feel that abstraction has been my mode since leaving high school. The figuration comes and goes but has always been a part of what I do, in fact the only painting I brought to Chicago from Montana is *RODEO* (1971), mentioned because it is a combination of both figuration and abstraction. So, think of me as mostly doing abstract



Ted Stanuga, *Untitled*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 54 x 48 inches.  
Photos courtesy of the artist.



Ted Stanuga, *Purple Heart*, 1996. Oil on canvas. Photo courtesy of the artist.



works and now beginning to blend them with figuration. A visit on any given day will find both in progress. Again, I will mention that, for me, abstraction has always been more open to the viewer with many more points of access and opportunities for viewers to find themselves in the work.

**Neil:** You have had a long and productive Chicago career and have continued to paint while making a living. For me, that has been particularly impressive as you have worked through any number of adverse circumstances that would have challenged the rest of us. When were you able to focus entirely on painting?

**Ted:** Yes, as I chuckle, a great biography of me could be told by the jobs that I have been forced to have. Growing up poor and isolated, the first thing I had to do was get a job immediately, and it has been month to month ever since. That should tell you much. The focus required for my work leaves me amid utter chaos in normal day-to-day activity. I don't think that will ever change now.

**Neil:** As you have spent most of your life in Chicago, do you consider yourself a Chicago artist, or rather an artist who lives in Chicago? Is the work connected to the city visually?

**Ted:** I am an artist who lives and works in Chicago. I consider myself an American Artist.

**Neil:** What is your important accomplishment as an artist? In looking back, what were some of the high points of your career as an artist?

**Ted:** A recent high point was my show at Matthew Rachman Gallery, also curating the show of Veteran Art from the collection of the National Veterans Art Museum that traveled to St. Petersburg, Russia. The important accomplishment of my artistic life is to help veteran artists communicate what their experience meant to them and then to us.

**Neil:** You are experiencing some very difficult health related issues. How has that influenced your work? Is there a sense of urgency in the work?

**Ted:** Those things loom in the background—rage, as well as the paintings of the wrecked carousels. At the same time there is a need to bring color back to the conversation. Urgency, you bet, although I am fine with what is coming, I want to finish the chapter well.

**Neil:** Is there a closing statement for this essay, or something that I might have missed?

**Ted:** I am here and working because many people have contributed to my efforts through teaching, generosity, and by creating enough room around me so I was allowed work and think. Those who trusted me and gave me the chances I have had; I cannot thank enough. ■

Neil Goodman is a sculptor formerly based in Chicago with an extensive exhibition history. Presently living in the central coast of California, he retired from Indiana University Northwest as Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by Carl Hammer Gallery as well as serving as the South Central California Region Editor for the New Art Examiner.

## REVIEWS

# “Envision: The Michigan Artist Initiative 2023”

*by K.A. Letts*

“Envision: The Michigan Artist Initiative 2023,” an exhibition and awards program sponsored by the University of Michigan’s Penny Stamps School of Art and Design, showcases the excellence and artistic merit of three mid-career artists working in the metro Detroit area. But it does more than that. It also serves as an illustration of current trends in contemporary art practice. The three finalists, Bakpak Durden, Levon Kafafian and Parisa Ghaderi, in addition to creating well-conceived and highly personal work, can also be said to check all the boxes that characterize contemporary art preoccupations at this moment: gender fluidity and non-conformism, check; ethnic and racial diversity, check; political advocacy, check; multi-disciplinary art practice (with accompanying technological bells and whistles), check. One of the three finalists will be selected as the winner of this year’s competition with an accompanying \$5,000 cash prize. But all three have already won, in a sense, having been chosen from a field of 309 applicants for the prize.

The three-person exhibition that accompanies “Envision,” now on view through July 31st at the Penny Stamps Gallery in Ann Arbor Michigan, is illuminating in ways both intended and unintended. The atmosphere that permeates the work in the exhibition is one of dislocation and strangeness—an effect totally appropriate to the confusing time in which we find ourselves as a nation and as a community of artists. Unidentified locations, unknown identities, overheard conversations in unknown languages, and unfamiliar melodies from the finalists contribute to a sense of intrigue calculated to unsettle and disorient.

In the front gallery, highly accomplished representational paintings and grainy, atmospheric photographs by BakPak Durden spotlight the artist’s virtuosic work, which often references established traditions of painting and art history. Durden is a native of Detroit, self-taught, who has absorbed lessons from the masters they have studied—Caravaggio, Rembrandt, and van Eyck—and has repurposed their renaissance and baroque esthetic in the



Bakpak Durden, gallery installation. Photo: K.A. Letts.

Bakpak Durden (Left panel), *Double Crown of the Distant One* (diptych), 2022. (Right panel), *Double Crown of the Distant One* (diptych), 2022, oil and archival ink on wood panel, each side, 48 x 36 inches (48 x 72 inches overall). Photos: K.A. Letts.



development of a personal iconography of sharp, slender triangles and lines that float through lushly painted compositions. The result is a subtly surreal evocation of the artist's fragile liminal state, one which they describe as an acute sensitivity to Black transness, queerness, variable states of mental health and neurodiversity.

Durden has found a warm welcome for their accomplished figurative paintings, murals and photographs among the artists, museums, and galleries in Detroit. Their work first came to public attention in 2021, when they took part in the inaugural BLKOUT Walls festival with their *Evocative of Ingenuity* mural. They were awarded a Kresge Foundation Gilda Award in 2021 for visual art, as well as a 20/20 Emerging Artists Fellowship from Playground Detroit in the same year. A solo exhibition of their work at the Cranbrook Art Museum, "The Eye of Horus," opened in November of 2022.

