

**THIS IS
AMERICA**

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Whenever something terrible happens in the United States, many Americans like to say, “This is not who we are,” as if the terrible incidents are aberrations that do not define the country’s character. These protestations are wishful thinking. No one wants to believe they are connected to people capable of brutality, racism, callous indifference to suffering. But when mass shootings, racist attacks, and rampant discrimination are the rule rather than the exception, it is time to admit that maybe, just maybe, this is exactly who we are. Some of us have known this all along, and others are finally seeing that truth.

On January 6, 2021, a large group of angry men and women attended a rally where twice-impeached President Donald J. Trump inflamed the crowd with soaring, mendacious rhetoric about winning the election he lost by a significant margin. He continued to insist that he and his legal team, a band of utterly incompetent lawyers who mounted more than forty unsuccessful legal challenges of the election results, were still going to make a stand against the encroaching reality of a Biden presidency. Trump told his followers, “We will never give up. We will never concede.” He promised to “fight like hell.” And then he said, “We’re going to walk down to the Capitol and we’re going to cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women, and we’re probably not going to be cheering for some of them.” The former president, of course, did no such thing, but he gave his followers all the permission they needed to make their way to the Capitol. And over several hours, they committed an insurrection that we watched unfold on social media and cable news. Members of Congress fled to safety as the Capitol police were overrun. The Senate chamber was breached. It was surreal. It was terrifying. It was heartbreaking. I would have asked, “How did it come to this?” but I already knew the answer.

After it was all over and the rioters dispersed, information about the gravity of what took place emerged. There were men in combat gear with plastic handcuffs, who moved through the halls of Congress with military precision. Certain politicians, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Vice-President Mike Pence, were targeted for attacks because they dared to defy the former president or they dared to articulate a progressive vision for the United States or they dared to lead their caucus from their rightfully elected position. It was equally chilling that the insurrectionists did not bother to hide themselves. They did not wear masks. They shared their locations and what they were doing on social media. They took pictures and videos. It was fairly easy for law enforcement to find them even though it is not very likely that they will face appropriate consequences for their actions. This is America, where justice is elusive and far from blind.

My parents, who were with me during the storming of the Capitol, watched the news with incredulity. My father, in particular, was profoundly shaken. He kept saying, “I cannot believe this is happening in the United States.” He was shocked, and then he was angry. My parents are from Haiti. They have known political upheaval. They have lived under dictators. They know what it means to survive an authoritarian regime. They never expected to see such circumstances in a country that has always prided itself on democracy and freedom. And it was particularly galling given that Americans always look down on countries like Haiti when they experience political unrest, as if similar unrest could never happen in America, the beautiful. We know better, now that this is, indeed, America where democracy is ignored when it becomes inconvenient to political ambitions.

I was stunned by the events of January 6, and then I wasn’t. Violence was inevitable. It had been brewing throughout the Trump presidency and many of us were simply waiting to see what would happen. The signs had been there after Heather Heyer was murdered during a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. There were more signs in the ensuing years as white supremacists, emboldened by Trump, became more comfortable displaying their racial enmity. Trump forecasted his resistance to leaving office when he would not definitively assert that he would peacefully hand over power if he lost the 2020 election. In some ways, the insurrection was the least surprising thing to happen during Trump’s tenure.

The Constitution, the founding document of the United States, is held as sacrosanct. It is treated as unimpeachable. But it was a document created by white men, some of whom owned enslaved people, all of whom were complicit in the institution of slavery. They did not believe Black people deserved to be seen as anything more than 3/5 of a white person. They did not believe in codifying

the freedom of all people, including Black people, in their supposedly sacred document. The inevitability of the January 6 insurrection might go much further back than people want to admit—to the birth of a nation that was built on the backs of enslaved people. This is America—any country that rose out of such a moral disgrace was bound to end in ignominy.

American exceptionalism is the seductive myth that the United States is a chosen nation, a country superior to all others. But throughout this country’s history, we have seen overwhelming evidence to the contrary. I suppose, like many Americans, I used to believe in this exceptionalism. I am not sure why I was ever so naïve. Or, I was the child of immigrants, and I understood that my parents came to America so their children would have opportunities, better lives than we might have had in the country they left.

I have traveled throughout the world by the grace of my career. I have seen glimpses of what life is like in Australia and Sweden and Egypt and Norway and Italy and other places. I’ve been to Haiti, many times. I have been to Mexico. There are wonderful things about these places, just as there are many wonderful things about the country I call home. Every place I’ve ever been to also has its failings. What I haven’t seen, when traveling, is any evidence that the United States is as exceptional as it believes itself to be.

