

ARTFORUM

TOPTEN

TOP TEN

Jack Bankowsky's highlights of 2021

Jack Bankowsky is a critic, a curator, and *Artforum's* editor at large. He currently organizes the spring seminars for ArtCenter College of Design, a series that brings notable artists and writers to the school's Pasadena, CA, campus.



David Hammons, *Day's End*, 2014–21, stainless steel, precast concrete. Installation view, Gansevoort Peninsula, Hudson River, New York. Photo: Jason Schmidt.

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DAVID HAMMONS, *DAY'S END*, 2014–21 (WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART IN COLLABORATION WITH HUDSON RIVER PARK, NEW YORK)

As a longtime Hammons fan, I will admit that I followed the seven-year gestation of *Day's End* with a measure of pique and bemusement, as the museum jumped high, and then higher, to meet the \$17 million price tag, and then—how else to justify their

enlightened spendthrift?—PR'd the crap out of the collaboration. The payoff, essentially an enormous volume of empty air delineated by the slimmest of steel armatures, was worth it (I've come round to this!); the circus is a part of the art. It might be its fulcrum.

Hammons's poetic maneuverings have a way of burlesquing the social contracts on which they depend, in this case the devil's bargain that is cultural patronage. Context! That's it—so too then the deep babble of history where Gansevoort Street meets the West Side Highway. Consider the cobbled thoroughfare named for Herman Melville's forebears; the waterfront's gradual descent into dereliction; the great wharf's re-inhabitation by the city's gay denizens in the 1970s, a safe haven for sunning and cruising. And—last but not least—its soon-to-follow colonization by a chain saw-wielding Gordon Matta-Clark, his *Day's End*, 1975, the inspiration for Hammons's ghostly volume and, for better or worse, a harbinger of the steel-and-glass “resurgence” to come, of which the Whitney—and Hammons, his magical call to pause—are unavoidably a part.



View of “Laura Owens & Vincent van Gogh,” 2021, Fondation Vincent van Gogh, Arles, France. Mural: Laura Owens, *Untitled*, 2021. Painting: Vincent van Gogh, *Enclosed Field with Ploughman*, 1889. Photo: Annik Wetter.

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"LAURA OWENS & VINCENT VAN GOGH" (FONDATION VINCENT VAN GOGH ARLES, FRANCE; CURATED BY BICE CURIGER AND MARK GODFREY)

Instagram failed to prepare the viewer for either the intensity of this show's visual ravishments or the suggestive thought avenues it opened. The foundation's namesake artist's unmatched posthumous branding triumph, which is to say the question of artistic immortality (both the mystery of demonic genius and the conventions whereby we package it as such), was writ large in an installation that brought the art of the fabled Post-Impressionist together with that of the unknown artist-designer Winifred How and Owens's own prodigiously inventive wallpapers, inspired by both. In the face of this *mise-en-scène*, as exhilarating as it was improbable, questions of artistic priority, of arts/crafts hierarchies, of artistic recognition posthumous or otherwise seemed to dissolve in a feedback loop of life force and aesthetic energy that rendered them, for an instant anyway, all but academic.

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TOBI HASLETT, "MAGIC ACTIONS" (N+1, NO. 40)

"Lest we forget," the opening refrain from my nomination for the best essay of 2021, is a call to remember the spring revolution of 2020, to preserve the moment and the meaning of the biggest spontaneous riot in this country's history from the nervous, liberal "you won, you got what you wanted" *rappel à l'ordre*. At once a chronicle of life on the ground among the young insurgents who took to the streets in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder and a nuanced yet emotionally immediate log of the author's political reckoning with the events of those remarkable months, "Magic Actions" refuses the forces that would repackage armed insurrection as polite protest, reminding us that without the bad manners and broken glass, the Derek Chauvin trial—"its obscenity and thin catharsis"—might never have happened at all.



Lorraine O'Grady, *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, 1980. Performance view, Just Above Midtown, New York, June 5, 1980. Photo: Freda Leinwand. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. © Freda Leinwand. Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute.

