

30 YOUNG ARTISTS TO

In art, like in life, there is a premium put on youth. In creating our second annual young artists list, we wanted to celebrate individuals who are charting their own course, creating work that challenges us—both inside and outside the art market. The 30 artists under 35 we include here capture just a slice of

BY KAT HERRIMAN, JESSICA LYNNE AND WILLIAM J. SIMMONS

PORTRAITS BY JASON SCHMIDT

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a generation that feels more connected than ever with one another. Via screen, canvas or installation, these are the voices of a moment in time that has as much to mourn as to celebrate. We look to the youth to communicate our future—a glimpse of which we capture on these pages.



Jordan Casteel | [@jordanmcasteel](https://www.instagram.com/jordanmcasteel)

Jordan Casteel's portraits are intimate records of time and space, to be sure, but they are also exercises in the sociopolitical implications of color in all its forms—pigment, skin, labor, difference, community. Her subjects are as important as her application of paint, which acts as a record of her technical skill and emotional intelligence. "The malleable-vidid-durable-revealing-permanent-colorful-(or colorless)-elastic medium of paint on canvas allows me, in the only way I know how, to communicate the evolving, shared connection between myself, my subjects, our environments and everything in between," says Casteel.

It is into this connection that Casteel allows us a momentary glimpse. This goes beyond being a skilled artist; it is testament to an ability to translate the world in terms that are legible to multiple and disparate communities. While we may or may not know the figures Casteel portrays, we nevertheless learn

to look with precision and empathy, to ruminate on how the figures interact with the layers of complimentary and complementary colors.

"Painting the black figure as a black woman is a radical act," she says. "Acknowledging the power of our image becomes of utter importance to consider and reconsider every aspect of my paintings—and challenge others to observe their relationship to color in the process." Color is, one could argue, the basis of all interpretive vision—the space wherein we differentiate, find commonalities, inspect resemblances and contemplate beauty. There may be no more powerful intervention than this—to insist that vision is mutable, to claim its simultaneous capacity for violence and healing.

Casteel does more than cultivate sympathy. Instead, she insists that we reformulate the way we see, so that we might see difference, and see differently.



Sadie Barnette | @sadiesbarnette

In her ongoing series *Dear 1968,...*, the multimedia artist Sadie Barnette has repurposed the FBI file on her father Rodney Barnette, who was under surveillance for his activism with the Black Panthers. In other works, Barnette adorns family ephemera with gold frames and rhinestones, which creates a space wherein a personal history becomes universally legible as something to be both cherished and rigorously reconsidered. It is an attention to history that informs Barnette's work. "I do look to the past in order to think about how to move toward a more liberated future," she says, "but I also look 'up' and 'down' to more abstracted notions of time and space, as with my 'glitter-scapes' and minimal collages, to dream and invent and think about worlds that exist beyond gentrification and state surveillance."

Barnette's work does not always take on an expressly political form even as it remains passionately dedicated to taking apart racism and classism. In "Superfecta," a solo exhibition featuring photographs and drawings, Barnette undertook a sustained inquiry into the racetrack as a site of memory and an intersection of class and enjoyment. In *Untitled (Pony ride, Compton, CA)*, the artist shows two figures around a person on a horse, but the shot is so out of focus that all you can ascertain is muted outlines in the approaching dusk. This is perhaps a stand-in for Barnette's own memories of going to Hollywood Park as a young girl, but there is also something more expansive. We understand that this picture was taken in Compton, Barnette's own neighborhood, and it is indeed a beautiful portrait of what some would call a "decisive moment." However, there is something that can't be fully located or considered documentary, something "up" and "down," to quote Barnette.

"I do look to the past in order to think about how to move toward a more liberated future."

—Sadie Barnette



Korakrit Arunanondchai | @kritbangkok

Korakrit Arunanondchai positions his work in terms of a quintessentially postmodern problem: the shifting relationship between bodies and concepts. "I want the audience in my installations to be aware of their physicality in relation to time—through senses, experiencing inputs like sound, the lighting program, smells, moving liquids, atmospheric fog—while also experiencing the extension of their bodies into a more digital or perhaps immaterial realms as well," says Arunanondchai. We have reached a moment in art history where the dispersed, digital body has become primary, as opposed to any kind of centeredness on a literal, corporeal body, but Arunanondchai's work allows us to consider the uncertainties of existing within a post-digital world. "There is a sense of awareness of a physical body while simultaneously being implicated in one that is perhaps atmospheric, spirit-like as well," he says.

For example, Arunanondchai's *Painting with history in a room filled with people with funny names 3* places stand-ins for the body in the form of mannequins within a cave-like installation that is reminiscent of video from a colonoscopy. The result is a weird, but somehow familiar set of throbbing, oddly shaped and otherworldly mass of stasis and movement. It is a series of indices of the body, and it is our own body that offers some tentative completion to the narrative. Yet, we are removed once again. Footage of the installation is recorded by a drone and played in our own space. It is as if the Cartesian being has been set into the wilderness of its own creation; with nowhere to find an accurate reflection of the self.



Petra Cortright | @petcortright

Petra Cortright's paintings begin as Photoshop files that the artist builds up layer by layer, stroke by stroke. Her methods of mark-making varies from brushes she designs to ones she downloads and jerry rigs. The Los Angeles-based artist spends the majority of her studio time surfing for the right low-res photographs, textures and programs to abstract into her fluid landscape compositions. "The abstraction in my work comes from using really bad quality images," Cortright says. "If it is really high definition with beautiful details it feels more precious. Why abstract that? I want to cut up things that aren't working on their own."