When I am abroad, people ask me so many questions about life in America but they aren’t the questions you might expect. Instead, they want to know if American police are as dangerous as they seem. They want to know if we really don’t have universal healthcare. They want to understand student loans. These are well-intended conversations but they always make me feel like I am an involuntary emissary from a deeply uncivilized place.

I feel like I need to say I love the United States, that I should say some positive things about the country but I don’t know how to, anymore. Yes, there are wonderful things about the United States. There are opportunities here that cannot be found anywhere else. There is a richness in the diversity of the American people. But there is also needless suffering that could be avoided if, once in a while, we would favor policies that would benefit the entire country and not just a privileged few. This is a country that worships at the altar of rugged individualism and the survival of the fittest but only a few are able to be the fittest. This is America—a country of stark contradictions—a country of immense wealth and unnecessary poverty. This is a land of possibility but there is an impassable border around that possibility for most people who are not heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied white men.

Whatever faith I once had in the United States was shattered when Donald Trump was elected. It was unfathomable that he rose to the highest office with no qualifications, with no integrity, with no real aptitude for leadership. With each new policy he enacted that eroded rights and freedoms for anyone he held in contempt which was almost everyone, my faith shattered even more. For the first time in my life, I felt like I needed to apologize for the country. What else could I express but shame in a country that tried, several times, to institute a ban on Muslims entering the country? Or allowed migrant children to be held in cages, separated from their parents with no plan for reunion? Or did nothing as, for decades, police officers brutalized Black Americans during arrests, while they were walking down the street, while they were sleeping?

As the 2020 election season unfolded, and the candidates were winnowed, liberals understood that literally anyone would have been a better president than Trump. And we also understood how pathetic it was that this is what American politics had come to—trying to clear the lowest of bars. We had to compromise. We were told that it was best to rally behind the most electable candidate and, of course, the most electable candidate was a man who would be familiar, comfortable to the broadest swath of the electorate. It is strange that the most successful political candidates do not embody the values of a country that prides itself on bold, brash innovation. Joe Biden ended up winning the nomination. He is a centrist politician, an older white man who looks presidential and assumes the role with relative ease. He isn’t too radical for conservative voters and he is just liberal enough to moderately appease progressive voters. This is America—a country so exhausted by political turmoil that it elected a leader who offered the hope of respite after four years of wanton chaos.

The Biden presidency has been mostly unremarkable, with the exception of his vice-president Kamala Harris, the first Black woman, and first South Asian woman in that position. Harris’s election was an incredible achievement but it was also a frustrating reminder of how long it took for that glass ceiling to shatter and that the glass ceiling of the presidency still remains.

The Biden administration inherited a terrible mess. Trump largely ignored the pandemic. During the final days of his presidency, Congress spent more time politicking than trying to provide any kind of meaningful relief to people who were facing unemployment, eviction, and a number of other crises. Politicians are reluctant to cancel student loan debt that is an unreasonable burden for people who merely wanted a college education. They are reluctant to pass a \$15 minimum wage, which is less than what the minimum wage should be for anyone to make a reasonable living. And a lot of their constituents agree. They begrudge basic initiatives to improve the quality of life for all Americans. They adhere to a scarcity doctrine. It is every person for themselves. That toxic attitude will be but part of our downfall.

As the pandemic raged on, financial stimulus was meager. As other countries gave their citizens monthly stipends until the crisis ended, the United States issued one \$1200 check and one \$600 check, and not to everyone. Masks became politicized and people actively resisted doing the one thing that would prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The selfishness, the cavalier disrespect, is staggering. For a time, there were supply chain issues for almost everything. Hospitals were overrun. Families were forced to say their goodbyes to loved ones via FaceTime. Dead bodies filled morgues. To call it a disaster would barely begin to address the state of affairs. This is America—the country was, finally, exceptional, in that we accounted for nearly a quarter of the world's coronavirus infections while accounting for just more than four percent of the world's population. This is America—more than 500,000 people have died.

There was no way Biden would be able to right a great many wrongs immediately. He was, in the earliest days of his presidency, exactly who we expected him to be—sober, diligent, cautious. He wore a mask in public. He received his vaccination in public. He mourned the hundreds of thousands of people lost to the coronavirus. These are the smallest of gestures, things that should be *de rigueur* for a leader but in the wake of Trump, they were significant. More relief, something of a return to normalcy. And sadly, it isn't enough. It was never going to be enough, particularly for the most vulnerable Americans, the ones consistently forgotten, ignored, overlooked.

What I am trying to tell you is that America is a mess. This is a country on the precipice of change that some are resisting with all their might. It is too simplistic to suggest that we are experiencing the last gasp of white supremacy, though white supremacy is, certainly, a large factor. The demographics in the United States are shifting. By 2055, there will be no racial majority. The balance of power will, I hope, eventually shift too. That is a terrifying prospect for the people who have, historically, held all the power. They do not want to relinquish it. They do not want to subject themselves to the ways they have treated those over whom they wielded their power.