"Envision" opens with Durden's wall-size mural depicting the artist's hand clutching a workman's coat, a motif that recurs throughout their portion of the exhibition. The upper part of the mural is painted in color, then repeated below and in the foreground in grisaille. Narrow bands slice through the doubled images and attach them to a smallish painting hung nearby as well as to the accompanying artist's statement.

*Double Crown of the Distant One*, a diptych hung on two adjoining walls, illustrates many of Durden's methods and preoccupations. A kind of vanitas painting, the composition is crowded with emotionally resonant, yet cryptic, elements. A bisected skull shares space with a slinky toy, a potted plant rests near pharmaceutical bottles and syringes. There is humor here, and desperation. The doubled composition starts in color at the top of the 2 paintings and leaches into black and white toward the lower edges, suggesting the conventional material world in transition to its ghostly echo.

Durden's work is firmly rooted in the environs of Detroit and its post-industrial landscape, as the city returns to its natural state. Several of the paintings and photographs use the interiors of cars as framing devices. Durden routinely juxtaposes blue-collar clothing, work tools and everyday environments with the elegance of the artist's technically accomplished painting in a potent combination of the humble and the sublime.



Bakpak Durden, *Elude to Reserve* (printed 2023), framed archival print from original negative, 30 x 40 inches. Photo: K.A. Letts.





Levon Kafafian, *The Flaming Rose*, 2023, (left) leather, thread, beads, acrylic metal, handwoven silk, rayon, cotton and foam, 18 x 20 x 16 inches, (right) jacket-handwoven in cotton, rayon, linen, silk and bamboo; hardware, applied trim and found fabric lining; vest-found fabric and hardware; pants-handwoven panels of cotton, rayon, linen, silk, nylon, bamboo with found fabrics; shirt-found dyed garment; sash, silk trim; choker-leather, hardware. Photo: K.A. Letts.

In contrast to Durden's art history inspired paintings, the middle space of the Penny Stamps Gallery is occupied by the playful visual storytelling and world building of Levon Kafafian, an Armenian American native of Detroit who holds a BFA in crafts from the College for Creative Studies. They inventively exploit the formal possibilities of thread, beads and fabric to create costumes and artifacts for the inhabitants of an imaginary place they call Azadistan, where a tale unfolds of "blurred boundaries, false borders and questions of cross-cultural coexistence." The objects on display in the exhibit support a developing story—yet to be written—entitled *Portal Fire*. This sprawling project is represented in the gallery by 5 costumed avatars and several artifacts and amulets that pertain to their identities, as well as woven tapestries that provide a background for each figure. The archetypes represented are four out of 12 spirits of Azadistan who populate the tale

and move the story forward with their special attributes. *Anarad*, the Serpentine Spirit, "embodies the never-ending Serpent... who imbues the snake clan with the power to wield fire magic in emerald and jade hues." *Vartahan*, The Flaming Rose, is a mischievous trickster who enjoys manipulating human emotions, sensuality and fertility. *Vanagad*, the Obsidian Spirit, has twin bodies, and the *Summoner* is a mysteriously hooded traveler. Kafafian has chosen the dubious strategy of providing voluminous supporting material for this imaginary world by means of the dreaded QR code (15 of them!) ensuring that you will spend the bulk of your time in this section of the exhibition looking at the screen of your cell phone. Which is too bad, because the objects in the exhibit are beautifully crafted and intriguing in their own right, visual representations of a very much larger project that wants to be a graphic novel—or an epic film.



Levon Kafafian (Left), *The Summoner*, 2022, cloak-handwoven in hand-dyed cotton, rayon, applied trim and found fabric lining; mask/veil-leather, o-rings, pyramid studs, hand applied beads and evil eyes; tunic-sewn in found fabric; belt/satchel-assembled leather, jewelry, hardware; pouches-handwoven wool, cotton, rayon and cord; pants-handwoven in hand dyed cotton, rayon with found fabric waistband; staff-found wood, whittled and dyed, applied beads and thread. (Right), *The Wildfire Amulet*, 2023, leather, beads, metal, cord and foam, 21 x 11 x 2.5 inches. Photos: K.A. Letts

Parisa Ghaderi, *For dancing in the streets*, 2022. Gallery installation, projected video image and video. Photo: K.A. Letts.



From the rich fantasy world of Kafafian's Azadistan, you will be plunged into darkness, both literally and figuratively, by the austere journalistic photographs of Iranian-born artist Parisa Ghaderi. Ghaderi studied graphic design and visual communication in Tehran and, since her immigration to the U.S., has earned an MFA in 2014 from the Penny Stamps School of Art. *For dancing in the streets* is an installation of five projected, large format black and white images of the recent Iranian "Women, Life Freedom" protests which began in September 2022. The over-size static images contain smaller inset videos of dancing protesters who face imprisonment and worse from a government that employs all the power of the state to police challenges to their socially and religiously repressive system. Each photograph is framed by a pair of hands, a reference to the "mourning mothers" who attend the protests to hold up pictures of their children killed by the regime. The dancers in the videos, mostly women, defy the misogyny of their government through movement. Lest there should be any doubt that there is an ongoing government effort to quell dissent, the *New York Times* on June 11 reported that two female journalists are now on trial for

publicizing the death of Mahsa Amini, the incident that set off the protest movement in 2022.

The jury for "Envision 2023," Neil A. Barclay of the Charles Wright Museum of African American Art, Shannon Rae Stratton of the Ox-Bow School of Art and last year's prize winner, Navda Collazo-Llorens, face a daunting task—to select one winner out of the three accomplished finalists for the 2023 Envision Prize, which will be awarded on June 29, 2023. Bakpak Durden, Levon Kafafian and Parisa Ghaderi, have all presented technically accomplished work that expresses—each in its own way—the esthetic pluralism of the contemporary art world at this moment. Their artworks illuminate not only their individual excellence but provide a snapshot of the cultural moment we find ourselves in now—one of confusion, dislocation, and possibility. ■

**K.A. Letts is the Detroit editor of the New Art Examiner, a working artist ([kalettsart.com](http://kalettsart.com)) and art blogger ([rustbeltarts.com](http://rustbeltarts.com)). She has shown her paintings and drawings in galleries and museums in Toledo, Detroit, Chicago, and New York. She writes frequently about art in the Detroit area.**



Parisa Ghaderi, *For dancing in the streets*, 2022, projected video image and video. Photo: K.A. Letts.

