

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Financial Times

Six artists reshaping our way of seeing

Baya Simons and Rosanna Dodds

26 April 2021



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For this cadre of international talent, the past year has been a moment of incredible productivity – and freedom

Tau Lewis

27, NEW YORK



Image: Tau Lewis works with recycled materials: “Things hold memories and information...they carry stories with them” © Flo Ngala.

There is something otherworldly about Tau Lewis's sculptures – some uncanny human likeness, and some mischief. The Toronto-born, Brooklyn-based artist has been exhibiting work for the past eight years, but her self-taught practice is the result of a “non-stop journey of material research and making”, she says. “The backbone of my art is that I work with recycled materials.” She has two European solo shows planned – at London's Hayward Gallery and Paris's Fondation Louis Vuitton – as well as a handful of exhibitions across the globe, from the National Gallery of Canada to the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

A series of works are currently on show in London at Stephen Friedman Gallery (until 15 May). The group exhibition, Threadbare, explores the relationship between textiles and the body, something that is integral to Lewis's practice. Often her works begin with a salvaged piece of clothing or a found object; the idea is to use materials that are familiar. “Things hold memories and information,” she says. “They carry stories with them.”



Image: Lewis in her New York studio © Flo Ngala.

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Image: “The Talons of the Eagle, The Ladder of Death, By God’s Grace, All Will Be Well” (2021) by Tau Lewis © Flo Ngala.

Sometimes it takes months of hand-stitching for her vision to be realised. Harmony, a work that is reinterpreted every year, is an embodiment of the “blackness of outer space”, she explains. “I want to create places to go to. My artwork takes me out of this world, out of this realm.”

Within each new sculpture is a piece of the last one – a scrap of fabric or a repurposed piece of thread. “I’m unfurling a sci-fi through each body of work,” says Lewis. “Everything is connected.” The most joyous moment is when her figures start to come alive. She considers them to be vessels for spirits, ancestors and stories. “Part of the magic of figural sculpture is that it’s similar to the toys and dolls we have when we’re growing up,” she says. “We see ourselves in them. There’s a part of us that’s waiting for them to come alive, for them to talk back or for their eyes to move. That’s a really magical part of the human spirit.” RD

Lisa Brice

52, LONDON



Image: Lisa Brice with (on floor) “Boundary Girl (Natalie)” (2009-2017) and (right) “Between This And That” (2017) © Adam Davies. Courtesy of Lisa Brice and Salon 94.

South Africa-born, London-based artist Lisa Brice’s paintings are instantly identifiable by their vivid tones of cobalt blue. It’s a bold signature that – along with her skill for creating narrative through gesture and her focus on female subjects – has attracted solo shows at London’s Tate Britain as well as Stephen Friedman Gallery and New York’s Salon 94.

Brice arrived at this particular blue in response to the light of a neon sign; she wanted to “capture the fleeting colour of twilight – that transitional gloaming hour – in paint”. The colour has taken on new meaning as she’s worked with it. “I associate it with the Trinidadian Blue Devil, a formidable carnival character.” The colour also creates uncertainty, which is central to her style. “It can suggest a skin covered in paint or tinted mud, obscuring naturalistic skin tones and interrupting an easy or preconditioned reading of the subject along ethnic lines,” she says. “This all reinforces the idea of

transformation and adds to the ambiguity of the narrative in the work.”

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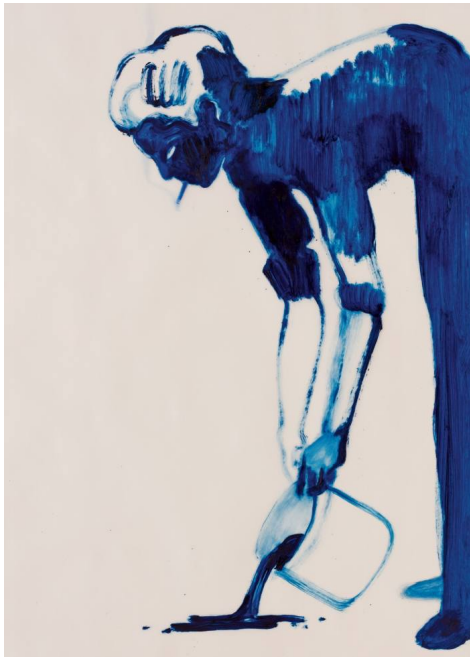


Image: Untitled, 2020, by Lisa Brice © Courtesy of Lisa Brice and Salon 94.

In recent years, her practice has involved recasting characters or scenes from historical artworks by men, to give the subjects new agency. In her 2017 painting *Between This And That*, the cigarette-smoking woman recalls a figure in Swiss painter Félix Vallotton's *The White and the Black* (1913), only in Brice's version the woman sits across from a standing, clothed and masked figure rather than a sleeping nude woman. In *Smoke and Mirrors* – set to be the centrepiece in a new show at Salon 94 next January – a group of naked women are shown reflected in a mirror, smoking, drinking and hanging paintings, which, she says, is a reference to *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882) by Edouard Manet, with its bored-looking barmaid. "I like to think that the paintings are the antithesis of misrepresentation," she says. "A reclamation of the canvas by all the models, painters, wives, mistresses and performers."