But there is also this—for every failure, there is a triumph in this country if you know where to look. As communities have struggled during the pandemic, they have also come together. Mutual aid organizations have done incredible work in cities all across the country. Politicians like Cori Bush, Lauren Underwood, Ayanna Pressley, Ilhan Omar, Deb Haaland, Rashida Tlaib, Sharice Davids, and others are a new generation of politicians who reflect the actual diversity of the people they represent. I wish there were more triumphs to hold onto but this, for America, is a time of reckoning with the mistakes and moral failings of the past so that the possibility of the future is open to as many people as possible. I don't know that we need more glowing testimonials about America's greatness and hope for our future. We need brutal honesty.

As a Black, queer woman, as a writer who engages with issues of race, gender, sexuality, and other forms of difference, I am often asked to respond to current events, particularly when they are tragic or horrifying or unjust. Like many Black writers, there is always a slew of inquiries in my inbox after yet another police shooting of an unarmed Black person or an act of domestic terrorism. There is a strange expectation that the only thing I am qualified to comment on is oppression. It has been hard to know what to write over the past four years. I certainly have opinions and observations to offer on the American political climate. But I also have creative inclinations that have little to do with the political climate. There are so many things I want to make, if only America would let me. I suspect most artists feel this way, trapped between an obligation to telling the truth, to bearing witness, and surrendering to the wilds of our imaginations. If only America would let them.

I am a realist, not an optimist. I don't quite know what to make of America anymore. I really don't. Or I don't want to face, eyes wide open, what America has become and how elusive an equitable future for all Americans seems. But I still have words. I have my voice. If there is a creative mandate for anyone who means to make art, it is to reflect not only America as it was and as it is but to also reflect America as it could be.

This is America presents over thirty artists that live and work in the United States. Many of the artists in this exhibition were born there and have witnessed the country's rapid evolution during the past few decades. Other artists were born outside the US and have emigrated from different parts of the world—the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, Asia. Together, this selection encompasses a cross-section of artists whose work reflects, for better or worse, their experiences in the US. Following 2020, a year that will be remembered in infamy given the global pandemic and social unrest, much of this art reflects the current state of precarity in which we all live. The works in the exhibition were made during the past year, from 2020 to 2021, and each reflects prescient issues affecting this country at present, including class, race, and gender inequity, as well as concomitant civil unrest.

Wealth Disparity

Income disparity in the US is at its highest since the gilded age. New York, the city that several artists in the show call home, has some of the wealthiest and poorest people living within its densely packed boroughs. On the Pacific coast, Los Angeles boasts affluence, celebrity, and idyllic weather, but it is also home to one of the largest populations of homeless people in the world. Skid Row is adjacent to blue-chip galleries, where collectors vie for million-dollar artworks. Alfonso Gonzalez Jr's poignant *Homeless health care Los Angeles* (2021), is a painting depicting the titular clinic with an overstuffed car and sofa outside, capturing the reality of many people trying to survive while living in their automobiles or, even worse, on the street. Philadelphia-born artist Timothy Curtis remarks on a different disparity related to health care—the relationship between opioid addiction and death or incarceration—in his work *Aw Man*, 2021. Structured in two parts, on the right side of the canvas, a prescription pill container spills pills marked POISON; a grid covers the opening of a container and two eyes peek out from its depths, suggesting an imprisoned person. The left side of the canvas features a tombstone with marks that overflow from its surface, a sad reminder of how many people are lost to overdoses. Curtis creates a visual commentary on how big pharma has vastly accelerated addiction, which, in turn, was criminalized; each of these industrial complexes—the pharmaceutical industry and the private prison system—have made billions for some while destroying the lives of too many Americans. These contrasts are what make this country so complex and legitimately difficult to encapsulate. For every great aspect about living in the US—the right to free speech, to practice free religion, sexual freedom, and same-sex marriage, as well as the incredible variations in landscape and topography—there are equally disturbing elements. Gun violence, racial inequity born out of slavery and incarceration, an addiction epidemic, and an almost moral disdain of poverty are some of the issues plaguing our nation.



