

The New York Times

Best Art Exhibitions of 2021

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

By **Holland Cotter** and **Roberta Smith** Dec. 7, 2021



Details from left: Emma Amos and Ryan Lee Gallery; Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, Charlie Rubin for The New York Times; Estate of Alice Neel

HOLLAND COTTER

Most Memorable Art and Image-Makers of 2021

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

African American South

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

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

Outstanding Solos

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

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

The Best Art Shows of 2021 Were in Galleries

ROBERTA SMITH

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

Museums Step Up

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