

ART REVIEW

# Greater New York,' a Show of the Moment, Dwells in the Radical Past

In the wake of an election, pandemic, protest movement, extreme climate and rising debt ceilings, MoMA PS1 comes back with a cautious display of art.

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**Greater New York 2021**

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Three things stand out about the current edition of “Greater New York,” a survey at MoMA PS1 of artists living and working in New York, which happens every five years: pitch-perfect politics, intense nostalgia and an underwhelming display of new art.

Organized by a curatorial team led by Ruba Katrib, “Greater New York” — which opened Thursday — is both a show of our moment and one that attempts to escape it through the trap door of history. In the art world at the moment, it’s safer to celebrate the underknown, underrecognized and under-acknowledged artist who was radical half a century ago than to dive into the actual messy politics of the present.

The best work here, overwhelmingly, is the art made decades ago, not within the last few years. That is unfortunate, because it gives the impression that great art isn’t being made right now. Meanwhile, art in New York is vibrant, which you can see on any given day, particularly in galleries on the Lower East Side, Chinatown and TriBeCa, and in pockets of Queens.



Left, video by Regina Vater. Center and right wall, works by E'wao Kagoshima. Foreground, Kayode Ojo, "You need to prove to me that I can count on you to be loyal" (2021). Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

However, this is still a deeply political show. Every large exhibition trains you how to observe it, and here you quickly learn to look at the wall labels, which focus in many cases on the ethnicity of artists. This is interesting information but the hazard is that art is turned into a rhetorical instrument rather than a bearer of illuminating or speculative ideas.

The show features the work of 47 artists and collectives and bridges documentary photography, surrealism, painting and video. Here are dominant threads and standout contributors.

## History and Nostalgia

Alan Michelson, "Midden" (2021). Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

The excavation of history weighs so heavily in "Greater New York," it calls to mind classic narratives of our metropolis: Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace's masterpiece, "Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898" (1999); Luc Sante's "Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York" (2003); the film "Downtown 81" (2000), which starred a young Jean-Michel Basquiat and a pre-gentrified Lower East Side.

Some of the work here is directly linked to these histories. Alan Michelson (a Mohawk artist) has created an installation, "Midden" (2021), in which a video created along the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn and Newtown Creek on the border of Queens glides over a pile of oyster shells, a food mainstay in New York for millennia, until the oyster beds were stripped away during colonization and industrialization.



Shanzhai Lyric, "Incomplete Poem" (2015-ongoing). Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Two installations by the collective Shanzhai Lyric draw from the history of Canal Street, which started off as a swamp and a waterway and later became an artery for commerce, including bootleg luxury goods and T-shirts. A dedicated room at MoMA PS1 displays the contents of the collective's "Canal Street Research Association" storage unit: foam Statue of Liberty crowns, miniature Empire State Buildings and other tourist curios. Near the museum's entrance, their installation of T-shirts manufactured in China and printed with odd phrases in English creates a disjointed "poem."

Hands down the best paintings in the show are the bright, colorful abstractions by Paulina Peavy (1901-1999), an artist who said she had an encounter with a U.F.O. while attending a séance in California in 1932 and later moved to New York, where she lived and worked until age 97. Peavy's paintings here, made between the 1930s and '60s, are part of a wave of resurrections of lesser-known women artists in the 20th century, including Agnes Pelton, Hilma af Klint and Emma Kunz, whose abstract paintings were based in spiritual or healing practices rather than the formal arguments and battles of mainstream art movements.





Paulina Peavy, "Untitled" (1938-47). Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

The best photographs in "Greater New York" are also historical ones. Hiram Maristany served as the official documentary photographer for the Puerto Rican Young Lords, a group that arose from the Black Power movement in the 1960s. His black and white images from that period are a powerful representation of an artist "preserving his own community," as he says in the wall text. After a year of the most documented protests in history (Black Lives Matter), it would be nice to see more recent documentation of the current social justice movement.

Marilyn Nance traveled to Lagos, Nigeria, in 1977 to document FESTAC '77, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture that drew thousands of artists, writers and activists. A range of her New York street photographs from the '70s and

'90s are on display, capturing people jumping subway turnstiles, musicians and circus elephants sauntering down a nocturnal city street.

A range of photographs by Marilyn Nance from the 1970s to '90s. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

A 1989 video of the poet Diane Burns (identified as Chemehuevi and Anishanabe) reciting a punk poem on the Lower East Side crackles with humor around Indigenous politics, gentrification and displacement. Regina Vater's two "Saudades do Brasil" videos, from the mid-70s and mid-80s, compare New York with gritty Brazilian cities. There are also drawings, photographs and paintings from the '80s by artists like E'wao Kagoshima, Julio Galán, Peter Hujar, Andreas Sterzing and Luis Frangella that offer a window into an edgier, largely pre-AIDS New York — as well as the rise of various aesthetics around graffiti and L.G.B.T.Q.I.A. art.

While many of these artists have been overlooked, a fraction of the historical displays would suffice. They allude, however, to art being produced right now. Swing by the gallery Higher Pictures Generation in Dumbo for a tutorial on contemporary photography. For queer art and work that explores and celebrates intersectional identities check out Queer Thoughts, Company, Fierman, PPOW or the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art. For overlooked artists of all stripes, go to Ortuzar Projects in TriBeCa. And for painting by emerging artists, check out small galleries like 56 Henry, Jack Barrett, Charles Moffett or Housing, at 191 Henry, which aims to support Black artists in particular.