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LORRAINE O'GRADY (BROOKLYN MUSEUM, NEW YORK; CURATED BY CATHERINE MORRIS AND ARUNA D'SOUZA WITH JENÉE-DARIA STRAND)

Imagine Mademoiselle, America's racial unconscious, ribald in a sea of gowns and tails! Covered from neckline to hem with scores of white, debutante-prim gloves, the unforgettable dress O'Grady donned to crash the festivities of the art elite in the early '80s (the garment served as the centerpiece of this overdue retrospective) was enough to remind old fans and educate new ones re: the seminal contribution of this fearless, ahead-of-her-times creator.



Alice Neel, *Two Girls, Spanish Harlem*, 1959, oil on canvas, 30 × 25". © The Estate of Alice Neel.

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ALICE NEEL (METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK; CURATED BY KELLY BAUM AND RANDALL GRIFFEY)

Despite the fact that—or precisely because—I've been late in fully embracing this painter's art, I've enjoyed the periodic surprise of happening on a Neel and being stopped in my tracks by, well, how good it is. This retrospective, as capacious as it was timely, offered that aesthetic jolt in gunfire-rapid succession, as the painter nailed it in canvas after, forgive me, masterpiece.



Thomas Schütte, *Glaskopf B, Nr. 10* (Glass Head B, No. 10), 2013, cast Murano alexandrite glass, steel base, overall 61 3/4 × 15 3/4 × 15 3/4".

6

THOMAS SCHÜTTE (PETER FREEMAN, INC., NEW YORK, AND BOURSE DE COMMERCE, PARIS)

The most significant move in advanced artmaking in recent decades may well have been the return to figural sculpture, *not* as a call to old-fashioned order but rather as a dialectical counter, a synthesis of the dematerial and theatrical experiments of the '60s and '70s (not to mention that earlier all-trumping assault on sculptural tradition, the readymade). Does it work for Schütte? I've been woefully slow to come round to the sculptor's considerable art, having written him off as an unreconstructed Expressionist, but the work, I'm compelled to acknowledge, is more complicated—more self-conscious, more formally precise, more materially replete than just about anything else out there today.



Brett Goodroad, *Untitled (Seascape 1)*, 2021, oil on silk over linen, 30 × 36".

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BRETT GOODROAD (CUSHION WORKS, SAN FRANCISCO)

Arrayed in the congenially tatty Cushion Works galleries, these twelve canvases—substantially abstracted compositions populated with fragments of landscape or figure—collared me with their stormy intensity, the crusted surfaces at once seemingly hard-won and bravura delectable. Think Albert Pinkham Ryder but as a colorist: the reds and deep teals of *Untitled (Seascape 1)*, 2021; the dusty pinks and beige golds capped with breaker-crest-white highlights in *Winter*, 2019–20; the verdant, layered greens of *Untitled (Big Green)*, 2018–20.