# Lonnie Holley: Inside and Outside

## at Knoxville's Big Ears and Gallery 1010

*by Sean Roberts*

If not entirely discredited, the moniker of “outsider art” has found itself embattled over the last two decades.<sup>1</sup> Labels and distinctions like “self-taught” and “folk art” persist, even within the curatorial practices of flagship institutions like the National Gallery of Art. More productively, art spaces like Chicago’s Intuit: The Center for Outsider and Intuitive Art unapologetically embrace these terms as empowering and community building. Both Alabama native Lonnie Holley and writers on his art still rely upon the association of his practice with the outsider trope of “Shamanism.” Holley’s insistence that his first sculpture was a tombstone carved in 1979 for two of his nieces who died in a house fire is likewise an oft-repeat-

ed, harrowing, and ultimately effective mythology of this art’s muse.<sup>2</sup> Slowly but surely though, Holley, like many artists of his generation, has shed the trappings of the outsider. His paintings and sculptures can be found today in many of the most significant public collections in the U.S. including MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to say nothing of his Blue-Chip gallery representation by worldwide giants Blum and Poe, the firm that dubiously brought the world Kanye West’s Famous exhibition at their Los Angeles location in 2016.<sup>3</sup>

Holley is an integral part of a group of practitioners who challenged and displaced, yet sometimes still embrace, the outsider label of contemporary visual arts.

When he decided at the age of sixty-two to try his hand at recording and performing as a musician for the first time, he found himself flagged indelibly, however, with that questionable but nonetheless convenient moniker. Within the less professionalized, and often more dynamic world of music journalism, Holley’s identity as an outsider has persisted and even thrived in proportion to his ever-greater visibility in art galleries over the last several years. To cite but one of dozens of examples, National Public Radio’s 2015 feature on his first album carried the titled



Installation view of “Lonnie Holley March 3–April 2, 2023: In Collaboration with Big Ears,” University of Tennessee School of Art, Gallery 1010. Photo by the author.



Lonnie Holley, *Fresh Out of the Fields*, 2023, acrylic, gesso, and spray paint on canvas, 60 1/8 x 48 1/4 x 2 inches. ©Lonnie Holley/Artists Rights Society (ARS), Courtesy of Gallery 1010. Photo by the author.



“Self-Made Man.”<sup>4</sup> Here, Holley is in good company. Such identities are embraced by a bewildering range of music world figures from so-called “outlaw country” music. Consider Eric Church’s decision to name what would become his most commercially successful album *The Outsiders*—or the geographic outsider chip on the shoulder of emerging non-coastal hip hop crews like those associated with Buffalo’s Griselda Records. Such non-credentialing is probably inevitable in a field that privileges the self-taught and in which very few artists received professional training. Those who do admit credentials must soft-pedal their institutional backgrounds. Betty Who, seen dancing and lip syncing to her brand of electropop atop a float at last year’s Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade, for example, is a Berklee College of Music alumna. Even Taylor Swift insists, amid what is perhaps the most profitable world tour in industry history, that she is, in fact, the “Anti-Hero,” (the title of her most recent #1 single).

This too-easy dubbing of Holley as an outsider in popular music is ironic. If many commercial musicians must strive to establish such outsider cred, Holley instead has spent decades building a hard-earned opposite central place within contemporary art. Moreover, his output as a music maker often unapologetically embraces insiders. His albums have been produced by and co-written with Jacknife Lee. An industry fixture, Lee is best known for his work with marquis insiders like U2, Missy El-

liot, and Eminem. That level of star power is particularly brought to bear on Holley’s 2023 album *Oh Me Oh My* with its inclusion of indie stalwarts like Michael Stipe, Sharon Van Etten, and even Swift collaborator Bon Iver.<sup>5</sup>

The distinctive inside and outside mash of Holley’s practices, fluid personas, and critical reception, were on full display for attendees of Knoxville’s Big Ears festival on March 30, 2023. On the one hand, Holley’s works in paint-



Lonnie Holley, *Freedom in the Cemetery*, 2022, acrylic, gesso and oil stick on quilt over wood, 48 3/8 x 48 7/8 x 2 inches. ©Lonnie Holley/Artists Rights Society (ARS), Courtesy of Gallery 1010. Photo by the author.



Lonnie Holley (Left), *Bad News in Birmingham*, 2021, painted mailbox and baseball bats, 22 1/2 x 30 1/8 inches. ©Lonnie Holley/Artists Rights Society (ARS), Courtesy of Gallery 1010. Photos by the author.

ing and sculpture felt comfortably at home inside the University of Tennessee's downtown exhibition space, Gallery 1010. Yet, on the other hand, as a headlining musician, Holley played a key role in the festival itself, a gathering whose organizers have defined as a big tent venue featuring first and foremost new genre-bending and breaking music. Not unlike Holley though, the Big Ears festival finds itself at a crossroads between the inside and outside. Jazz,

noise, and the catchall "experimental" often draw upon an inside but aging listener base, while forms of hip-hop, once positioned outside that genre's mainstream, are gathering previously unimagined commercial and critical success. To give but one example, Billy Woods, an American rapper who took to one of Big Ears' stages after midnight on Friday, now garners the sort of praise once bestowed upon Dylan, with a vocal faction of the internet commentariat dubbing him America's greatest living poet.<sup>6</sup> Experimentation, fusion, purposely adopted outsidership, all sit at the core of a festival increasingly representative of what critics call the "prestige" wing of Indie, which might reasonably be dubbed Blue Chip Indie. Without a hint of irony, the weekend's most expensive, all-access tickets are called "Sonic Explorer" passes.<sup>7</sup>