A painter reminiscent of Helen Frankenthaler, Cortright dilutes her original digital medium to create images that almost seem to glow, that create a space of their own. Printed on linen, aluminum and paper, the labor of Cortright's research process is hidden by the lightness and deftness of her mark-making.

This January, Cortright will show a suite of new paintings as well as some videos at Ever Gold Projects in San Francisco. Like previous solo exhibitions at Société Berlin and Foxy Production, the artist plans to show her physical and digital works in a straightforward way. "I try to avoid gimmicks," she says of her exhibition strategy. "I believe work should be able to stand on its own. I've never made the kind of work where you need to read an essay to understand it." When asked what she does want to conjure in her work, her instinctual response deals with integrity and beauty. "I am a sincere person who wants to make sincere work," she says. "We are in a weird time, where everyone thinks everything has to make some kind of a commentary, and not to say that work isn't important, but I am okay with making something that is just an escape."



Avery Singer | [@thoughtsondeck](#)

From a distance, the mechanics of Avery Singer's paintings are almost invisible, lost in the 2D fog of her compositions, but as one steps closer the detail of her handiwork surfaces: the ejaculatory waves of an airbrush, the milky way of droplets. Usually reserved for hot rods, Singer's technique leverages both the hand and the automatic in order to explore production and its entanglements with art history. "I am not really interested in using paint brushes, and never have been, so I guess I am trying to figure out how to make a painting without that methodology," Singer says. "When you look at a painting, you are perceiving people's decision-making, you are seeing process behind how things are made or thought of or realized, so the way you make a painting carries with it most of its meaning."

When Singer began airbrushing, she used a laborious masking and unmask-

ing process. Each image would be generated on the computer and then mapped onto the canvas. At the 2015 New Museum Triennial, Singer's classical artists' studio scenes reimagined as monotone 3D mock-ups stole the show. In her debuts at the Hammer, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo and Stedelijk, Singer pushed her process further through color and abstraction.

Last January, the artist expanded her formal vocabulary once again. "I wanted to remove my hand," she says. Her experimentation took her to Switzerland where she was able to access a printer capable of airbrushing her images directly on canvas. There she produced four works for her 2017 solo show at the Secession in Vienna. When Singer returned home she invested in her own printer. "I feel free when I'm alone in the studio," she says.



Micah Hesse | [@micahesse](#)

At Micah Hesse's day job, the New York-based artist uses programs such as After Effects to edit commercials for advertising agencies. After hours, the Cooper Union graduate applies his skills for rendering and animating toward his own practice, which lately has consisted of poetic vignettes of either 3D-modified footage or completely CGI-rendered environments.

In his silent looping landscape *Stranger With The Rain*, 2015, for instance, Hesse builds out a New York City subway car, riding into infinity on a sea of Coca-Cola. "I really loved making this piece because I loved creating the metal bars of the subway train," Hesse says. "They are so sculptural. I'd ride the subway every morning and look at the way the pieces fit together."

The city is an omnipresent muse in Hesse's most recent bodies of work,

a function of both access and Hesse's interest in investigating the immediate world around him. In *Lobbyless*, 2016, which he screened at Art Brussels this past spring, Hesse takes the grand entrances of financial district buildings as a surface for delving into power and how it manifests in the corporate office environment. Hesse spent months, nearly half a year, taking walks with friends shooting and tracking different lobbies before stitching them together with animations. "I'm not trying to make it look real," he says. "If you go 90 percent realistic that is enough. You can always tell it is animation and I kind of like that." Like a sculpture, Hesse's interest is not in recreating reality, but forcing new conversations through intervention and the introduction of the uncanny.

“I’m no painter and I like this idea of appropriating a medium that everyone takes so seriously.”



Aria Dean | [@lol_prosciutto](#)

Aria Dean doesn’t subscribe to a model of art-making where one must be literal, instead she revels in wedging herself deeper into discomfort—the space where one expectation misses another. By taking on the risk of being misinterpreted, Dean’s work is able to address complexity on its own terms and engage with the paradoxes on which beliefs around identity are built. “I became interested in toying with the gap between what I think is happening and what the audience thinks is happening,” Dean says. “That is what, in part, those pieces for American Medium are about.”

Dean is referring to a series of paintings she showed this past fall at the New York gallery. Made from quilted batting stretched across bars, the all-white works are a kind of material pun embedded in the cliché of the blank canvas and a line from Marx: “Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry.”

“I’m no painter and I like this idea of appropriating a medium that everyone takes so seriously,” she says. “I’m interested in my amateur relationship to different techniques, production processes, and technologies, and how I can manage my anxiety by exploiting my discomfort with the material instead.”

In addition to a traditional studio practice, Dean writes prolifically and works as a curator at Rhizome. Occupying three titles—critic, artist and curator—only adds complication to the way Dean’s work is received by others. “It scares me to make an obvious gesture because, while I do want to toy with an object’s obviousness, there is always the risk that people will think it is genuine,” Dean says. “There is not a lot of space for irony in the zeitgeist, but I think it’s an important tool. For me, there is very little fun in treating art like a grade school thesis, ‘Here is my hypothesis, my evidence and my conclusion.’”



Cy Gavin | @cy.gavin

One might be prone to reading Cy Gavin's paintings as illustrations of historical circumstance, but his work is, in fact, more akin to politics of representation than a representation of politics. "I admire poetry, as poetry relies on more than just the associations and definitions of words to create meaning and atmosphere, but also on rhythm and cadence, deliberately shaped phrasing, how words sound, and possible homonyms," explains Gavin. This is an essential intervention that has been taken up by other queer painters, such as Nicole Eisenman, who insist that narrative painting should not be confined by any story we might project. "I really try to make pictures that are an enactment rather than just a depiction," says Gavin.