Farley Aguilar
Chain Gang, circa 1903, 2021

Miami-based artist Fairley Aguilar's *Chain Gang*, circa 1903 (2021) shows a group of four shackled men in prison striped outfits. The inspiration for this painting was a historical photograph of imprisoned men of color. One man leans on a large ax, symbolizing the free labor obtained through a draconian incarceration system after slavery was permitted. Aguilar, a Nicaraguan artist who lives in Miami, clearly understands that his fate could have been much different had he been born even one century earlier. With a similar ethos, LA-based Alex Becerra comments on the horrific realities of manual labor for many of his Latin community with an oil on linen painting, *Chemical Cocktail* (2021). In an artist's statement, Becerra reminds viewers, "Chemical cocktails for the migrant worker while you slurp up a strawberry daiquiri on a rooftop and small talk with your associates."¹ He is referring to the use of highly toxic chemicals sprayed on the fields for

strawberry harvest while workers with little to no rights are exposed as they toil these crops for a pittance.

Jarrett Key's oil painting on cement, *A Good Laugh* (2021), responds to the history of Black migration to the North that was so prevalent during the Jim Crow era. Rather than focusing on the exploitation of this population for labor and the injustices that they suffered, he shows two joyful Black men, reflecting the new opportunities found in cities like Chicago or New York. The lush pastoral scene and the protagonists' smiles contrast with the cement to form a poignant commentary on a history of oppression. This is aligned with the ceramic works of Sharif Bey. His *Was, Was Not*, 2020 and *Protest Shield: Zulu Knots* (2021), which resemble the formal iconography of African tribal art but are very much rooted in the contemporary. *Protest Shield* borrows its form from Benin sculpture, with a head surrounded by a halo of tiny fists, a BLM reference to Black power and resistance. Bey's shield is one of protection as well as power, suggesting the elision of meaning as works are understood across cultures and historical eras.

Tony Marsh, Louis Osmosis, and Christina Forrer contribute works that are more abstract in their messaging of disillusionment. Marsh's group of ceramics sculptures, *The Jester's Pants* (2020/2021), while appearing without narrative, alludes to the year 2020 and its mounting crises, from the pandemic and divisive politicians to civil protest against gender and police violence. The artist says, "I felt disgusted, everything around me felt like it was in a state of chaotic mess, like vomit and excess."² His ceramic forms with various colors of dripped glazes reflect the conditions of chaos and disorder. Christina Forrer, a native Swiss artist who calls the US home, shows *Distant Affliction* (2020) a woven work made of cotton, wool, and watercolor. While not referencing any conflict directly, the figures in the work have a folkloric appearance, seemingly conjured from dark fantasy. Forrer's work may be read as symbolic of our current state of crisis and frustration. An anthropomorphic sculpture by Louis Osmosis is similarly obtuse. *HK Space Museum (Berghain Mix)* (2021) was inspired by the protests in Hong Kong as well as the legendary psychedelic techno club Berghain in Berlin. A central figure with a security mirror as a face is punctuated by small neon rods, recalling Renaissance imagery of Saint Sebastian. The neon sticks are reminiscent of shards of light in a nightclub and lasers used in the Hong Kong protests. The figure is symbolic of the dislocation and a fugue-like state that many people felt during the past year.

#BLM

While 2020 will be remembered for the COVID19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement became mainstream and formed a groundswell of support.³ This developed in response to shock and outrage over George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. While this kind of violence has been endemic in our country, today, cell phone videos provide evidence from an intimate distance. Peter Williams references Floyd's murder directly in two paintings, *Stand in Now or Later* and *Jesus Died For Somebodies Sins, But Not Mine*, both 2020. The latter depicts Floyd's ascension as a martyr saint with angels in the sky circling his halo. Williams based the painting on Medieval religious imagery paired with contemporary events.

Pat Phillips presents a work on paper that examines the correlation between no-knock warrants and violence against African Americans. *Untitled I'm just a no-knock warrant* (2020) shows the



Jameson Green
Numbers on the Board, 2021

warrant as a personified pencil-drawn figure looking up at a person, whom the viewer sees only from the shin down. The blue trouser leg and black Nike Gore-Tex boot that dwarfs the warrant illustrate the disparity in power between the police, those who are supposed to protect and serve, and their victims, who are often innocent. *Numbers on the Board* (2020), by the young artist Jameson Green, is perhaps the most unflinching depiction of violence against African Americans in this exhibition. The painting reads formally like a deposition, with a person of color (only the dreadlocks reveal the race) seen under a blood-stained sheet surrounded by the small numbers used to indicate details in crime scene photographs. Green's oil on panel could depict any of the hundreds of people of color brutalized by the police in America daily.