University of Tennessee's Gallery 1010 occupies a modest ground floor space within a renovated brick building, on a block of Gay Street, where historic industrial spaces are rapidly giving way to luxury apartments, as is happening in much of Old City. For one weekend each March, Gay Street becomes the main artery for Big Ears. Within

the white cube of the gallery, visitors encountered twelve of Holley's paintings and three sculptures.<sup>8</sup> The paintings were provided with plenty of breathing room on the walls, and the sculptures set upon the hardwood floors basked in sunlight that



Lonnie Holley, *No Time to Recline (Honoring the Steel Man)*, 2007-2008, bent steel, 51 x 41 x 34 inches. ©Lonnie Holley/Artists Rights Society (ARS), Courtesy of Gallery 1010. Photos by the author.



Lonnie Holley, *Fresh Out of the Fields* (detail), 2023, acrylic, gesso, and spray paint on canvas, 60 1/8 x 48 1/4 x 2 inches. ©Lonnie Holley/Artists Rights Society (ARS), Courtesy of Gallery 1010. Photo by the author.



streamed through the gallery's floor to ceiling windows. These were accompanied by a single LCD screen playing music videos for three of Holley's best-known works as a musician—*I Snuck Off a Slave Ship*, *A Little Too Far (Mistreating Love)*, and *I Woke Up...*. The impression was that of a representative selection of recent work by an artist today at home in flagship East and West coast galleries, and part of a now significantly expanded canon of American modernism.

The paintings were a highly unified group completed in the last two years. Each of the works relied upon layered spray paint to create partially transparent silhouettes, alternately legible as faces, and dissolving into pure pattern as the viewer stood in front them. This optical irresolution, an effect the artist has related to the perspectival play of Renaissance painting, was most effective in the largest of these works. Several more modestly scaled examples instead enticed the viewer to closer visual inspection, and to a consideration of the textural play between spray paint, canvas or paper, and acrylic. The palette varied from concrete shades of gray to umbers and muted primaries. The overall effect of these paintings, with their translucent facets of color, could not help but invoke the high-modernist planes of Aaron Douglas's murals, perhaps especially so here, in that artist's adoptive home of Tennessee. The most ambitious of Holley's paintings on dis-

play, *Freedom in the Cemetery* bridged the gap between the artist's two- and three-dimensional approaches, viscerally exploring texture by combining layered spray paint with more tactile acrylic, gesso, and oil stick on a quilt support. The result is a shimmering interplay of red, blue, black, and brown; an uneasy but effective combination of the iridescent with the worn, weathered, and smudged.

This quilt, emblazoned with overlapping and interlocked faces, forcefully called upon vernacular traditions, rural cultural production, and the long memory of Black cultural experience in America. Holley's 2018 sculpture *Bad News in Birmingham*, is composed of three wooden baseball bats within a *Birmingham Post-Herald* branded mailbox. These found objects, what the artist calls "cast-offs," stands as a reminder both of the now-Atlanta-based artist's birthplace and what might be any of a dispiriting host of "bad news" that plagued that city's Black population from slavery through the last century. The specificity of experiences of the Black South gave way, in other works, to an iconography of a more universalized working man. The linear steel armature *No Time to Recline (Honoring the Steel Man)* of 2007–2008 was positioned near the gallery's front window. There it cast an oversized, skeletal, and strangely anthropomorphic reflection upon the floor. If the absent-presence of the "boss" hangs over *No Time to Recline*, it is, instead, that of the overseer that lurks in



the background of *Fresh out of the Fields*. Here the dense overlay of silhouettes that characterize these paintings coalesces into a seeming memorial to the anonymity of the Black faces and lives that grew America's crops, first under slavery, and later in the Jim Crow South. The pivotal, historical differences separating labor and capital for Black and White Americans suffuse Holley's visual practice, dovetailing with several of the most urgent and confrontational pieces on his music album *Oh Me Oh My*. The driving blues-rock of "Mount Meigs" draws upon Holley's experiences as a teenager at the sinisterly euphemistic "Industrial School for Negro Children" in that Alabama community. That juvenile detention center is now infamous for its continuation of Jim Crow era forced labor practices well into the second half of the twentieth century. So too, the song "Better Get That Crop in Soon" slides ambiguously between narratives of plantation slavery and the persistence of exploitative Black agricultural work in the modern South.

On Thursday evening, Holley stood some three blocks east of Gallery 1010, on the stage of the Mill and Mine, a warehouse-like modern event space, whose brick walls and exposed ceiling were purpose-designed to evoke the industrial spaces with which it shares real estate. Though a smattering of less-anticipated performances had been underway since mid-afternoon, it was Holley's set, in

one of the Big Ear's prime locations, that truly kicked off the festival's opening night. A bit surprisingly, the artist performed none of the "hits," whose videos were included in the exhibition. Indeed, little was recognizable here from Holley's five studio albums. Instead the crowd was treated to a largely improvised and—by necessity—little rehearsed set with Cleveland's Mourning.A.BlackStar, an ensemble who describe themselves as "multi-generational, gender and genre non-conforming amalgam of Black Culture dedicated to servicing the stories and songs of the apocalyptic diaspora."<sup>9</sup> Addressing the audience early in the performance, Holley explained, or perhaps boasted, "We ain't practiced none of this. I ain't gonna lie to you. We're bringing it to you raw; straight out the straw." This was true in spirit, notwithstanding that the group Mourning.A.BlackStar and Holley are close collaborators who have performed together intermittently over the past several years. Like his albums, these songs set Holley's weathered and authoritative voice upon a core braiding of jazz, rock, and blues patterns. The multi-vocal arrangements and harmonies, for which the band is known, amplified however the gospel and traditional spiritual elements present in Holley's music. The result was not so much one of the shaman, but of the secular preacher, of a vernacular revival. Near the end of the hour-long set, Holley and his collaborators were joined by fellow poet, Moor Mother, for a more structured rendition of "I am a Part of the Wonder," a track on which she features on the *Oh Me Oh My* album.

