

7 hot NYC artists you need to know right now

By Barbara Hoffman, David Kaufman and Marisa Mazria-Katz | May 12, 2015

A new generation of star artists is taking charge in NYC — and the world is paying attention. These virtuosos include a landscape artist who's grown a grove of reflective trees in the middle of Gotham. A Brooklyn pioneer with serious celeb cred. A prize-winning portraitist who's a favorite of the first lady. And a heroic satirist challenging race and class to wild acclaim. They're changing the face of New York's cultural scene, and luring curators from across the globe just in time for Frieze.

KEHINDE WILEY **38, painter and sculptor**



Kehinde Wiley (left) and Swizz Beatz. Photo: Sam Deitch/BFAnyc

ART CRED: The LA-born, NY-based Wiley uses Old Masters techniques to create heroic portraits of people of color — both hip-hop stars and the men and women he meets on the street. His acclaimed works have been

stealing the show everywhere from Fox TV's "Empire" (check the :48 second mark in the clip below) to major collections around the world. Some 60 of his pieces are now on display at the Brooklyn Museum, where Michael Jackson once discovered one of Wiley's equestrian paintings and tracked the artist down for what he calls "a series of fruitful conversations."



Bound, 2015

Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York

FINDING HIS MUSE: "I grew up going to museums and not seeing images of black and brown people," Wiley tells Alexa. "As I began studying art, I was fascinated with the history of portrait painting. Many of the people in my paintings come from economically depressed and underserved communities. I think it's important for me to shine a light on those places."

ON FRIEZE: This year on Randalls Island, Wiley will show two large portraits of farmers from a small village in Cameroon he visited two years ago. "It's kind of hard to describe," he says, "but it's going to be epic."

— *Barbara Hoffman*

HANK WILLIS THOMAS

39, multimedia artist



Thomas kicks back at his Midtown studio, in front of his “Lightsaber (Diamond)” piece. Photo: Victoria Will

ART CRED: It’s already been a banner year for conceptual artist Thomas, who nabbed a prestigious International Center of Photography award and was appointed by Mayor Bill de Blasio to the NYC Public Design Commission. Thomas’ electrifying work, the latest of which is on view at Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea, has been acquired by dozens of institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim and the Whitney.

STRONG ROOTS: With parents like MacArthur Award-winning photographer Deborah Willis and physicist and Black Panther Hank Thomas, inspiration was never far. “To have two parents that never lived by the rules society dictated put the onus on me to create my own path,” he tells Alexa. “They taught me to be free and not fearful of the world.”



Branded Head, 2003

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

ON FRIEZE: For Thomas, Frieze is a much-needed respite from a merciless winter. “The fair is a breath of fresh air manifested through creativity,” he says. The New Jersey-born artist, who will have photo-derived sculptures in both the Goodman Gallery and Jack Shainman Gallery’s booths, is anticipating a bevy of “blooming flowers on the island surrounding a refreshing group of young and contemporary artists.”

— *Marisa Mazria Katz*

TERESITA FERNÁNDEZ
46, installation artist and sculptor



Fernández strikes a pose beneath her new “Fata Morgana” installation in Madison Square Park. Photo: Victoria Will / Hai and makeup: Yoshie Kubota

ART CRED: As her bold new outdoor project at Madison Square Park and her recent solo exhibition at Mass MoCA attest, Fernández’s work is known for its stunning and immersive grandeur. She has received both a MacArthur Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship, and was appointed by President Obama to serve on the US Commission of Fine Arts from 2011 until 2014.

IN THE AIR: This summer, Fernández brings the largest sculptural installation ever to Madison Square Park. “‘Fata Morgana’ is a monumental, golden, mirror-polished canopy that hovers over the walkways in the park so that visitors see themselves reflected in its surface as they walk underneath,” she tells Alexa. “It distorts the surroundings and functions like a luminous portrait of urban activity.”



Madison Square Park installation rendering FATA

Courtesy the artist, Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco

ON FRIEZE: The Miami-born Fernández, who works from her Brooklyn studio, takes the ferry to Randalls Island to check on the installation of her work at Lehmann Maupin Gallery. But she doesn't linger all day at Frieze: "When everyone in the art world is at the fair, you can actually get a lot of work done in your studio."
— *Alexa editors*

MICKALENE THOMAS
44, artist and filmmaker



Thomas stays in focus at her Brooklyn studio, standing before her “Untitled #12” painting; she created her “Portrait of Sidra” (inset below) with acrylic and oil paints, enamel and rhinestones. Photo: Victoria Will / HAIR AND MAKEUP : Jas Lee for OCC & ORIBE

ART CRED: Thomas’s 2012-13 solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum is among the dozens of venues around the world where her work has shined, including the Studio Museum in Harlem, MoMA PS1 and Art Basels (Switzerland, Miami and Hong Kong).

BOMBASTIC: Thomas, who graduated from Yale and takes pride in challenging gender and beauty stereotypes with her sparkling, yet serious paintings, was recently honored by Bomb, an art magazine. “I always want to make use of platforms like my Bomb award to promote other artists who I think are making important work, who don’t receive the recognition they deserve, and who inspire me — mostly female, black and queer artists,” Thomas says.