Consider the artist's portrait *Sally Bassett, With Kid*, an homage to an elderly Bermudan woman who was wrongly convicted of attempting to poison

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the family that had enslaved her. In 1730, Bassett was burned at the stake, and it is said that a purple flower emerged from her ashes—a glorious member of the iris

family now called the Bermudiana. So captivating is the story that we might forget there is no way of knowing what Bassett looked like; thus, Gavin's painting is not a retelling of history, it instead points to the necessity of looking sensitively and believing in art's ability to interrupt seamless narratives of "progress."

In Gavin's hands, Bassett does not become a tragic figure, but rather a fully imagined human being awash in deftly applied layers of color. The Bermudiana might be a metaphor for painting itself—the emergence of something beautiful and unexpected from the elemental components of life.

Hayden Dunham | @haydendunham

Hayden Dunham brings a background in environmental studies and a lifelong interest in geology to her sculpture practice that investigates the relationship between the architecture of the human body and the chemical matter with which it interacts. "I became interested in object-making the moment I realized that art had the ability to change how people feel about a subject," she says. Indeed, environmental and ecological conversations can be quite polarizing. And so, for her part, Dunham, who splits her time between Brooklyn and Los Angeles, tends to take on multi-year projects that slowly confront this moment of collision between a material and a body.

Through sculpture, Dunham grapples with the notion that the body will remain a constant site of augmentation based on the ever-evolving chemical composition of our world. Silica fluoride, and volcanic ash are substances that have surfaced for Dunham and still, the larger question—how do external systems inform and influence our internal infrastructure?—is one that the artist is hoping to explore in ways that do not end with the biological. "Corporations are now making decisions about our interior infrastructure, non-consensually and consensually. Think about DuPont

circulating C8 into Ohio waterways. That moment of information exchange within our bodies is fascinating to me," Dunham says. To be sure, the stakes are high for Dunham as entire ecosystems are reconfigured due to human manipulation and political and economic concerns continue to embed themselves within our discourse about ecology and wellness. But the artist remains optimistic. "I am thinking about how to turn a system inside out," she says. "What is the way to infiltrate? My material explorations embody and encourage these questions."

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Garner notes that her work is a process of “demanding respect” for the black female body that has always been understood as a spectacle.

Doreen Garner | [@doederek](#)

Not all artworks are generalizable, nor should they be. Some refer to traumas so pervasively applied to one group of people that it would indeed be unconscionable to appeal to some universal human condition. Doreen Garner insists that her work must be read as a statement about the treatment of black women, and not an appeal to the general (i.e. white) body as we are prone to create in art history. “The era that I reference in my work is a period where black people were not only enslaved, but used as test subjects,” explains Garner. “There was a theory that black people can endure more pain, which is completely made up. It served the purpose of allowing black bodies to be used for medical research, but also to feed the sadistic nature of the white male medical practitioner.”

It follows that Garner’s work is as historically informed as it is visually arresting. There is a wealth of research and documentation that takes her imagery out of the realm of shock and into a deeper appeal to the way the white patriarchy feverishly changes science in order to support its hatred. Garner shows the accoutrements of this mindset by taking objects out of context, such as silicone toys, teeth and medical instruments. She notes that her work is a process of “demanding respect” for the black female body that has always been understood as a spectacle.

It is the depth of this cruelty that Garner examines, and it is her goal to lay it bare so that it might not be another one of history’s secret atrocities.

“In order to be an artist, you have to trust the process, and in order to trust the process, you have to walk by faith.”



John Edmonds | [@johncedmonds](#)

You might say that John Edmonds has been meditating on intimacy as an extension of his own faith practice. What has resulted from this deep inquiry is a body of work that has placed the 28-year-old photographer at the center of many serious conversations about the present state and future of the medium. For Edmonds, who earned his MFA in photography from Yale in 2016, the process of image-making is the process of building trust between himself and his subjects. “In order to be an artist, you have to trust the process, and in order to trust the process, you have to walk by faith,” says the Brooklyn-based artist. Edmonds’s oeuvre offers up poetic renderings on blackness that rejects exoticism and fetish.

The images that comprise his portrait series of young, black men wearing du-rags, for example, challenge long held assumptions about black masculinity.

Edmonds has photographed the men posed with their backs to the camera as the du-rag—itsself an important object of beauty and utility in the black community—capturing a vulnerability that is always present yet rarely publicly celebrated. “This is something that has already existed, something that has already deserved our care and celebration.” A recent series of photographs commissioned by the *The New Yorker* on the occasion of MoMA’s exhibition “Items: Is Fashion Modern?” attend to the possibilities of style and gender as active sites of imagination, revision and fluidity. Indeed, Edmonds lifts the veil, taking seriously the role of fragility, nuance and fiction embedded in acts of self-fashioning. This treatment with which he responds to everyday black poetics is a never-ending task, a spiritual undertaking unto itself.



Her inclusion in the 2015 New Museum Triennial allowed Huxtable to further extend her reach and exploration into the ever-shifting proverbial white cube.

Juliana Huxtable | [@julianahuxtable](#)

It is no understatement to claim the following: Juliana Huxtable is a force. Her multi-disciplinary body of work transgresses the lines of poetry, performance, music and fashion to offer up critical responses to the banalities of the contemporary art world and create space for radical revisions.

Since moving to New York City in 2010, the 29-year-old Bard alumnus has been deeply embedded in the city's nightlife culture, which represents a necessary site of self-preservation and communal gathering. These spaces, to borrow language from choreographer and artist Brendan Fernandes, are spaces of support—physical and architectural—that then result in queer space—space that is constantly in action, in flux, in a non-definitive moment. Yet, to understand the totality of Huxtable's aesthetic and intellectual endeavors, one must also remain acutely aware of the theoretical underpinnings that govern them. Huxtable probes feminist histories, black studies and digital technology, among

other subjects, in an effort to challenge discourse around our understandings of queerness, futurity and black femininity.