Holley has long used "Thumbs up for Mother Universe" as a kind of mantra at his shows. Those words, and the accompanying gesture, are known and repeated by his fans, and taught easily to newcomers. Indeed, the simple phrase is so connected with the artist that George King used it as the title for his 2021 biographical film. As Holley and the dozen-odd musicians around him on stage ended their set on Thursday night, the crowd was all thumbs, so to speak. If Holley is a preacher, his gospel is one of the potential



Holley and members of Mourning.A.BlkStar take a bow following their set at the Mill and Mine in Knoxville Tennessee on March 30, 2023.

Lonnie Holley, *Setting Liberty Free (Bound for Freedom)*, 2018, antique bird cage and souvenir Statue of Liberty, 65 x 15 x 14 inches. ©Lonnie Holley/Artists Rights Society (ARS), Courtesy of Gallery 1010. Photo by the author.

for shared human experience and the hope it might provide. That message of universal hope was presented in Gallery 1010 by the 2018 work *Setting Liberty Free (Bound for Freedom)* an assemblage that placed a small, souvenir Statue of Liberty within an antique bird cage, its door conspicuously thrown open. Such optimism suffuses as well the *memento mori* and call to action of *Oh Me Oh My's* "We All Have but a Little While." When I passed Holley walking on Gay Street early Saturday afternoon, without much thought, I gave him the thumbs up and the artist, after just a split second of hesitation, dutifully and graciously returned my gesture. This momentary exchange though—and what I rightly or wrongly perceived as the briefest apprehension—left me trying to put my finger on a feeling that had lingered over Thursday night's performance. A bit of tiredness might well be in order, of course, for a 72-year-old man who, it seems, never stops working. Holley not only performed on Thursday night, but also gave a range of shows throughout the weekend. He joined other artists on stage and put together an ad hoc backing group dubbed as his "All Stars" for a Saturday gig. In addition to these Big Ears sets, Holley took part in educational outreach to Knoxville public schools and held a workshop for MFA candidates at the University of Tennessee's School of Art.

Still, might not just a little of this weariness be a reasonable response to the unacknowledged burdens of preach-



ing positivity amidst increasingly polarized red state politics? Might not some friction arise from telling stories of the slave ship, night after night, within the sanitized, and overwhelmingly White spaces reserved for festivals and prestigious, indie rock music? Whether in the gallery or in his recordings, Holley can hardly be accused of shilling toxic positivity. "I woke up in a fucked-up America" is perhaps his second best-known phrase, even though its full statement is elided in the song's "I Woke Up" title itself. So too, a viewer might well glance from the uncaged Statue of Liberty and catch sight of one of the many undeniably confrontational, even disturbing images, like a caricatured Black lawn jockey draped with a frayed noose, which populate that song's video in the gallery.

Lonnie Holley, *Memorial at Friendship Church*, 2006. Metal, found debris, plastic flowers and ribbon, 38 x 31 x 27 inches. Courtesy of the artists and James Fuentes Gallery.

Editor's Note: This piece was featured at the EXPO CHICAGO 2023 at the James Fuentes Gallery booth.

As many of America's most successful hip hop acts have long known, it is certainly possible to play for increasingly White audiences, and such recognition has engendered a range of performative responses. That range was, in some small way, on display in the varied strategies employed by artists throughout the Big Ears Festival. This event was, after all, an event headlined by many artists of color for the decidedly, though hardly exclusively, White audience. Later Thursday evening, Moor Mother performed as part of her duo 700 Bliss in Jackson Terminal. If she reassured Holley's listeners that we were all "part of the wonder," then those who stuck around for the late show were met with a decided shift in tone. The claxons and screeches of DJ Haram's soundboard, a tangled rat's nest of wires and effects pedals, overwhelmed the relatively intimate space, open to the public and used throughout the festival to sell merch. Few beers and even fewer shirts seemed to be sold during 700 Bliss' set, and Moor Mother's jibes at the present state of politics in Tennessee hung in the air along with the unspoken, but unshakeable sense that, just maybe, the universe was not returning all of those thumbs up as the night turned to early morning. ■

**Sean Roberts is Senior Lecturer at the University of Tennessee and former director of Virginia Commonwealth University's art history program in Doha, Qatar. Sean's essays on the art of Europe and the Islamic lands, the cultural history of maps, and the place of printmaking in the histories of art and technology have appeared in journals including *Renaissance Studies*, *Print Quarterly*, and, most recently, *Material Culture Review*. His first book, *Printing a Mediterranean World* published Harvard University Press was called a "future classic on the subject" by the Times Literary Supplement. His most recent co-edited book *The Environment and Ecology in Islamic Art and Culture* appeared this June with Yale University Press.**