Further reverberations of this theme are spread throughout *This is America* in works that feature protest imagery. Cristina BanBan's *US Summer 2020* (2020) is a painting that represents protests related to BLM. The acrylic on canvas features a Herculean sea of bodies of varying colors, some holding megaphones and signs bearing the names of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Elijah McClain, as well as the heartbreaking "I CAN'T BREATHE." Other figures, mostly white, hold batons and wear police uniforms. The all-over composition suggests chaos, confusion, and movement. Ilana Savdie's *Public Displays of Insinuation* (2021) bridges references to resistance and invasion of all forms, from the structural and societal to the cellular. The central area of this painting appears to be an acrobatic human figure, with a hand gripping a pole that cuts across the foreground. The figure's arm is the most referential element, while the torso and head areas are abstracted. As if flying through the air, several legs and feet can be seen in what may be read as a reference to group action and the dynamic public response to various injustices. Complementary colors are juxtaposed in the composition, with pink and blue hues hovering alongside a large swath of textured green, an area where the artist used pigmented beeswax to create a rippling effect. Savdie's painting embodies the feelings and moments of the past year in American history without referencing any specificity.

David Leggett, Raelis Vasquez, and Patrick Quarm each represent figures of color in their work. Leggett's paintings use text and pop culture references. *Night Studio* (2020) features a KKK member, Mickey Mouse and Pluto riding a donkey, Fat Albert, and the text "STAY BLACK." Leggett was intrigued with the controversy over the cancellation of Philip Guston's retrospective and how the dialogue in the press and the art world didn't involve Black voices. His painting memorializes this moment and encourages voices of color to speak out. Quarm's three-dimensional painting *Dream of Reason* (2021) depicts a Black man asleep while sitting at a desk, his head resting on a pillow. Speech bubbles float upward from his head, the largest reading "GRIM!" While the text recalls Pop art, the artist based the composition on Goya's iconic painting *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* 1797–1800. This contemporary iteration sums up the nightmare of policing for people of color in this country. Raelis Vasquez paints a seated young couple looking downwards to something outside the edge of the canvas, perhaps the viewer. Vasquez implicates all of us in the discussion of racial violence and inequity, casting a mirror image and asking what we will do to work towards a solution.

#MeToo

One of the most important developments of recent years was the #MeToo movement.⁴ As a woman who grew up in the 1970s and 80s, I'm no stranger to catcalls, lewd jokes about women, and unwanted advances. It is a welcome development that men can no longer trespass women's bodies without legal and social repercussions. *This is America* includes several works that touch upon the theme of female experience and resistance. Zoë Buckman's *feather canyons* (2021), and *face to the bricks* (2020), are hanging sculptures of boxing gloves made from vintage textiles,



Zoë Buckman
feather canyons, 2021

particularly those most typically associated with women, such as tea towels and tablecloths. They embody the rage that some women have sublimated and are now feeling freer to express. Kelly Reemtsen also conveys the precariousness of female experience without using bodily imagery in *Look What You Made Me Do* (2020). Reemtsen is known for her uncompromising depictions of women in fancy dresses carrying household objects that suggest violence, such as axes and chainsaws. In this large oil on panel, the artist paints a white frock on a dress form, which can be read as a stand-in for a female subject. Blood spatter on the wall and floor suggest violence, but we never see the damage. Her tongue-in-cheek title suggests television shows such as *Dexter*, where violence is depicted and even glorified, as well as the music of Taylor Swift, a popular twenty-first-century feminist icon.

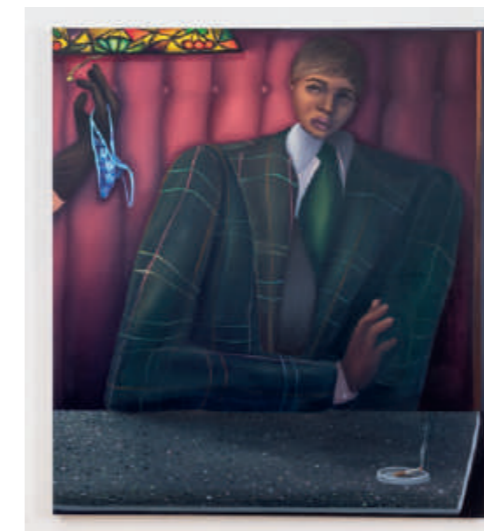
Using clay as a medium, Brie Ruais also comments on the female experience without creating an overtly figurative work. Her large ceramic sculpture *Locating Obfuscating*, 130 lbs (2021) is made with the precise amount of material as her body weight at the time of its creation, a silent commentary on the immense societal pressure on women to appear a certain way. Ruais kneads, pushes, and forces this material into a large circular form torn into pieces. A large red X crosses its surface; this may be interpreted as a protective force applied to the female body and is an evocative statement on violence against women. Boot prints and scrapes from her knuckles are a testament to the corporal engagement with the medium.