Her inclusion in the 2015 New Museum Triennial allowed Huxtable to further extend her reach and exploration into the ever-shifting proverbial white cube bringing with her righteous provocations informed by offline and online research. Indeed, as curator Adrienne Edwards notes in her essay *Relishing the Minor: Juliana Huxtable's Kewt Aesthetics*, “while Internet outlets exposed Huxtable to the work of different writers and artists, they more importantly served as vehicles for the primary modes of artistry that have become the core constituents of her work: written text, self-portraits and video and music experiments.”

It is a practice that has since led Huxtable around the world and back. It is one that will undoubtedly continue to do so.



Madeline Hollander | @mchollander

Madeline Hollander sees choreography all around us. These designed movement sequences, which include everything from the way we interact with touch screens to the Heimlich maneuver, interest the New York-based artist for their troubled translation to copyright law and preservation. The struggle for companies to copyright certain movements folds onto a history of artists creating contracts around their ephemeral performances.

"One reason I'm interested in the copyright of movement sequences is its ability to collapse scale, context and intention," Hollander says. "While it's common for a product, protocol or interface design to be copyrighted, it's not that common to copyright choreographic sequences. This inverts the role of what is spectacle and what is functional, and what is performance and what is a tool."

In her own practice, Hollander operates like a scientist. Her performances begin with months of research, followed by rigorous testing in the dance studio. "When I'm interested in a specific movement sequence, it is like putting it under a microscope," Hollander says. "My process is definitely closer to an examination than invention."

The precision of Hollander's work in the studio plays out into the final work. Her performances are not about spectacle but are treated as installations. Each performance is completed by a series of documents and totems, including Hollander's hand-recorded notation of each choreography using a system she designed that includes color punctuations. This spring, Hollander, who has synesthesia, will publish her first book of these unique drawings with Peradam Press. In addition to the monograph, next season Hollander will be doing a show with the Artist's Institute in New York City.

Besides her upcoming projects, Hollander has also been working on a new series of performances. Among them is one that meditates on the global sand shortage. New Yorkers caught their first glimpse of her work delving into this issue when the artist staged *Arena* (2017) at Rockaway Beach this summer. During the performance, a drone flew overhead capturing a duet between seven dancers and a beach-rake truck as they acted as one, drawing and erasing patterns on the sand in one continuous loop until sunset.



Sable Elyse Smith | @sable_elyse

What exactly is trauma and how does it make itself known in the world? How does it live on and in our bodies? These are the questions that loom over the practice of interdisciplinary artist Sable Elyse Smith as she grapples with the fallibility of language, the malleability of memory. These entities are objects themselves for the artist as she dissects the overlooked violence of mass incarceration. This is to say that Smith is not merely just interested in the theoretical frameworks that govern much of our contemporary dialogues about the harm caused by the carceral state. Instead, she focuses her attention to the ways in which one's encounter with the bureaucracies of this system and the transgressions that result from those confrontations map themselves onto the body over time, with a specific interest in sculpture, cinematography and text.

Smith's *Untitled* (2015), an aluminum signboard that was included in the 2017 exhibition "Without a Body" at Andrea Rosen Gallery, offers a direct and haunting declaration about the nature of communications between a visitor and inmate: "Their words passed through—with a blue-greenness the thick of the glass the fluorescent light it buzzes and can't be drowned out. If you think it's ceased it's because the buzz has now become part of you. You walk around with it. I walk around with it. Becoming." How else does one describe this quotidian duress, to use Smith's own words, if not as a threat? *scapeG.O.A.T.*, (2017), is a large lightbox photograph depicting a prison basketball court contemplating the very stakes of leisure itself within the contested grounds of the prison. Even the terms of recreation must not be taken for granted.

Smith undoes the conventional boundaries of language and form even as she offers her viewers a prophecy of sorts: perhaps the only way through which we might contend with the behemoth of a structure such as the prison industrial complex is with consistent public undoing of syntax that point us to its small, quiet, raging symptoms.

Sophie Hirsch | @ssophiehirsch

"I don't view sculpture and abstraction as separate," says Viennese born sculptor Sophie Hirsch. "I think abstraction is an integrated part of sculpture." Sculpture, according to Hirsch, is a site through which we might encounter new discoveries about the nature of our bodies and their undulating architectures. Such a focused study on anatomy might seem at odds with a delve into the abstract. But if we look closely at works such as *Muscle Test 1 & 2* (2016), or the large-scale polycarbonate forms that comprise the *Postures* series, we see an artist in strict contemplation about a body's deliberate agility. This study of the delicate choreography of movement has followed Hirsch as she's exhibited in galleries around New York City, including *Signal*, *Duty Free* and most recently, *Larrie*.

Perhaps more than any other medium, sculpture retains a unique ability to respond to the relationship between flexion and extension, posture and composition. "The most exciting aspect of sculpture to me is its potential to create movement," explains Hirsch. "I am fascinated how material and composition shape the dynamic of a sculpture, and how that triggers our physical movement around it. Sculpture invites us to explore all sides and angles, letting our eyes move and our spines bend."





“It is important to be fluid. Experimenting is what I like most about art-making.”

Maggie Lee | [@suede87](#)

Maggie Lee received her first wave of attention for *Mommy*, her 2015 film, which conflated her own coming of age narrative with the life and untimely demise of her mother, Ping, a Taiwanese American immigrant. A personal and universal narrative, *Mommy* blends together both family videos and found footage into one conscious stream that echoed the vocabulary of Lee’s other work from di- aristic zines to her readymade sculptures. “Collage is how I think about my practice,” Lee says. “I apply it to all different media. It is important to be fluid. Experimenting is what I like most about art-making.”