#### Footnotes

1. See especially Lisa Slominski, *Nonconformers: A New History of Self-Taught Artists* (New Haven and London: Yale University press, 2022).
2. See for example, Sean O'Hagan, "It's Like One Continuous Song Pours Out of Him': Meet the Shaman-like Artists-Musician Lonnie Holley," *The Guardian* May 1, 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/may/01/lonnie-holley-art-the-growth-of-communication-the-edge-of-what> Accessed 6/7/2023 and Rachel White, "Lonnie Holley and the Geologies of Alabama," blogpost for the Smithsonian, May 19, 2018: <https://www.aaa.si.edu/blog/2018/03/lonnie-holley-and-the-geologies-of-alabama>. Accessed 6/8/2023.
3. [https://www.blumandpoe.com/exhibitions/kanye\\_west](https://www.blumandpoe.com/exhibitions/kanye_west). Accessed 6/5/2023.
4. R.J. Smith "Lonnie Holley: Self-Made Man," for NPR <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2013/10/31/242114835/lonnie-holley-self-made-man>. Accessed 6/5/2023.
5. Zach Schonfeld, Pitchfork review of Oh Me Oh My: <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/Lonnie-holley-oh-me-oh-my/>. Accessed 6/5/2023.
6. Tom Breihan, Stereogum Album of the Week column for Billy Woods & Kenny Segal, Maps May 2, 2023: <https://www.stereogum.com/2222254/billy-woods-kenny-segal-maps-reviews/album-of-the-week/>. Accessed 6/14/2023.
7. <https://bigearsfestival.org/passes/>. Accessed 6/13/2023.
8. Gallery 1010, Current and Past Exhibitions: <https://downtown.utk.edu/past-exhibitions/>. Accessed 6/13/2023
9. <https://mourningablckstar.com/>. Accessed 6/5/2023.



# “House Set Sun”

## Anne Speier and Lucie Stahl at What Pipeline, Detroit

by Marissa Jezak

Somewhere in an industrial wasteland, a new dialect is emerging. On the border, objects whisper to each other in the fortified chamber of the gallery, isolated from the surrounding city's chaos. Inside is a mix of vibrant photographic prints, paintings, and sculptures, accompanied by a short text about the work and its concepts, such as driving, consumerism, and late-capitalist dystopia. In addition to the engrossing nature of the individual pieces, the open-endedness of the installation allows for infinite interpretations. The exhibition, entitled “House Set Sun” is a collaboration by German artists Anne Speier and Lucie Stahl, who have both previously been featured at What Pipeline, an artist-run gallery in Southwest Detroit that has been showing contemporary art for the past decade.

After stepping inside What Pipeline, one is immediately greeted by a huge photographic print of layered color gradients. Stahl's *Rear View 5* is boldly postured, front-and-center in the gallery, and sturdily mounted on a thick industrial steel frame. The print is accompanied by five similar images of identical size, dispersed throughout the space on frames as well as on the walls. At first glance, it is unclear exactly what process was used in the creation of the prints. The abstract smudges and dust seem to suggest color negative film or blown-up slides, while the meticulous, clean placement of the small inner rectangles on the canvas is indicative of a precision that can only be achieved through the intervention of a machine. Further research into Stahl's previous works will show that these prints do not utilize film at all—rather the artist uses a scanner in combination with various materials and found objects to make the images, which are then digitally layered together. The moody compositions allude to the act of driving and escapism and possess a disorienting lack of



Lucie Stahl, *Rear View 5*, 2023. Inkjet print and steel, 40.5 x 72.875 inches. Photo by Alivia Zivich. Courtesy the artists and What Pipeline, Detroit; dépendance, Brussels; and Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna.

spatial coordinates that suggests fantasy, or a vision from a dream. It's as if they are suspended in a parallel world, enmeshed between the virtual and the visceral.

Several paintings and two large sculptures fabricated by Stahl's collaborator, Speier, are also on display in conjunction with the prints. Near the front of the gallery, *Curio Guy*, a tall anthropomorphic figure built from wire and a domestic display case, and sporting a shingle hat, coolly stands by the side wall, the multi-faceted mirror of his torso providing a distorted reflection of the passersby. His counterpart, *Vitrine Guy*, guards the back of the room with a direct head-on gaze (minus the eyes). The monochrome sculpture tames the space, bringing in a comforting domesticity that playfully tests the barriers between the prestigious white cube and the common everyday object. These grandiose assemblages resemble old folk art and help ground the tone of the show in a familiar visual language, while boldly adding three-dimensionality to the otherwise two-dimensional presentation.



Anne Speier (Left) *Curio Guy*, 2023. Wood, laminate, foam, glass, mirror, metal and wood shingles, 109 x 34 x 40 inches. (Right) *Vitrine Guy*, 2023. Wood, glass, mirror, metal and wood shingles, 92 x 35 x 39 inches. Photos by Alivia Zivich. Courtesy the artists and What Pipeline, Detroit; dépendance, Brussels; and Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna

Seven medium-sized paintings by Speier are hung throughout the installation and depict a range of representational symbols including many houses, nuns, cherubs, and select words taken out of supermarket ads, such as “MEGA” and “EXTRA FRESH!” There is a visible difference in the variety of surface textures among the paintings, for example, between the thick, expressive application, and painterly aesthetic of works such as *Crusty House*, compared to *Mega*. In the latter, the crisp edges of its parts liken it more to a traditional cut-and-paste collage. Two of the houses are shown as dirty, dilapidated, and unsafe,

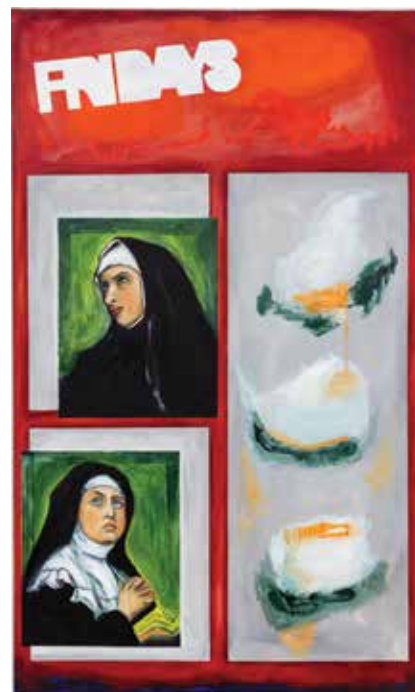
while *Mega* gives an unobstructed view of a clean, blank interior, like an open, empty dollhouse. In *Bluehouse*, the subject is doubled, with one house appearing blurry, floating in a lavender haze, and the other directly below it, wearing shoes amid a colorful surreal scene.