ON FRIEZE: “I will definitely visit Frieze,” she tells Alexa, noting that her work will be presented there this year via Lehmann Maupin Gallery.



*Solange Knowles and Mickalene Thomas.
The Image Gate/Getty Images*



Photo: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Kenneth I. Schaner, © 2014 Mickalene Thomas/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York © Mickalene Thomas

Her portrait of Michelle Obama was displayed in the National Portrait Gallery — a first-ever for a first lady — and a short film she made about her mother made its HBO debut last year.

This summer, her pieces will also be in a show at the African American Museum in Philadelphia, the National Portrait Gallery in DC, the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco, the Museo Bardini in Florence and, of course, Art Basel.

— *Alexa editors*

DUSTIN YELLIN
39, sculptor and painter



Yellin presides over his Pioneer Works compound in Red Hook, Brooklyn; he is best known for paper-and-glass collages, like his “Psycho geography 31.” Photo: Victoria Will

ART CRED: Best known for his large-scale three-dimensional paper collages suspended in glass, Yellin is also the founder of Pioneer Works — a 24,000-square-foot art and science “laboratory” in Brooklyn that incubates artists and presents cultural exhibitions and classes. “I liked the idea of a place where friends could come together to make music, art and film — an all-in-one interdisciplinary space,” he tells Alexa. Yellin’s own work reached a new critical high this winter when his sculptures were spotlighted as part of the New York City Ballet’s Art Series initiative.

STAR POWER: Already one of Brooklyn’s art-world scene-makers, Yellin’s name recognition hit new levels in 2013 during his rumored yearlong romance with Michelle Williams. His annual spring Pioneer Works gala lures young art, fashion and media luminaries. But Yellin says he views social and commercial success as more opportunity than accomplishment. “Selling art helped me establish Pioneer Works, which is now a thriving nonprofit,” he notes.



Psychogeography 31 2013
Courtesy of the Artist

ON FRIEZE: Yellin’s Pioneer Works will host New York’s first-ever contemporary African art fair, 1:54, during Frieze week this year. The fair is a natural evolution for Yellin, who views his creative process as open-ended. “I am working on a performance piece and writing a movie with a good friend,” he says of his upcoming projects. “I like to surf, I like to write, I like to make love — everything that’s good in the world.”
— *Alexa editors*

XAVIERA SIMMONS
40, multimedia artist



Simmons, photographed at the Bronx Borough Courthouse, takes a stand before her graphic “Continent” piece, featuring acrylic paint on wood. Photo: Victoria Will / Hair and makeup: Jas Lee for OCC & ORIBE

ART CRED: Since completing her studies at Bard College and the Whitney, Simmons has shown her multimedia work across the globe, including major institutions like the Guggenheim and the Studio Museum in Harlem. Simmons was awarded the Foundation for Contemporary Arts (Robert Rauschenberg) grant in January of 2015.

CITY AS CANVAS: Born and raised in NYC, the landscape of the city remains an active part of Simmons’ thinking. “It’s almost like a little brain where you have so many different psychologies happening inside of a small space,” she says. “The effects of that on landscape, on image-making and on sculpture definitely influence how I think about making things in my studio. I think of my studio as its own little brain, its own little island.”



Index Four, Composition Two 2013
Xaviera Simmons

ON FRIEZE: As a featured Frieze artist, Simmons has created a sound installation that visitors can listen to on iPods while wandering the fair. The piece is a mix of Spanish, French and Italian, and, as Simmons explains to Alexa, “is about a buildup of language: language as cinematic, and the cinematic in terms of landscape and desire.”

— *Alexa editors*

ELI SUDBRACK

47, painter and installation artist



Sudbrack poses in front of his “Birds Sing Tribute to Sand Mountain After Twilight Acid Rain” painting at his studio in Queens. Photo: Adam Golfer

ART CRED: One half of the artist duo Assume Vivid Astro Focus, Sudbrack’s phantasmagorical work first moved into the spotlight more than a decade ago with a show at the illustrious NYC gallery Deitch Projects. Since then, his rambunctious installations have included a Public Art Fund-supported floorscape in Central Park’s Skate Circle, and been featured in dozens of museum shows at venues like the New Museum and Moscow’s Garage Center for Contemporary Art.

A PUBLIC MOVE: Although public installations have always featured prominently in Sudbrack’s 15 years of practice, the Rio-born artist is now making a concerted effort to step outside galleries and institutions and bring his art to a larger audience. “There is spontaneity, physicality and a surprise factor to working outdoors that is missing in a gallery setting,” he says. “And ultimately,” Sudbrack adds, “the dream for me has become to make work that gives back to a community.”



The Space Between Now and Then Group show at OMR, Mexico City, Mexico, 2011
Photo by Natalie Kovacs / Courtesy Eli Sudbrack

ON FRIEZE: While he says fairs “are always a bit of a funny place for artists, particularly with their tendency to focus on trends,” Sudbrack still plans a jaunt to Randall’s Island to see the Cecilia Alemani-curated Frieze Projects. And he’ll be showing his own work at next month’s Art Basel.

— *Marisa Mazria Katz*