

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

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).