In dialogue with Speier’s repeated house image is Stahl’s conceptual focus on the car, via distorted ambient landscapes shown through a rearview mirror. The suggested reflections prompt thoughts on the essence of the vehicle and how it houses the body, both shielding and endangering it while acting as a vessel for our superpowered



Anne Speier (Left), *Crusty House*, 2023. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 44.5 x 26.75 inches. (Right), *Mega*, 2023. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 44.5 x 26.75 inches. Photos by Alivia Zivich. Courtesy the artists and What Pipeline, Detroit; dépendance, Brussels; and Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna.

Anne Speier(Left), *Fresh*, 2023. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 44.5 x 26.75 inches. (Right), *Fridays*, 2023. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 44.5 x 26.75 inches. Photos by Alivia Zivich. Courtesy the artists and What Pipeline, Detroit; dépendance, Brussels; and Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna.



movement—it propels us forward through life—a tool for enhanced speed and efficiency. These focal themes—the car and the house—are as mundane as they are necessary for survival in contemporary society.

Similarly, the repetition of religious imagery, specifically nuns, is common throughout Speier's portfolio, and may serve as an allusion to the systems used to organize people and keep them docile (i.e., religion: the opiate of the masses). The ubiquitous nun imagery and the sense of virtue it evokes, coyly and somewhat whimsically, shares space with the viewer from the elevated sanctuary of the frame, content in its own inevitable salvation.

The emotions activated by the exhibition are vast, touching on loaded subjects of home, escapism, consumerism, and religion. The works fully fill the space of the gallery and envelop the viewer—the result is a sensation of smallness. Perhaps it taps into a particular conflict of the psyche, triggered by the stark contrast between the depictions of home and those of the road, the per-

sistent struggle between the familiar and the unknown, of comfort versus thrill and the need to get away, to feel something new. From a different perspective, the work conceptually romanticizes the sense of *déjà vu* that characterizes modern existence. It provokes a reassessment of the methods we use in our sensory intake of the everyday by fragmenting and reconstituting common materials and symbols into these new, hybridized meditative forms. ■

What Pipeline has exhibited works by artists from Detroit as well as other parts of the world since 2013 and has participated in several art fairs. This show ran from April 8th to May 27th, 2023.

**Marissa Jezak** (b.1992, Harrison Township, MI) is an artist and writer based in Detroit. She earned a BFA in photography and critical theory from the College for Creative Studies in 2014. Marissa Jezak's writing has been featured in publications such as *Detroit Research* and *runner*, and she has exhibited artworks internationally. Her ongoing research focuses on illness, trauma, and gender politics.

Lucie Stahl, *Rear View 10*, 2023. Inkjet print and steel, 40.5 x 72.875 inches. Photo by Alivia Zivich. Courtesy the artists and What Pipeline, Detroit; dépendance, Brussels; and Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna.





# The Alchemists: A Transformative Exhibition of Black Art

## at Johnson Lowe Gallery Atlanta

by Destiny Gray

In Atlanta, a thriving and distinctive art ecosystem is emerging, characterized by an impressive trajectory that intersects, parallels, and diverges from major circuits like New York and Los Angeles. The city's creative milieu is flourishing, yielding an abundance of compelling results across a diverse range of dynamic creative endeavors. The recent exhibition at the Johnson Lowe Gallery, "The Alchemists," serves as a testament to this burgeoning creative community.

Upon entering the Johnson Lowe Gallery, one is immediately met with Mark Bradford's powerful masterpiece, *Playing Castles* (2022). The immense canvas portrays a landscape devastated by some unknown force, viewed from a bird's eye perspective. Deeply etched scratches expose raw canvas while broken lines evoke crevices in the earth's surface. Amidst the desolation, a glimmer of hope

shines through in the form of end papers—a traditional tool once used in black hair care. Vibrant yellow hues wash over the rugged terrain, symbolizing resilience and the potential for metamorphosis. This remarkable painting offers a tantalizing glimpse of the transformative power that permeates "The Alchemists" exhibition.

Under the leadership of Donovan Johnson, the Johnson Lowe Gallery has undergone a transformation by embracing a new level of vision and ambition while retaining its roots. The exhibition, co-curated by art critic Seph Rodney and Johnson, features work by twenty-eight black artists who explore the evolution of culture and identity. It provides a crucial platform for artists to explore and document Black material and ideological culture, making it a significant contribution to Atlanta's art scene and is a must-see destination for anyone seeking to immerse



Mark Bradford, *Playing Castles*, 2022. Mixed media on canvas, 72.125 x 96.25 x 2.125 inches. Photo: Johnson Lawson Gallery.

Shanequa Gay, *get that doe...*, 2015. Flashe and acrylic on wood panel, 72 x48 inches. Image courtesy of Shanequa Gay and Johnson Lowe Gallery.



themselves in the best of Atlanta's art scene and beyond.

"The Alchemists" exhibition title not only encapsulates the transformative essence of the showcased works but also references a long-standing tradition within Black art and culture. This tradition dates back to early African art, which was often created with found materials and imbued with spiritual meaning. The ability to take ordinary objects and elevate them to extraordinary heights has become a hallmark of Black visual artists and creatives, from the assemblages of Romare Bearden to the sampling techniques of hip-hop producers. "The Alchemists" exhibition continues this legacy with contemporary artists who utilize a wide range of materials and techniques to create works that are both visually striking and conceptually profound. These artists possess an unparalleled ability to take the raw materials of their lives and transmute them into compelling narratives and captivating art. Through the theme of ecstatic transformation, the exhibition celebrates the artist's mastery of metamorphosis and alchemy, showcasing how art can transcend the mundane and transform the ordinary into the extraordinary.

