

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.

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.