Lee works out of her bedroom in Brooklyn, so the majority of her work is domestically sized. At her 2016 show at Real Fine Arts, Lee showed doll-filled tanks that functioned as moody dioramas. These terrariums followed her to the Whitney Museum of Art, where Lee screened passages of *Mommy* on a decorated television set as a part of “Mirror Cells,” a group show curated by

Christopher Lew.

This fall, Lee got to test a new form. Blumenthal Gallery commissioned her to create a billboard for the corner of Bowery and Canal street. Her solution was to take a portrait of herself using the Photobooth app, a nod to the “just be” simplicity found in Asian-American art. “I’m thinking about the history of the Bowery art scene and Canal street in Chinatown,” she says. “I want to talk about what it is like to be an Asian-American artist in New York now.”

Lee’s work often addresses its context on an associative level. Her 2016 solo show at 356 Mission, “Gigi’s Underground,” which centered on a fictional twentysomething from 2006, is based on the experiences she had upon first moving to New York City, particularly in the underground scene looking at Wendy Yao, Ethan Swan and Brendan Fowler as a young artist. This conflation of life and fiction, subject and context, is the magic of Lee’s delicately layered work.



“I think of my work as existing in a kind of design purgatory.”

Hannah Levy | [@hannahslevy](#)

There is an alluring sensibility to Hannah Levy’s practice as it traverses the gap between sculpture and design. She approximates an ergonomic condition even as her forms also tease, rejecting a pure utilitarian outcome. “I think of my work as existing in a kind of design purgatory. The design strategies of impossibly sensual curved and leaning structures are pushed to a point of humor,” explains Levy. “Each sculpture references different objects but doesn’t exactly match anything, rather they exist between many preexisting forms.”

Silicone and steel are materials that excite Levy. Her works engenders touch—the flesh tones of the sculptures remind you of skin, their hyperbolic curves and lines might just remind you of a body. And yet, they are still forms in flux. “A kind of ergonomic purpose is suggested, but the forms and mate-

rials indicate some anemic quality,” says Levy. The human body looms over Levy’s work in so much as it becomes a conduit for a reflection on the entanglement of installation, negative space and materiality.

And much to her credit, the art world is following along closely. Her work has been exhibited at Hannah Hoffman Gallery in Los Angeles, Marlborough Gallery in Chelsea, MoMA PS1 and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark. Indeed, Levy, who earned a BFA from Cornell University and a graduate degree from Städelschule in Frankfurt, is only getting started. “I hope to continue to explore different aspects of the designed world and the way we relate to it by creating objects that are sleek, humorous and quietly kinky. We are surrounded by objects on a daily basis in our homes, offices and public spaces. Sculpture is a way to give these familiar forms a new context.”



“I saw opera as a way to travel, a way to transform myself.”

Richard Kennedy | [@mrrichardkennedy](#)

Richard Kennedy fell in love with opera as a child. His local community theater in suburban Ohio served as an escape as well as an entry point for what developed into a life-long passion for the performing arts.

“I grew up in the hood and I was obsessed with anything that was not integrated,” Kennedy says. “I saw opera as a way to travel, a way to transform myself.”

Today, the self-described experimental opera composer leverages the virtuosic talents he accrued in school—ballet and operatic singing—into creating works that erase the boundary between choreography and environment. “The time you spend training matters,” says Kennedy. “Before I was the paint, now I’m the painter. I am the choreographer and the composer.”

This fall, Kennedy executed his first Performa commission at Public Hotel, Act One of a three-part opera called *Infinity Beach Suite: 1* (2017). The work meditated

on the metronomic waves that wash over us—the revolving door of constant, unremitting change.

Like Kennedy’s past compositions, *Infinity Beach Suite: 1* had some biographical undertones that carried through the dancer’s movements and the soundtrack; the work pointed back to the artist’s recent move from the city to Hudson, New York. “I was frustrated by all the time I didn’t have and all the resources I didn’t have,” he says. “I take time to digest. I use performance as a way to process things.”

Deep into his MFA thesis for Bard, Kennedy, who has performed at MoMA PS1 and on Broadway First National Tours, hopes to create work that speaks beyond personal experience and connects broadly. “The opera is a great way to open up consciousness and propose things that are a little big preposterous,” Kennedy says. “People are open to it because it’s a fantasy land.”



Zak Kitnick | @zkitnick

“There are some parts of life that are very complicated, and other parts that are very simple. I try to simplify the complicated parts and complicate the simple ones,” Zak Kitnick explains when asked about the guiding ethos of his work. His installation and sculpture illuminate the relationship between object and iconography while attending to concerns of consumerism and market systems.

The artist, who is currently represented by the Brooklyn-based gallery Clearing, employs a dry sense of wit as he interrogates sites of exchange to challenge his viewers presuppositions about the utility of our most quotidian objects and the symbolic meanings of our most quotidian occurrences. Unexpected juxtaposition and strange aesthetic alliances are a preferred methodology for Kitnick, not unlike the surrealists. Take for instance, *Innermost Out*, 2015, a pair of liquid dispensers on which the figures of two young boys peeing rest atop. There’s also *Rewind*, 2015, the ceiling-mounted dispenser comprised of olive oil bottles. For his 2015 exhibition, “Peace,” these dispensers were installed in various places throughout the gallery as if they were meant to offer an anointment. Or not.

How does the symbol evade our understanding? What does it mean for these functional objects to now circulate as readymades? On some level, the slippage between the installation, design and sculpture is frustrating, and yet, that is precisely the fracture that fascinates Kitnick.