A standout feature of the exhibition is Shanequa Gay's captivating mural that expands on her 2015 work *get that doe...* The mural, which stretches across an entire wall, is a fusion of stenciled wallpaper and a large painting at the center. Gay skillfully employs her signature deer-human forms to create a mythical and folkloric atmosphere. In the



William Downs, *Otherworldly, Drawing Relating to an Imaginary or Spiritual World 1-12*, 2022. Super black ink, ink wash, and spray paint on paper, each 38 x 25 inches. Photo: Johnson Lowe Gallery.



Tod Gray, *Nike D.O. / Versailles*, 2021. Three archival pigment prints in artist's frames, UV laminate, 65 7/8 × 81 3/8 × 5 1/2 inches. Photo: Johnson Lowe Gallery.

painting's foreground, Black men and animals flee from a police car in the distance, adding a chilling commentary to the scene. Gay's artistry is evident as she embeds meaning and subtext in her wall covering that seamlessly morphs into the canvas, producing a thought-provoking and mesmerizing piece.

For those familiar with the Atlanta arts scene, William Downs needs no introduction. His untitled enigmatic and surrealistic collection of drawings, featured in the exhibition space adjacent to Gay's mural, has captivated audiences with its mystical and otherworldly figures that transcend the boundaries of human form. Downs' signature use of inky washes imbues his drawings and paintings with a dreamlike and ethereal quality, while his surrealistic free associations create a sense of transience that is both palpable and beautiful. His frequent depiction of figures with multiple heads and eyes has become a hallmark of his work, making him a beloved figure in the Atlanta arts community.

"The Alchemists" exhibition is a dynamic celebration of the profound and timeless impact of Black culture on the creative sphere. As a forum for investigating the cultural identity and heritage of Atlanta, the exhibition's curatorial choices encourage a re-evaluation of conventional perceptions of Blackness and a deep appreciation for the breadth of Black experiences. The exhibition's scale and scope are impressive, showcasing exceptional talents across generations and disciplines, while also providing a

reflective space for critically examining the intersection of capitalist culture and race. In doing so, the exhibition boldly challenges the disturbing trend of commodifying and diluting Black culture into mainstream culture, demanding a reimagining of how we honor and value Black creativity and innovation.

Within "The Alchemists" exhibition, Todd Gray's thought-provoking artwork "Nike D.O/Versailles" highlights the tension between Black culture and the forces of globalization and capitalism. By juxtaposing an African image with Western architecture, the work prompts reflection on the complexities of this relationship. However, within the art market, the commodification of Blackness carries unique significance. How can the art world support and honor Black artists without reducing their work to mere commodities? These are complex and pressing questions, and "The Alchemists" offers no easy answers. Nevertheless, by bringing together a diverse array of artists and showcasing the richness and complexity of Black experiences, the exhibition offers a powerful vision of what can be achieved when art is allowed to flourish on its own terms. ■

**Destiny Gray is a writer and storyteller who has focused on education and curatorial practice in the arts. She is based in Atlanta Georgia and received a BA from Georgia State University.**



## SUBSCRIPTIONS

The **New Art Examiner** has a long history of producing quality and independent art criticism. Subscription rates include six issues, print and digital version sent by email.

USA/Canada \$55 postage incl.

Rest of World \$80 postage incl.

Please send checks, along with your name and address, made payable to:

New Art Examiner

5555 N. Sheridan Rd., Unit 1415A

Chicago, IL 60640. USA.

Or log on to our website, [newartexaminer.org](http://newartexaminer.org), and use our PayPal button.

## ADVERTISING RATES 2021\*

FULL PAGE Inside front cover \$500

Inside back cover \$450

FULL PAGE \$400

(All full page ad rates include a double web ad)

HALF PAGE – portrait/landscape \$250  
(includes free one-unit ad on web site)

QUARTER PAGE – portrait only \$175  
(includes free one-unit ad on web site)

EIGHTH PAGE – landscape \$75

TWELFTH PAGE ‘Tweet’ \$25

All rates are for “camera ready” art. Black and white or color prices are the same. We can design your ad for an additional fee. Please email us for details and rates.

\*Rates subject to change without notice.

## WEB ADS

A double web ad is free with the purchase of a full page ad. A single web ad is free with a half page and quarter page ad. Contact Michael Ramstedt at [michaelramstedt1@gmail.com](mailto:michaelramstedt1@gmail.com) for dimensions and other details.

Web ads may be purchased separately for \$50 for a 190 x 190 pixel ad and \$75 for a 190 x 380 pixel ad. Web ads run for eight weeks of your choosing.

## WANTED: WRITERS

The *New Art Examiner* is looking for writers interested in the visual arts in any major metropolitan area in the U.S. You would start with short reviews of exhibition in your area. Later, longer essays on contemporary visual art issues could be accepted.

Please send a sample of your writing (no more than a few pages) to:

Michel Ségard  
Editor in Chief  
New Art Examiner  
[nae.msegard@gmail.com](mailto:nae.msegard@gmail.com)

## WANTED: ASSISTANT EDITOR

The *New Art Examiner* needs an Assistant Editor to help edit and proofread articles and reviews prior to publication. The position pays \$250 a quarter and only requires about two to four working days a quarter.

Please send a sample of your writing or editing (no more than a few pages) and a brief CV to:

Michel Ségard  
Editor in Chief  
New Art Examiner  
[nae.msegard@gmail.com](mailto:nae.msegard@gmail.com)