A video of Diane Burns reading her poem "Alphabet City Serenade" (1989). Her poem references the entwined histories of Native American dispossession, diaspora and urban poverty. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

## Pertinent Politics

A wave of anti-Asian hate crimes, Donald Trump's presidency and the reinvigorated #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements have challenged curators and institutions to highlight diversity and right historical wrongs. Here are some notable presentations that intelligently address these issues.

The Seneca author and artist G. Peter Jemison's excellent works on paper reference the Canandaigua Treaty of 1794, its impact on the Haudenosaunee — the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy — and campaigns by churches and schools to eradicate the culture and language in northeast North America. His use of humble paper bags is what is most exciting about his work.

Similarly, Curtis Cuffie's sculptures from the '90s address where art flourishes and is displayed. He saw the sidewalk as his primary venue and used scavenged materials — clothing, objects and trash items. They were originally installed around Astor Place and the East Village, which was undergoing intense gentrification. (If Cuffie, who died in 2002, were a young artist today, his witty assemblages and costumes would likely appear on Instagram or TikTok.)

Sculptures by Curtis Cuffie, which were installed on sidewalks, walls and fences around Astor Place and throughout the East Village in the 1990s. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Yuji Agematsu's impactful wall of detritus collected on daily walks during the pandemic and stuffed into cellophane cigarette-box wrappers is a scruffy update of On Kawara's conceptual "Date Paintings," which marked the days, starting during the Vietnam War.

Steffani Jemison's "Similitude" (2019) is a wry commentary on cultural appropriation filmed in anonymous sites across New York. The video, starring a Black actor trained in mime, recreates gestures and actions of people carrying out daily activities. Politics here are drawn from everyday life and question the idea of language and mimicry.

Some of the most powerful aesthetic statements last year appeared in the form of monuments covered with graffiti, torn down, or removed. Images of activists in Bristol, England, removing the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston last year suggested a wave of empowered community action, joy and possibility.



I thought of this when viewing Doreen Garner's sculpture "Lucy's Agony" (2021), which references gynecological experiments carried out on African American women by doctors like J. Marion Sims. A statue honoring Sims was removed from its prominent site on Fifth Avenue in 2018, but it was not destroyed.

Garner's sculpture borrows the '90s installation shock tactics of artists like Mona Hatoum, Robert Gober and Pepon Osorio, but it also conjures battles over the Covid-19 vaccine, and modern-day inequities in medicine.

Video by Steffani Jemison, "Similitude" (2019). Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

## Placeholder Art

A typical phenomenon in large surveys is to include merely acceptable art by extraordinary artists. Too often, it gives a lukewarm introduction to people who have made exceptional contributions but whose best works may not be available. This challenge was met here by curators presenting paintings and works on paper by Milford Graves, who started off as a percussionist and became a visionary healer, teacher, visual artist and martial arts master. Graves, who died in February, has an exhibition opening in a few days at Artists Space, where I expect he will be better represented.

Left wall, Milford Graves, "Calmness / Relax" and "Tsunami" (2020); center, Hadi Fallahpisheh, "Young and Clueless" (2021). Right wall, works by Rosemary Mayer. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Look, too, for works on paper by Rosemary Mayer (1943-2014), though her recent show at Gordon Robichaux gallery featured examples of her best work: billowing fabric suggestive of women's anatomy.

The bulk of the art here by younger contemporary artists unfortunately replicates, without much vision, the dreamy, quirky, surrealism of artists like Marc Chagall, Leonor Fini or Remedios Varo; early Modernist abstract painting and sculpture; experimental photography from the 1920s and '30s; and the bodily sculpture of Kiki Smith.

Yuji Agematsu, "zip: 01.01.20 ... 12.31.20" (2020), mixed-media in cigarette pack cellophane wrappers on shelves. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

One of the most enduring and important factors in the art world — class — remains largely invisible in this show. Rents are still high in New York, and artists are expected to have costly graduate degrees. The wealth of museum patrons and trustees, has become a sticking point among protesters and groups like Decolonize This Place. While wall labels describing the ethnicity of artists feels quaint at this point, what would be truly radical would be to include the artist's debt load, which literally determines many contemporary artists' ability to participate in the studio-based art world. (Moreover, the faulty assumption that artists from so-called developing nations are not among the wealthy classes in their countries of origin is a huge oversight.)

One of the don't-miss works addressing class is Marie Karlberg's satirical video "The Good Terrorist" (2021), which updates Doris Lessing's 1985 novel of the same name. It features several well-known artists (Nicole Eisenman, Jacolby Satterwhite) playing entitled revolutionaries occupying a luxury apartment on the Upper East Side.

Here, identity politics — actors include people of color and some who are gay — are seamlessly woven into a work in which radical leftists attempt to coexist and effect change in the world. Perhaps the most telling feature is that their privilege — as famous artists cozy in the museum world — goes unmentioned in the wall text.

One-hour video by Marie Karlberg, "The Good Terrorist" (2021). Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

**Greater New York 2021**

Through April 18, 2022, MoMA PS1, 22-25 Jackson Ave., Queens; (718) 784-2084; moma.org. Entry to MoMA PS1 is by advance timed ticket.