“I try to simplify the complicated parts and complicate the simple ones.”

Ajay Kurian | @ajaykurian

During a recent visit to his Brooklyn studio, Ajay Kurian unveils a large, multi-panelled, steel framed sculpture covered in purple velvet that will lie at the heart of his forthcoming solo show at Sies + Hokes Gallery in Dusseldorf. During the exhibition, the object, a Jacob’s Ladder, will be positioned horizontally rather than vertically, torquing throughout the gallery as if to suggest that earthly attempts to connect with the divine are all but futile. In the context of Kurian’s work, religious allusions such as this surface often as his sculpture responds to the intertwined myths and realities of the American cultural fabric. The artist has long grappled with the complexities that govern race politics in which his own story has been exposed repeatedly.

“I feel like I’m asking the question, ‘how are you going to save your soul?’”

With this new body of work, the artist is pointing his attention outwards in order to ask questions about the nature of white supremacy in the digital age. “The brotherhood is virtual now, and to me, much more terrifying. At this point, I feel like I’m asking the question ‘how are you going to save your soul?’”

It is a daunting inquiry. Yet, the 2017 Whitney Biennial alum brings a deftness to the making process that engenders thoughtful dialogue about a topic that remains fraught. His large-scale sculptures frequently make use of materials as varied as pipe cleaners, marble, plexiglass and candy to investigate the precarious terrains of racial mythologies. Animals and childlike figures, such as in the artist’s biennial work, *Childermass*, become the embodiment of slippery social codes that might otherwise fall flat were the figures literal depictions of humans. Humor is deployed certainly, but we, the viewer, must still decide if we are in on the joke. To this end, the worlds that Kurian fabricates invite us to examine our own relationships to Americana and ultimately, the myths in which we are all implicated.



“People say some of the things I make are ‘weird.’ I think that they’re weird too, but the thoughts most people have are weird.”



Calvin Marcus | [@calvinmarcus](#)

“I do think of my work as being stripped down to bare necessity,” says Calvin Marcus. “I don’t dress any of it up to make it more appealing or decorative.” It is perhaps this commitment to a minimal language that allows him to explore simultaneously muted and excessive forms.

“People say some of the things I make are ‘weird.’ I think that they’re weird too, but the thoughts most people have are weird,” he says. “Some people are able to see themselves in the images or the ideas and others are looking at it from a distance.” The radical possibility of identification with works of art is a complex notion in Marcus’s work—if we do find ourselves inside his work, what might we find? It might be scary or confusing or beautiful, and that is a risk Marcus invites us to take.

An interest in the fantastic, therefore, does not have to take art objects outside the realms of empathy or self-identification. Marcus goes on, “Though the work is reflective of me, my ideas, my quirks, etc., I think the work is on a baseline relating to some basic human conditions, feelings and introspections.” Marcus’s work thus becomes a conduit for the development of emotional sensitivity through art objects. In his series *Green Calvin*, for instance, ceramic chickens with carved smiles inhabit green vinyl fields painted on hardboard panels. It is meme-able, to be sure, but anxiously so. We have all felt so abjectly embarrassed as to feel like a grotesque object pinned to a wall. Or perhaps we have all felt unseen. All of this Marcus accomplishes with a precise attention to materials, such that these human experiences become solidified in tangible objects.



“It’s interesting to live in a time where I can do a performance for 4,000 people—anywhere, any time—from my phone.”

Jasmine Nyende | [@standardized_sex](#)

In the age of social media, documenting the minutiae of our daily lives is commonplace if not intuitive. It is not, however, always a flawless gesture nor a perfect algorithm. And it is this particular friction in which Los Angeles native Jasmin Nyende revels.

The digital space provides a fertile ground for experimentation and Nyende considers this landscape a prime space for performance. The artist plays with the act of deletion on her social media channels as a way to think through the elasticity of memory—and the very boundaries of performance itself. “I started making work out of deleted post because it reminded me of the anxious, friction possible in social media. It’s interesting to live in a time where I can do a performance for 4,000 people—anywhere, any time—from my phone,” says Nyende.

“I want to understand my relationship to this power by making mistakes, re-inventing myself constantly and not pressuring myself to be perfect.”

Still, this is but one component of Nyende’s multi-media practice which also includes poetry, sculpture and video. What remains consistent though across these forms is Nyende’s interest in the storyscapes and physical processes that lead to healing within black communities—in her hometown and elsewhere. In Nyende’s hands, the questions surrounding what we remember, how we remember and why we become affixed to certain memories allow for the mining of the possibilities of self-determination. “My practice is about hybridity and the intuitive forms of creativity for healing. I care deeply about how we learn how to heal, breathe and honor ourselves under anti-black capitalism.”



“I just know that my work operates on this kind of romantic level and flowers are a shortcut to getting there.”

Sam McKinniss | [@wkndpartyupdate](#)

After a debut solo show at Team in 2016 and an album cover collaboration with Lorde, Sam McKinniss decided to take a step back. The New York-based painter spent the summer recovering, but is back at work on his follow-up exhibition at Team’s Los Angeles bungalow in January.

To prepare for the show, he read “Helter Skelter” and Joan Didion’s “White Album” to get in a “California mood.” “I was fascinated with the way Charles Manson really started vibing on the Beatles and wanted to be a singer-songwriter, but was a joke at it and failed, so he started killing people instead,” McKinniss says. “I thought, ‘I’m really into pop music too, what if I became psychotic?’ But I didn’t. So I started making paintings instead.” Over a couple of weeks, he produced 30 full-color drawings, which became the basis for “Daisy Chain.”