Several artists in *This is America* use the female body, arguably the center of the #MeToo movement, to comment on the gendered experience of women as both subjects and creators of art. Shona McAndrew's *Katye* (2021) is a painting that seeks to challenge what Laura Mulvey coined as "the male gaze."⁵ *Katye* is not a typical idealized female as we have grown conditioned to seeing throughout centuries of art history. She has pink hair, purple lips, and is tattooed. She is also larger than most women painted by male artists, defiantly expressing an alternative form of beauty. Alina Perez also creates a female subject that resists stereotypes of female nudes. In *Self Portrait as Nude with Mask* (2021) the artist draws herself nude, sitting in a striped chair⁶ and wearing a mask. Her stance is louche and confident: one leg is bent upwards, her tattooed legs and arms are clothed only with a pair of socks and boots. A full-frontal nude set in an oval shape, it recalls miniature portraits but challenges any notions of propriety with a confrontational and powerfully sexual woman.

Gender Trouble

Maybe, maybe not (2020) by Sojourner Truth Parsons, shows two female bodies in profile surrounded by smaller images of figures. The central and largest figure is pregnant with swollen breasts, clutches a teddy bear, and wears a large pink bow in her hair. The reflecting figure is not with child. Created in her typical graphic style, with a predominance of pink and red, the painting captures the decision that most women make at some point in their lives, whether or not to bear children. This is an especially important decision for an artist, given the demands of motherhood and the lack of equitable support with domestic labor. While the Equal Pay Act was passed in 1963, we know that at present women are still paid around seventy cents to the dollar of men. Having a child only exacerbates this issue with the lack of federally endorsed maternity and paternity care regulations.

Coady Brown
Gentlemen's Club, 2020



Coady Brown's painting *Gentlemen's Club* (2020) shows a woman in a suit and tie, her head too small for the body, suggesting that she is shrinking. The cause of the discomfort remains out of the picture: a hand and a blue thong suggest an undressed stripper performing for her. This has the hallmarks of a typical Brown painting: the clashing patterns, the ambiguous expression, as well as the tightly framed composition of the figure. An intriguing statement on the female experience, the painting represents the objectifier looking more uncomfortable than the objectified. Again, a new riff on dismantling the male gaze. An equally ambitious and ambiguous work by Chloe Chiasson is titled *Come and Take It* (2021) depicting two figures which literally grow out of the canvas.

Chiasson's figures read as female and sit so close that their white shirts bleed into each other, suggesting intimacy. They sit on the back panel of a pickup truck in a surreal landscape punctuated by both American and confederate flags. The artist describes her work as a response to a polarized gender stratification, where her figures often embody "spaces that historically demand that I, and other queer people like me, specifically cannot and should not exist."⁷

Genevieve Gagnard contributes a diptych mixed media work on panel titled *White Fragility* (2020). As a biracial artist, Gagnard is known for a practice that merges photography, installation, and mixed media work and explores the divide between races and gender in America. One panel of *White Fragility* features several debutantes, all Caucasian, wearing white gowns and surrounded by out-of-scale red roses. The other panel shows one white woman in profile, again surrounded by roses. A small BLACK LIVES MATTER pin on her sweater reveals the problem of white fragility:

after centuries of dominance, it isn't easy to accede power and wealth. In the same vein, a white savior complex cannot solve these deep-seated issues in America. Where then lies the solution?

Fact and Myth

Mira Schor is an artist known for an abiding engagement in feminism and politics. Her three *New York Times* intervention pieces are part of a daily practice that expresses our collective frustration and anger with recent debates over truth in the media. Schor, known for her painting and critical theory, uses pages from the iconic newspaper (now hated by the right and some on the left as well) to comment upon their coverage of current events. Her *New York Times Intervention*, "NEW YORK TIMES IS THIS REALLY THE HEADLINE?" August 28, 2020 (2020) comprises black and red text in all caps and white gesso areas where images are obfuscated. Schor replaces their headline "Trump Bolstered by Party He's Transformed" with Trump "VIOLATES HATCH ACT" followed by a caustic denunciation of the President's actions. Schor's interventions suggest that no news source can be trusted wholly; we all must read across platforms and understand how truth can be twisted with language.

Mark Thomas Gibson's ink on canvas *You Can't Kill Us All (The Battle of DC)* (2020) depicts a scene from current events when Donald Trump used police, federal agents, and unknown security mercenaries to violently clear Lafayette Park in Washington DC for a photo opportunity. Gibson, whose work is inspired by the history of political cartoons, writes this incident large. Like a twenty-first-century version of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) the scene is chaotic, with random limbs, a horse, and the now infamous upside-down Bible all on view. Gibson writes of the "ongoing American interest in myth-making, which has always justified cruelty in the name of the USA."⁸ In contrast to Gibson's canvas, Cosmo Whyte's *No Names in the Streets* (2021) is a haunting work notable for its formal economy. A burning police car rendered in charcoal is surrounded by short textual references connected by red lines to the central scene. The absence of bodies is both sinister and peaceful, portraying the result of people coming together in an act of civil disobedience, albeit without depicting any violence against Black bodies. While the artist conceived this painting before the January 6 insurrection, the text references the security guard, Officer Eugene Goodman, who used his body as a decoy to insurrectionists away from Congress. In contrast, Charles Edward Williams presents a peaceful scene, although one just as disturbing. In his oil on mylar work *Untitled* (2021) we see a Black man holding a flag standing next to another figure. Rendered mostly monochromatic, the protagonist's face and hand are among the only areas in color. Both men appear sheepish, as if they have lost any hope in what the flag stands for.



