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LIFE & ARTS | IDEAS | ICONS

New Art for a New Year

Five artists featured in upcoming exhibitions share what they are looking forward to seeing and doing in 2021.



Bisa Butler. 'Anaya with Oranges' (2017).

PHOTO: BISA BUTLER. PHOTO BY MARGARET FOX

By Susan Delson

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The pandemic wreaked havoc on museums' exhibition schedules in 2020, and the 2021 calendar remains somewhat unpredictable. But a number of expansive, well-considered shows are planned for this year, including solo exhibitions spotlighting innovative contemporary artists. Several of those artists shared thoughts on the past year and what they're looking forward to in 2021. (Dates may change, so it's best to check with museums before visiting.)



Sean Scully, 'Untitled (Window)' (2017).

PHOTO: ELISABETH BERNSTEIN; SEAN SCULLY

Intense physicality and an expressive hand give the geometric abstractions of Sean Scully, 75, a resonantly human touch. His retrospective, “ Sean Scully : The Shape of Ideas,” is slated to open in June at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Much of Mr. Scully’s studio time last year was devoted to his continuing “Landline” series of paintings, in which horizontal bands of varying colors evoke landscapes and horizons. He also worked on “more nihilistic, pessimistic paintings, with black squares in the middle. Which I find very symbolic of the time,” he said. In 2021, he is looking forward to “ Jasper Johns : Mind/Mirror;” a nearly 500-work retrospective that will open Sept. 29 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

For Bisa Butler, the term that best describes the current moment is “hyperdrive.” After months of focused studio time, “I feel my own mind so full of ideas, projects and future collaborations,” she said, noting that the lockdown “has emboldened me to connect with people I admire.” Ms. Butler, 47, reinterprets vintage photographs of African-Americans as oversize, brilliantly colored quilts, playing pattern against pattern and layering fabrics to create nuanced tones. “Bisa Butler: Portraits” opened at the Art Institute of Chicago in November, a few days before the museum shut down; the show will continue when the Art Institute reopens.

Among the artists Ms. Butler is hoping to see more of in 2021 are Faith Ringgold, Romare Bearden and El Anatsui. She is also looking forward to the emergence of new work by other artists, noting that “as these projects come to fruition, we will see the creative abundance of the lockdown.”



A wall of canvases from Pat Steir’s installation ‘Color Wheel’ at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington D.C.

PHOTO: LEE STALSWORTH. COURTESY OF PAT STEIR AND LEVY GORVY

Pat Steir, 80, creates abstract paintings by pouring, splashing and flinging color at the canvas. Often an element of chance is skillfully factored into the process. Between uninterrupted studio time and postponed exhibitions, “the lockdown is a kind of dream and nightmare in one,” she said. When the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. reopens, “Pat Steir: Color Wheel”—a massive, 30-painting installation spanning the circular inner gallery on the museum’s second floor—will resume its interrupted run.

Ms. Steir particularly admires two artists, Mickalene Thomas and Barbara Kruger, who manage the difficult task of making great art that is also political. “Mickalene Thomas: A Moment’s Pleasure,” a two-story immersive work, is currently installed at the Baltimore Museum of Art, which is scheduled to reopen Jan. 16. A retrospective of Ms. Kruger’s work is expected to debut later this year at the Art Institute of Chicago.



Dawoud Bey’s photograph ‘Two Girls from a Marching Band, Harlem, NY 1990.’

PHOTO: DAWOUD BEY AND COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, SEAN KELLY GALLERY, STEPHEN DAITER GALLERY, AND RENA BRANSTEN GALLERY.

Over a four-decade career, photographer Dawoud Bey, 67, has portrayed members of underrepresented communities and explored aspects of American history, including the Underground Railroad and the 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, Ala. For him, 2020 was “a very difficult year.” Last spring the lockdown halted work on his current series, which focuses on “the plantation experience—the places where African-Americans first enter the American narrative,” he said. But the pause also had an unexpected upside, giving the artist time to prepare a new book, “Street Portraits,” which will be published this spring.

A major exhibition of his work, “Dawoud Bey: An American Project,” is currently on view at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and will move to the Whitney on April 17. In 2021, he is looking forward to the fifth iteration of the Prospect New Orleans Triennial, postponed from last year and now scheduled to open Oct. 23. Mr. Bey sees this as “the year where art, and the institutions that exhibit art, become even more engaged and reflective of the larger social world that we live in.”



Shahzia Sikander, 'Hood's Red Rider No. 2' (1997).

PHOTO: COURTESY MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM, COLLECTION OF SUSAN AND LEW MANILOW

Shahzia Sikander, 51, is known for bringing traditional Indo-Persian miniature painting into contemporary art. Debuting June 18 at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York, “Shahzia Sikander: Extraordinary Realities” explores the first 15 years of her career, which brought the artist from Pakistan to the U.S. With the pandemic slowdown, “I am in this fortunate place of reflection,” Ms. Sikander said, thinking about how, going forward, she can “open up more vantage points” with paintings and sculptures that are “becoming more allegorical.”

On the museum calendar, Ms. Sikander is looking forward to “Alice Neel : People Come First,” opening March 22 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “I want to see her watercolors, especially the erotic ones,” Ms. Sikander said. She is also looking forward to more work by Pakistani-born artist Salman Toor, whose first solo museum show runs through April 4 at the Whitney. But her greatest hope for 2021 is more fundamental: “I want art that inspires desire over fear.”

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