A new series of her works on paper, due to go on show at the Sussex home of the Bloomsbury set, Charleston, on 19 May, further explores the dynamic between artist and model. "I am interested in how people carry and present themselves, what they aim to project," she explains of her inspiration for the show. "I have recently been looking at a lot of images, either painted or photographed, of female painters throughout history. They very often appear clutching palettes and fistfuls of brushes: defensive, defiant, guarded, stern. They seem to be declaring their status within their chosen profession or calling, claiming space for themselves." BS

Alvaro Barrington

38, LONDON



Image: Alvaro Barrington in his Hackney studio © Adama Jalloh.

It's not often that an exhibition at a major art gallery borrows its title from a lyric by Drake, the Canadian rapper. But then Alvaro Barrington, the Venezuela-born, Grenada-then-Brooklyn-raised painter, is no ordinary artist – but one as likely to draw inspiration from Busta Rhymes or Lil' Kim as Mark Rothko or Kerry James Marshall. You don't do it for the man, men never notice. You just do it for yourself, you're the fucking coldest, which opened at the Marais, Paris outpost of Thaddaeus Ropac gallery in March (one of eight prestigious galleries around the world he works with), is a show of new paintings by the artist that respond to the events of the past year.

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Image: Barrington's "Untitled Red Hibiscus Carib Sea" (unfinished 2021) © Adama Jalloh.



Image: Barrington: "Artists need to be responsible to their generation" © Adama Jalloh.

"I really wanted to do a show that felt like we were dealing with what was going on in the moment," he says. "I thought this was a moment to think more positively about the things people are starting to do for themselves; it reminded me of that line from Drake's "Fancy". The paintings became things that people do in isolation; a moment of internally loving yourself."

The new works are semi-abstract depictions of people in bold hues. "I reduced all my friends to these colours, so they're almost like caricatures," he says. One painting looks down on a silhouette of a

woman in a bath of orange paint, with a candle and a glass of wine. Another shows a grey figure in the compass yoga position, one leg held high above their head against a background of baby pink.



Image: Books in his Hackney studio © Adama Jalloh.

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Image: Barrington with his piece "Emelda's Market" © Adama Jalloh.

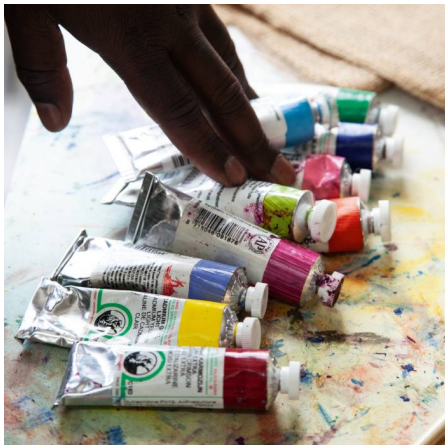


Image: Some of his oil paints © Adama Jalloh.

The title of the show and the playful tone to the paintings tap into something Barrington has been vocal about prioritising: accessibility, and the need to represent the cultures he grew up in, in Grenada and Brooklyn. "There's certain ways we enter spaces," says Barrington. "Some of it is very inviting for some people and some of it is not inviting for other people. Artists need to be responsible to their generation and to the people they fuck with. They have to be the voice of those people." From the rich variety of locations in which he shows his art to his show titles, and bold, engaging work, Barrington's practice is about opening art outwards.

"My paintings are never meant to make anybody feel dumb. I think an artist's job is usually just to say: this is what I'm experiencing. And if it resonates with you, then that's real; if it doesn't, it doesn't." BS

Victoria Cantons

51, LONDON



Image: Victoria Cantons in her studio in Brixton. Large artworks, from far left, The Order of Love Or While The World Burns Outside (2020-21). Le Visage De L'Amour Or The Maze (2021). What Survives of Us (2020). Left: A New Landmark (2020) © Benjamin McMahon.

"It's a way to clear the drainpipes," says Victoria Cantons of her painting practice. Graduating from the Slade School of Fine Art this summer, the London-based artist and curator has exhibited at the Saatchi Gallery, White Cube and the Royal Academy of Arts – all

in the space of a year. And 2021 is unfolding at a similar pace, with her graduate showcase approaching next month and a shared exhibition at Singapore's Cuturi Gallery in July.

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Born in 1969 to a French father and a Spanish mother – both of whom emigrated to the UK in the '50s – Cantons grew up in suburban south London. Creativity wasn't encouraged. Despite her "Picasso-esque" love of drawing, she was deterred from pursuing art professionally. "In terms of really taking painting seriously, that kicked off when my father died," she says. But it was later still, following gender transition and a divorce, that she began her art-school education, at the age of 43.