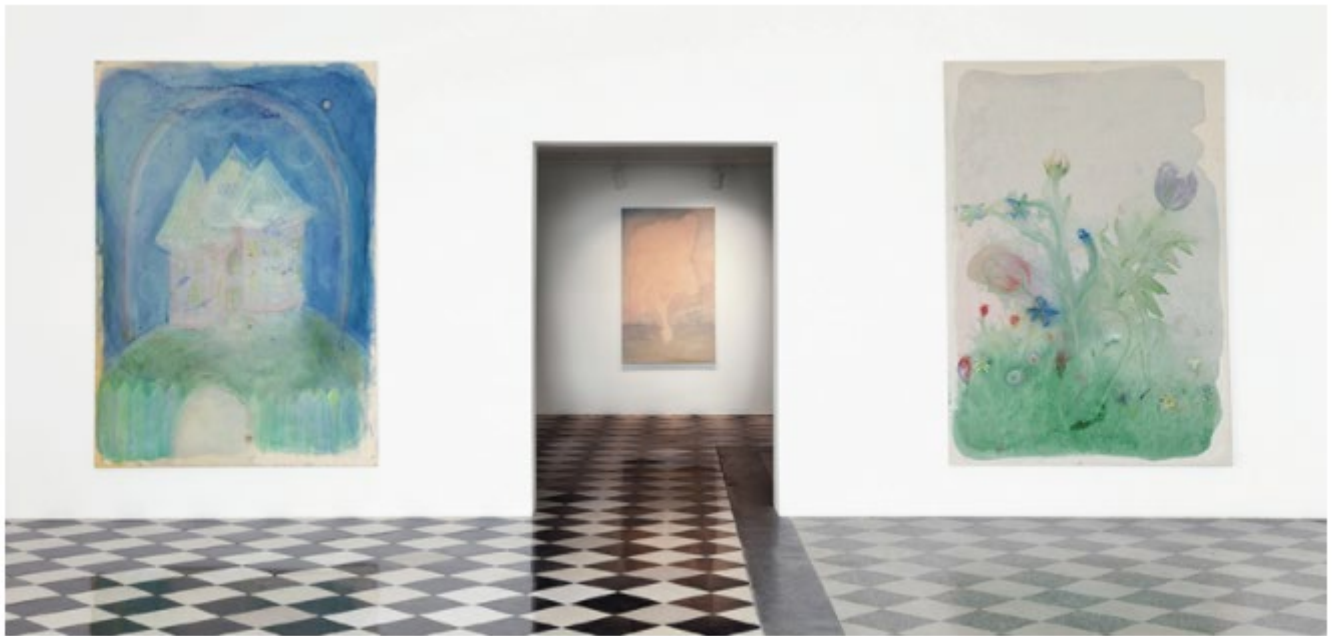


Kai Althoff, *Untitled*, 1993, dye transfer print, 33 1/2 x 33 1/2".

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KAI ALTHOFF GOES WITH BERNARD LEACH, EDITED BY KAI ALTHOFF AND IWONA BLAZWICK WITH EMILY BUTLER AND CAMERON FOOTE (WHITECHAPEL GALLERY)

Just as I was mourning the fact that Covid-19 had kept me from Althoff's first British survey, this exquisite catalogue-cum-artist's book arrived in the mail. Elegantly paced in collaboration with designer Roland Brauchli, the volume, like the show itself, brings works from the artist's forty-year output together with a selection of pots by the British ceramics legend. An enticing lineup of texts, including a conversation between ex-MoMA eminence Kathy Halbreich and snowboarding champion Iouri Podladtchikov (!?) and a preface by the indispensable "Francia Gimble-Masters" (aka Althoff), provides ample food for thought, if meager compensation for sitting out the main event.



View of "Tara Walters: Dropping In," 2021, Kristina Kite Gallery, Los Angeles. From left: *Welcome to Weathervane*, 2021; *Cherry Blossom*, 2021; *Otherworlds*, 2021. Photo: Brica Wilcox.

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TARA WALTERS, "DROPPING IN" (KRISTINA KITE GALLERY, LOS ANGELES)

École de Owens meets Karen Kilimnik, just to give you an idea—though this show of mostly largish canvases, stained and scrubbed and flecked with iridescents, introduced a sensibility in every respect its own. The work's next-to-nothing facture and boys-keep-out imagery throw us off the scent of the pictorial ingenuity that made for this year's freshest LA debut.



Todd Haynes, *The Velvet Underground*, 2021, 4K video, color and black-and-white, sound, 121 minutes. Featured archival photograph of Lou Reed, Maureen Tucker, Nico, Sterling Morrison, and John Cale, date unknown. Photo: Alamy.

The auteur and ur-fan turns his moviemaking artistry on the documentary form, tracking the comet-quick arc of Lou Reed and the Velvets in a filmic collage culled from the art archive. Forty-five minutes' worth of Warhol films are sampled, including the relevant screen tests of Lou Reed and John Cale at full length. The resulting pastiche—an editorial tour de force both visual and aural—is intercut with talking-head testimony from surviving protagonists of that die-young-stay-pretty firmament, including Reed's principal Velvet-era collaborator Cale and drummer Maureen "Mo" Tucker, my new all-time-favorite person. This sublime drone of a movie ends with seven solid minutes of credits, an inspired flourish that unpacks Haynes's singular recombination and restores it to the archive immeasurably enriched.