Will Cotton
Roping 2, 2021

Will Cotton's exquisite oil on canvas *Roping 2* (2021) features a cowboy throwing a lasso while riding a pink unicorn. Cotton comments on the opposing mythological status of both cowboys and unicorns, a metaphor for male/female dyad as well as immigrant/American identity. The sheer beauty and technical precision of this painting seduce the viewer into wholesale acceptance of these constructed myths, a welcome diversion from current events. Caleb Hahne depicts a similarly mythical scene: a Black man stands on top of a horse whose feet

are immersed in water. Holding a glinting sword and confronting the viewer straight on, he is flanked by a dove that hovers beside him, a call for peace in a time of great division. In addition, Asif Hoque joins this discussion of the masculine and the mythological with his oil on linen work *God of Love* (2021). A winged nude man and winged beast stand on a plateau surrounded by an indeterminate landscape. Both figures appear fearless and masculine, ready for action. The human figure's hybrid existence as a winged creature signals the artist's personal history as a Bangladeshi immigrant to Florida. The heroic quality of these works indicates our desire for contemporary heroes. Who will be the Malcolm X or Dr. King of the 2020s?

In Conclusion

What is the future of America? As a young country, we have a lot to learn from our colleagues abroad. Will there be a class or racial revolution? Will the country remain a superpower? There is much to be determined. It is not a stretch to believe that every artist in this exhibition has concerns over the future of the US. Some works in the exhibition are poignant in their envisioning of our future. For example, Cleon Peterson's acrylic on canvas painting *Suddenly Cruel* (2021), rendered in a rarefied palette of red, black, and white, reflects the struggle between many Americans and



Cleon Peterson
Suddenly Cruel, 2021

corporate culture. Often referred to as "the man," many of us are at the mercy of large multi-national conglomerates who often pay low wages despite reaping huge profits. Hiejun Yoo's *Lucky Striker* (2021) depicts an olivaceous landscape bisected by a road that doubles as a bowling lane. A large hand grips the setting sun, which doubles as a ball with the potential to knock out the ten pins. Yoo's canvas reminds us that we are hurtling towards the sixth extinction, draining our precious resources, including and perhaps most importantly, human capital. In her work, we might consider the large hand as "the man," with the bowling pins representing the people who do the heavy lifting to keep the country running.

Daniel Arsham's *Blue Calcite American Flag (Large)* (2016) is a fitting conclusion to this essay. The wall-based work immediately signals a flag due to its shape and gentle folds that seem to furl in the wind. The outlines of the stars and stripes remain but are transformed into a monochrome, calcified object that appears to be a relic, typical of Arsham's practice, sometimes referred to as fictional archaeology. A viewer can cast hundreds of years into the future and imagine stumbling upon this object, a remnant of a country founded on the principles of freedom, yet destroyed by greed and human nature, a federal Ozymandias. Arsham's sculpture reads as a semaphore, cautioning Americans to abide by our founding dogma that all are created equal.

¹ Artist's statement, p18.

² Artist's statement, p56.

³ The Black Lives Matter movement was founded in 2013 by three women—Alicia Garza, Patrice Cullors, and Opal Tometi—in response to Trayvon Martin's murder. See <https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/> for more information about the organization's history.

⁴ Born out of Ronan Farrow's *The New Yorker* exposé of movie mogul Harvey Weinstein's atrocious behavior, this movement gathered ferocity, becoming a global phenomenon. See <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories> for the full article.

⁵ See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009 (1989). The article was originally published in *Screen* journal in the UK in 1974 and subsequently published in the first edition of this title in 1989.

⁶ The seated subject is reminiscent of Alice Neel's *Self-portrait at eighty*, 1984, which is in the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian, Washington DC

⁷ Artist's statement, p32.

⁸ Artist's statement, p42.

