

The Best New York Art Shows of 2021 The art world has changed forever. But New York galleries still rule.

By Jerry Saltz December 17 2021



Jennifer Packer, *Blessed Are Those Who Mourn (Breonna! Breonna!)*, 2020, on view at the Whitney. Photo-Illustration: Vulture; Photograph by Filip Wolak

Somehow, New York galleries — places where art can be seen for free, often run by one or two people on tiny margins — had a tremendous year of exhibitions. When galleries shut down at the beginning of the pandemic, many, including me, surmised most of these spaces wouldn't survive. I was wrong. Almost all did.

On the other hand, once COVID restrictions eased, much of the art world rushed to return to a system that everyone said they hated. Art fairs reopened and are multiplying. Most of the gallerists who swore they'd never go back to the fairs are going back, as are the collectors, curators, museum directors, and critics who pledged the same. Galleries still earn as much as half their year's sales at these wingdings, and a handful of mega-galleries control maybe 75 percent of the market. Auction houses, the cockroaches of the art world that seem to survive everything, smelled fresh blood — investors with pandemic money, looking to buy art — and moved aggressively. They always sold contemporary art, but now they're doing it more than ever.

The art world we left in early 2020 is not exactly the one we find ourselves in now: The biggest change is that this super-wealth and hyper-activity is cloaked now as a social concern. Heady curators travel the world “discovering” unknown artists everywhere, while ignoring the artists in their own backyards. Some choose to only show overlooked and dead artists, making it impossible for critics to criticize these efforts without seeming churlish, or worse.

Yet all this is bringing something fantastic and necessary to the mix. As much as a lot of it feels like conscience-laundering and box-ticking, it has completely changed what exhibition schedules look like in one existentially tremendous regard: For the first time, American galleries, museums, and much of the market are getting more equitable — showing, selling, and celebrating more work by women artists, more work by artists of color. It is now impossible to imagine a big biennial or museum group show of all white male artists. We may be entering the most exciting era of art history ever, as everything is being rewritten, rethought, corrected, and examined. Of course, a percent of this work will be mediocre. But no greater percent will be bad than was true when mainly white men were sold and lionized. In time, the good will win out and the rest will be forgotten, as it always is.

Against the financial odds, smaller and mid-sized New York galleries — the kinds of spaces the sun can set on, the kind without locations around the globe — did amazing shows. They stayed flexible, charismatic, and fun. To lifers like me, galleries didn't seem as crowded. But everyone you saw there seemed eager to talk, passionate about seeing art again in the flesh, grateful to be there at all. All this made the art world feel smaller, not bigger. Over the buzz of the market, we may immerse ourselves once again. With a gaggle of great museum exhibitions (institutions that suffered huge drop-offs in attendance), excellent shows and a much-needed shift toward inclusion meant that New York galleries ruled.

Special Mention

In this time of accelerated, limelike artistic careers (many seeming to last only a couple years), a massive hat tip to artists who continue their work for decades at high levels — those with the lives-lived-in-art that we all hope for. Among others of this ilk standing out this year: Karla Knight, Olive Ayhens, Keith Mayerson, Mira Schor, Joan Semmel, Arthur Simms, Loren Munk, Catherine Murphy, and Vera Girivi.