

The New Generation of Black Women and Nonbinary Gallerists



Jasmin Hernandez Mar 1, 2022 3:21pm

Black women are the present and future of contemporary art. It's something I've said on Instagram and a fact that continues to prove itself over and over again. From Simone Leigh becoming the first Black woman artist to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale later this spring, to the recent high-profile appointments of Isolde Brielmaier as the New Museum's deputy director and Crystal

Williams becoming the Rhode Island School of Design's first Black (and Black woman) president. Black women historically and relentlessly define, preserve, ideate art and move culture. And they've undoubtedly helped construct the past as well.

When pioneering gallerist, filmmaker, and food activist Linda Goode Bryant opened Just Above Midtown (JAM) on 57th Street in 1974, she disrupted the white elitist art scene of the time in New York. Top galleries such as Leo Castelli, Ileana Sonnabend, and Marlborough catered to an upper-class white status quo, and felt comfortable not evolving. At JAM, Goode Bryant shattered those norms. She showed then-younger Black American artists (and total legends at this point) such as Maren Hassinger, Lorraine O'Grady, David Hammons, Fred Wilson, and others, who created experimental and provocative work on the Black experience and identity. Today, a new generation of Black women-owned galleries across the U.S. sustain Goode Bryant's radical legacy, whether they exist in physical, pop-up, or virtual form.

During this time of heightened visibility for Black American artists and artists from the African diaspora—which doesn't necessarily mean more equity in the art market—Black women and nonbinary gallerists, and the spaces they're establishing, are participating in meaningful and crucial ways in the art ecosystem. They're creating Black-owned art enterprises, impacting their local communities, exhibiting Black and POC artists across an intersection of identities, and building legacies.

In New York, Nicola Vassell, former director of Deitch Projects and Pace Gallery, and owner of art consultancy Concept NV, opened her space in the middle of the pandemic in May 2021 in Chelsea, with Ming Smith's inaugural and breathtaking photography exhibition "Evidence." In late January of this year, Afro-Canadian gallerist Hannah Traore founded her gallery on Orchard Street with two weighty shows: "Hues" and "Mi Casa Su Casa," the latter of which was curated by Hassan Hajjaj and Meriem Yin, featuring vibrant works by contemporary Moroccan artists. HOUSING on Henry Street, owned by KJ Freeman, operates much deeper than just a for-profit gallery (its

name is an ode to unfair housing issues faced by Black and POC working folk in the city). It's a haven for Black, POC, and QTBIPOC artistic safety, and in the summer of 2020, Freeman distributed essential micro grants to Black artists financially devastated by the pandemic. Curator and art advisor Cierra Britton and her forthcoming eponymous gallery are currently fundraising to open the first physical gallery in Manhattan dedicated to Black and WOC artists.



Installation view of "Hues" at Hannah Traore Gallery, New York. Courtesy of Hannah Traore Gallery.

Waller Gallery, founded by curator and scholar Joy Davis in 2017, is a major player in the thriving Baltimore art scene, and situated on Piscataway Land, feels a great commitment to Indigenous art and artists. At the newly founded Chela Mitchell Gallery (it debuted in Washington, D.C., as a pop-up in July 2021), Chela Mitchell—a super stylish art advisor and dealer, and founder of Komuna House—put on two stunning shows: a group show titled "Envy the Wind," comprised of six Black and POC artists who are D.C. locals; and painter Célia Rakotondrainy's U.S. solo debut, featuring mesmerizing double-exposed portraits unpacking her Franco-Malagasy identity.

On the West Coast, artist and curator Tariqa Waters has been crushing boundaries through Martyr Sauce, a now decade-old renegade DIY underground gallery in Seattle's Pioneer Square—which recently expanded with the addition of the aboveground exuberant Martyr Sauce Pop Art Museum (MS PAM). Nigerian artpreneur and gallerist Adenrele Sonariwo opened Rele Gallery's L.A. location on Melrose Avenue exactly one year ago, building upon the Lagos-based gallery program she founded in 2015. Rele prioritizes contemporary African women artists including Nigerian painters Tonia Nneji and Chidinma Nnoli. And all-around renaissance woman in the art world Dominique Clayton founded Dominique Gallery in Los Angeles four years ago. Her West Adams storefront, arts incubator, and project space supports BIPOC artists with publicity, networking, collector relationships, and much more.

Superposition founder Storm Ascher started her flexible nomadic gallery approach back in 2018. She's since held nuanced and engaging solo and group shows in L.A., Miami, and the Hamptons, and most recently co-curated "House of Crowns" in New York, which included works by Layo Bright, Renee Cox, and Haleigh Nickerson. Multi-talented curator and cultural strategist Ashara Ekundayo operated her namesake physical gallery from 2017 to 2019 in Oakland's Uptown and KONO districts, showing greats like Zanele Muholi and Tiff Massey, and has since evolved to offering global pop-up and virtual art experiences centered on Black women's artistic production.