

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

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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.