Like “Egyptian Violet,” his exhibition at Team last year, “Daisy Chain” will pull

imagery from the perversely popular. A suite of portraits—including Jonbenét Ramsey with baby’s breath in her hair and a naked Drew Barrymore crowned with daisies”—poke at hippy tropes co-opted by pop culture in the 1990s. “I just know that my work operates on this kind of romantic level and flowers are a shortcut to getting there,” McKinniss says. “There is such a history of painting flowers that you are allowed to use it as a shorthand for love plus death equals romance.”

It comes as no surprise that the painter admires the artist Maureen Gallace. “I think she is always about plausible deniability, like the beachside cottage as an alibi for more complicated things going on behind closed doors,” he says. “I don’t think she’d ever admit this but I think darker themes loom large around that work and you’d be hard pressed to prove it.” One could say the same about McKinniss’s investigation of celebrity and Americana.



Janiva Ellis | @ducatimist

Janiva Ellis picked up painting as a child as an outlet for self-expression. “Being black in Hawaii is really isolating,” she says. “It was hard to be a part of a community where my identity was not reflected at all.” Ellis moved to San Francisco after graduating from high school and began studies at California College of the Arts. During this time, though, Ellis lost confidence in her vision and threw herself into technique. “I wanted to be perceived as really knowing how to handle paint,” Ellis says. “I felt the need to impress people, the need to be exceptionalized, and especially as a young black woman, who’d never been surrounded by black people, I felt the need to stand out.”

After CCA, Ellis took a hiatus from painting. She spent four years between New York and Hawaii before settling in Los Angeles in 2016. There, her spark was reignited when a serendipitous gift of stretchers landed in her lap. “I had finally got to a place where I didn’t feel any pressure” Ellis says. “I felt like I had the headspace and freedom to work.”

Months of experimentation beared out in “Lick Shot,” her debut solo show at 47 Canal this summer, where Ellis showed a suite of paintings that placed cartoonish gestural figures in dialogue. “If you want to convey a complex idea really quickly, a cartoon is a great mechanism to do so,” Ellis says. “This is something that ties into representations of blackness, there is this comedic-ness to our existence.”

When it comes to actually repurposing Sambo or other black-face clichés, Ellis treads carefully. “I often question whether re-asserting those images creates a larger critique, or just reinforced their existence,” she says. “What I want is to create new reference points for myself instead of just comparing how things are different from one another.”

“I felt the need to impress people. As a young black woman who’d never been surrounded by black people, I felt the need to stand out.”

—Janiva Ellis

Borna Sammak | @bboornnaa

Borna Sammak’s restless energy flows into his work. Moving fluidly from medium to medium, the New York-based artist creates sculptures, paintings and photographs that keep the eye moving. “Pictorially I’ve been trying to make the same thing since I was a kid,” Sammak says. “When I was in high school in 2001 or 2002, I was an apprentice at fabric workshop and I made this repeating screen print all made of arrows. If you look at what my work does now, it operates the same way. It doesn’t let your eye leave the pictorial; you are in a kind of figure eight or ouroboros or something.”

Sammak draws his mesmerizing imagery from the everyday. Take for example paintings like *Hoagie Nose* (2015) and *You Could* (2017), which the artist made from layering ironing t-shirt decals on a canvas. “I try to keep what winds up in the art, whether it’s the t-shirt decals or the signage, to real life,” he says. “I never want to put something in my work that you don’t see out in the world.” Another piece, *Two Full Height Turnstiles Stuck In Each Other* (2016), shows the way the architecture and street culture of New York intervenes directly

into his formal, albeit humorous, investigations.

This spring, Sammak will stage solo exhibitions at his two main galleries, JTT and Sadie Coles. At press time, the ideas for the show were still percolating but Sammak’s

focus was on expanding his vocabulary, specifically his talents as a draftsman and a sewer.

“If I could draw, maybe I could plan for once,” he says.



Bailey Scieszka | @bailioni

Detroit-based artist Bailey Scieszka describes her relationship to Old Put, her performance persona, as Jekyll might talk about Hyde. “Old Put lives inside of me,” Scieszka says. “It’s not an alter ego. I see Old Put as this real, shape-shifting character. She is a clown, but she can also be an alien and a demon.”

One could say Old Put was born in New York but grew up in Detroit, when the artist graduated from Cooper Union and returned home to the Midwest. “When I first moved back, I would dress everyone up as Old Put and we’d have parties,” she says. “For me, it was this Jack Smith thing. I don’t care if the audience is four people I can still put on a show. I have the time and space to do that here.”

An avid fan of *Wrestlemania* and *Hobby Lobby* crafts, Old Put might be the penultimate expression and critique of unfettered Americana. “I draw inspiration from wrestling because, if you listen to what they are saying, it is all about this American, inspirational drive to be the best,” Scieszka explains. “I kind of think of Old Put as that, this dreamer who believes they are going to win this belt and be the champ. It’s really about heartbreak.”

Old Put enters the physical realm through live performances and Scieszka’s prolific work at her studio, which usually begins with drawing and often ends in elaborate craft projects, such as costume design and mask-making.

The work that Scieszka produces under the guise of Old Put mix historical and pop imagery with an emphasis on taboo—think: Confederate flags, poppers and tiki torches. “I think it’s interesting to engage symbols that make me uncomfortable,” she says. “I always think you can say the darkest things in the brightest colors.” This January, Scieszka will unveil her latest ruminations at the University of Michigan where she is hosting a solo show.



“The line isn't there to demarcate, it enables me to think through the making.”