Ilana Savdie

[Colombian, b. 1986]

Public Displays of Insinuation, 2021Oil, acrylic, and pigmented beeswax on canvas
mounted on panel

48 × 38 in, 122 × 96.5 cm

*"I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails."
—Gloria Anzaldua*

When landscapes are owned and not quite by us, our history is inherited in our bones, our cartilage, our diabetes and heart disease, our coded language, our ritual retellings, our inherited dread. Community that finds citizenship in the margins is the invented landscape somewhere between us and them. Shifting identities are intact in their state of flux, forever in a state of becoming. I am interested in the carnage that happens in those liminal spaces where the folkloric and the biological can cohere to propel power for those of us deemed impure, inconvenient, and culturally complicated.

Painting serves as a reminder that I have a body, beyond the teeth that grind and fingertips that add to cart. I can pervert, rescale, reconfigure, and reroute the paths of power in figures that co-exist intimately on the canvas as contrasting textures, gestures, and colors. I see these gestures as organs, fractured bones, unbound parts that displace the equilibrium of power and dependence.



The High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA (2019); The Drawing Center, New York, NY (2019); The Somerset House, London, UK (2019); Museum of Latin American Art, Los Angeles, CA (2017); Atlanta Contemporary, Atlanta, GA (2016); Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France (2016); and the National Gallery of Jamaica, Kingston, Jamaica (2014). His work is in the public collection of the High Museum, 21c Collection, Hallmark Art Collection, and Pérez Art Museum Miami.

	
Charles Edward Williams	

Infinity, 2021
Oil on mylar
36 × 44 in
91.5 × 112 cm
Framed dimensions:
41½ × 49½ in
105.5 × 125.5 cm

Side A (Officer) Side B (Young John Lewis), 2021
Oil on mylar
Two pieces, each:
8¾ × 9 in
22 × 23 cm
Framed dimensions, each:
22¼ × 22¼ in
56.5 × 56.5 cm

Charles Edward Williams [b. 1984, Georgetown, SC] lives and works in Greensboro, North Carolina. Creating compelling imagery in oils, video/film, and sound installations, Williams's work investigates current, historical-cultural events related to racism and suggestive stereotypes formed within individuals. His works define self–representation of human emotive responses that lie within cultural identity and reveal tension to expose the complexities within our sociopolitical environments. Through his visions, we are encouraged to engage in self-examination, to question false boundaries that separate us, and view the inner connectedness of our common existence.

Williams holds a BFA from the Savannah College of Art and Design, Atlanta, GA and an MFA from the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC. He has had solo exhibitions at the Urban Institute of Contemporary Art, Grand Rapids, MI and Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC, among others. Williams has exhibited in group exhibitions at institutions including the Weatherspoon Museum, Greensboro, NC and the Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC

Permanent collections include the North Carolina Museum of Art, NC; the Gibbes Museum, SC; Knoxville Museum of Art, TN; Polk Museum of Art, FL; and the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art, NJ. Williams also received the Riley Institute Diversity Leadership Award from the State of South Carolina to develop enriching art programs within local communities.

	
Peter Williams	
<i>Jesus Died For Somebodies Sins, But Not Mine</i> , 2020 Oil and graphite on canvas 60 × 72 in 152.5 × 183 cm	

Stand In Now Or Later, 2020
Oil and graphite on canvas
60 × 72 in
152.5 × 183 cm

Peter Williams [b. 1952, Nyack, NY] lives and works in Wilmington, DE. For more than forty-five years, Williams has chronicled current and historical events, interspersing pictorial narratives with personal anecdotes and fictional characters to create paintings about the diverse experiences of Black Americans. With boldness and humor, he tackles the darkest of subjects, including, but not limited to, police brutality, lynching, slavery, mass incarceration, and other realms of racial oppression. Williams uses cultural criticism to form new creation myths, retelling the history of America from fresh and cosmic perspectives.

Williams recently retired from his position as Senior Professor in the Fine Arts Department at the University of Delaware. Williams earned his MFA from Maryland Institute College of Art and his BFA from Minneapolis College of Art and Design. He is the recipient of the 2020 Artists' Legacy Foundation Artist Award and a 2021 Guggenheim Fellowship in Fine Arts.

	
Hiejin Yoo	

The Lucky Striker, 2021
Gouache and oil on canvas
35 × 38 in
89 × 96.5 cm

Hiejin Yoo [b. 1987, Munster, Germany] lives and works in Los Angeles, CA. Her work has been exhibited at Half Gallery, NY and LA; Paul Kasmin Gallery, NY; Blum and Poe, LA; Almine Rech, London, UK; Fredric Snitzer Gallery, FL; and Woaw Gallery, HK. Her work has recently been included in High Museum of Art in Atlanta, GA, the Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection (The Bunker) FLA, and Hort Family Collection, NY.

Yoo earned an MFA at the University of California Los Angeles (2018), a BA from Seoul Women’s University, and a Post Baccalaureate/BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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