Image: Le Visage De L'Amour Or The Maze, 2021, by Victoria Cantons © Benjamin McMahon.



Image: Victoria Cantons with The Order of Love Or While the World Burns Outside (2020-21) © Benjamin McMahon.

These experiences are frequent touchpoints in Cantons' work. Painting, she says, is an attempt to make sense of her past. She compares her process to that of an archaeologist: "It's like taking my trowel, going into my backyard – which is like my studio – and just scraping away. I know there's something under the surface, but I don't know what that something is exactly."

Cantons often finds herself returning to certain images. Flowers, for example, became a recurring theme after the death of her mother, a keen gardener. Other references are a nod to her artistic heroes – a plate of fruit for Picasso or a background inspired by Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera's Blue House. In a recent work, A New Landmark, Cantons has borrowed a composition from Edvard Munch. "I was looking at how I could explore it through the female gaze," she says. Her creations all "bounce off each other", she adds. "I'm constantly referring to past works."

But while Cantons's paintings are rooted in her past, they also seek to affirm her place in the present. "When I look at the canon of art history, and when I look around me, I don't hear someone else voicing what I need to hear," she concludes. "I've got to be that voice myself." RD

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Florian Krewer

35, NEW YORK



Image: Florian Krewer in his studio in the Bronx, New York. His works are in progress and as yet untitled © Landon Speers.

"I never thought I would study art," says German-born, South Bronx-based Florian Krewer. "I thought I had no talent." But while he was training as an architect in Cologne, one of his paintings was seen by a professor who suggested he train his eye at the city's galleries. Three years later, with a new love of German expressionism, Krewer began studying under Peter Doig at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. The relationship has profoundly shaped his work. Without Doig, he says, he wouldn't have found his artistic language. Now Krewer is preparing for a solo show at London's Michael Werner Gallery this autumn.



Image: Animals are increasingly the subject of Krewer's work © Landon Speers.



Image: The German-born artist is preparing for a solo show in London © Landon Speers.

Krewer's paintings illustrate a world on the edge of reality – half dreamland, half cityscape. Eyes On Fire, the series he exhibited at Tramps and Michael Werner in New York last year, portrays a city racked with protests, social unrest and the effects of the pandemic. The figures reel you in. "That's where the feeling is," he says of the characters based mostly on photos of friends. Shadowy and indistinct, they fight, cartwheel and flip through a hazy metropolis.

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Image: Krewer credits British painter Peter Doig with helping him find his artistic language © Landon Speers.

Increasingly, Krewer is turning his brush to animals. “Especially cats,” he says. “You don’t question if they’re male or female. They have this elegant way of moving, but they’re also aggressive. I like the ambiguity.” With his upcoming body of work, he intends to encourage his audience to embrace people’s differences. “Maybe

some people will be a little shocked,” he says of the heightened sexuality in his new paintings, many showing nude figures in lewd positions. “All this freedom – I love it.” RD

Zizipho Poswa

41, CAPE TOWN



Image: Zizipho Poswa in her studio in Salt River, Cape Town © Rudi Geyser.

Following several sell-out collections, and with works held in a roster of international institutions including Lacma (Los Angeles County Museum of Art) and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Cape Town-based ceramic artist Zizipho Poswa is currently having her first solo show at Southern Guild, in her hometown (until 1 July). The culture and the people of her childhood homes – in the town of Mthatha and the rural village of Idutywa, in eastern South Africa – have remained central to her work, which explores aspects of black female identity.



Image: Poswa adds texture to the clay base of a large-scale work for her iLobola collection © Rudi Geyser

Even from a young age, Poswa saw art in the everyday around her: “There were no art schools at home,” she says, “but I was creative. I used found objects around me, creating little sculptures, drawing in class.” Her mother, a teacher, instilled in her the value of making art. “She nurtured my creativity. She made it seem as if art was the best career in the whole world.”

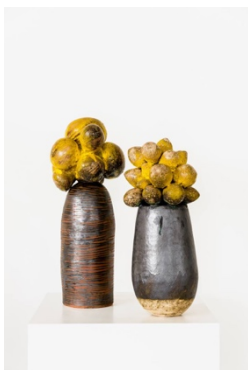


Image: Two of her glazed clay stoneware sculptures, “Umthwalo – Dadobawo” (left) and “Weniamo – Baobab Series” (right) © Southern Guild/Adriaan Louw.

Her new show will feature 10 large-scale, hand-coiled pots adorned with bronze horns, in homage to the spiritual offering at the heart of the ancient African custom of lobola, or bridal dowry: the cow. “I’m drawing inspiration from my culture,” she explains. “I’m telling the story of what the authenticity of the lobola used to be, to highlight that the important part is the uniting of two families – and that they should be supportive if there are any problems in the marriage.” BS