Toyin Ojih Odutola | [@toyinojihodutola](https://www.instagram.com/toyinojihodutola)

In Toyin Ojih Odutola, we see a master draftsman at work. The line informs and guides, imagines and exposes. It is the line that becomes as much a subject of Ojih Odutola's portraiture as the individuals or figures she conjures. “The line isn't there to demarcate, it enables me to think through the making: traversing the landscape of the surface, the figure and surroundings and the ideas that come about in the activity. This extends to material—both medium and concept,” says Ojih Odutola. And it is through an attention to the line that Ojih Odutola also extends an attention to blackness.

Working primarily in ink, charcoal, pencil and ballpoint pen, her drawings reveal an artist looking closely at the materiality of blackness while engaged in a deep examination of its methodology. Blackness then, much like the line is ever unfolding, infinite in its manifestations.

This year might prove to be the New York-based artist's biggest yet. Her

drawings have been included in a group exhibition at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles and were recently acquired by Princeton University and the New Orleans Museum of Art. What's more, Ojih Odutola's first solo museum exhibition in New York, “To Wander Determined,” recently opened at The Whitney Museum of American Art. “I'd never attempted to write a story out before commencing a series, but since working on “A Matter of Fact” (at MoAD, San Francisco) and recently with “To Wander Determined,” I'm creating stories—the drawings of each series are vignettes of these stories—and there is so much to explore and mine with that framework.”

The formal and conceptual complexity of her practice leave much room for investigations of composition and mark-making, representation and identity, and as viewers, we can only be certain that Ojih Odutola will continue to welcome us along as she excavates.



“I’m interested in the moment that my reaction to something sincerely painful or terrifying becomes rote.”

Cynthia Talmadge | [@cynthia_talmadge](#)

Cynthia Talmadge’s work is like the best of Douglas Sirk’s films—unabashedly sentimental, romantic and glamorous, yet filled with incisive, wry wit. Her “Leaves of Absence” solo show, for instance, refigured mental hospitals and rehab centers as college dorm rooms, complete with sweatshirts, mugs and pennants. Trauma is thus simultaneously heightened and made comical.

“I’m attracted to and repulsed by my tendency to stylize lived traumas until they reach a level of cinematic cliché in my mind,” says Talmadge. “I’m interested in the moment that my reaction to something sincerely painful or terrifying becomes rote.”

Talmadge’s dedication to this space of self-affirmation and self-hatred is a discomfiting look at how we process our failings and project them onto others, real or fictional.

Although Talmadge does not identify as a photographer, her imagery is reminiscent of the earliest investigations of photography-as-art, such as the black-and-white melodramas of Julia Margaret Cameron, the flattened spectacles of Manet or the 19th-century spirit photography that claimed to reveal the presence of ghosts. The latter was a commonly accepted idea made possible by the association of the camera with natural magic (to borrow Sarah Charlesworth’s term—an artist with whom Talmadge certainly shares conceptual aims). It is difficult to balance the art historical with the sentimental, as Talmadge does, in a way that does not itself fall into cliché.

Talmadge asks, “How many glasses are you going to throw against a wall before it’s just comical and you feel icky and self-aware?” I would respond that if glasses remain, I will keep throwing them.

“I have so many layers of a certain type of history in the paintings, but from day one I have been trying to build my own space to work in.”



Torey Thornton

Torey Thornton has created a language in painting and sculpture that is all his own. “In a very simple way, I grew up wanting to be a part of New York School painting,” he says. “I realized that there is no way to produce those paintings and have them still be relevant because those concerns and problems aren’t there anymore. There are so many other things going on to push against. Now, my work is more about taking that scale and playing with it.”

Thornton is cognizant of the historical precedents for his work, but he feels no need to exist in a state of homage, as many young artists do. This is in the service of creating an immediate connection to the bodies that interact with his work. “I have so many layers of a certain type of history in the paintings, but from day one I have been trying to build my own space to work in, and hop-

ing that through the logic I use, and what I am building in front of the viewer, there will be an understanding of what goes into the picture.”

In paintings such as *Breaking Some Rules For Momma*, (*Theresa*), which he created in 2014, we might see a human figure, and we might find that figure reminiscent of Willem de Kooning or later Jackson Pollock. This allows us to orient ourselves alongside the picture, but those visual references have been reformulated in unexpected ways. The figure, for instance, exists on a partially formed grid, which places the figure in a more rational space, as if the grid constitutes the body and vice versa. Of course, most New York School painters would be aghast at such a juxtaposition, but thankfully we can benefit from Thornton’s willingness to combine paradoxical aesthetic lexicons.



“Critical and institutional modes of validating and reading black authorship on a nuanced level of black cultural production are not yet developed enough.”

Kandis Williams | [@kandis_williams](#)

With the rigor of the Dadaists or the Surrealists, Kandis Williams takes apart myths of representation and the alleged unity of images. However, I would argue that Williams uses the deconstructive impulse enacted by the early 20th-century avant-garde to much more progressive ends.

What is central here is that Williams insists not only on the subject matter she portrays, but also on the formal language she utilizes. Williams rightly argues, “Black artists are read always as didactic exacters of their own content, as they are expected to be speaking to something and not in some way, which makes ‘black’ content a material code in and of itself that floats above its aesthetic execution.” Artists who are outside the norms of a hegemonic white patriarchy are expected to be fully legible to a normative audience, or at least to make their work indisputably “about”

race, class, gender or sexuality. Williams goes on, “Critical and institutional modes of validating and reading black authorship on a nuanced level of black cultural production are not yet developed enough to not collapse under the weight of a reading and situating of black artists, their working praxis and its varied content.”

To look at Williams’s work is to understand that identity is not something that manifests itself from some essential truth, but rather something that is constantly articulated through materials and impossibly complex lived experiences. Williams summarizes with the assertion that there remain “certain market logics for consuming identity,” which is to say that non-normative artists can only become part of the conversation once they are packaged and tied with the bow of acceptable difference.