

# ELLE

## 14 OF THE MOST BRILLIANT, UNEXPECTED, AND POWERFUL WOMEN IN ART RIGHT NOW

By Molly Langmuir and curated by Cary Leitzes  
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From a painter hitting her stride at the age of 100 to a 35-year-old gallerist/artist/studio manager at the center of New York's buzziest scene, these 14 female visionaries are carving out fresh, fearless ways to rule the art world—and they're doing it their way.



### **Xaviera Simmons, the Space Explorer**

In 1998, Xaviera Simmons joined an order of Buddhist monks on a walking pilgrimage that followed the transatlantic slave trade route through the States and (after a flight) back through Africa, an experience that "I'm always thinking about," she says, "in terms of what it taught me about the ramifications and privileges of space." In one of Simmons's photographs, she's fishing in a shallow Colorado river, her vivid dress dangling in the water—the idea being, she says, to make the viewer wonder, What does it mean to have a character like that inside a landscape like that? And photography is only one of Simmons's many mediums. This past October, she choreographed a dance piece that included film, sound, and even sugar-coated blueberries. "My whole practice questions how I can now claim space within different practices," she says. "Most of us aren't born knowing how to claim space. We have to continuously practice opening up different landscapes and learning to feel comfortable."

*Xaviera Simmons in her Brooklyn studio with a 2012 photograph from her Index series behind her. Styled by Samira Nasr. Patric Shaw*

## Carmen Herrera, the Undersung Hero

Up a flight of paint-splattered stairs in New York City's Flatiron district lies the studio apartment in which painter Carmen Herrera, 100, has lived and worked for the past 55 years, gradually distilling her ideas into abstract canvases—geometric fields of vibrant colors segmented by stark, straight lines—whose power is only amplified by their extreme simplicity.

Raised in Cuba, the youngest of seven children, in 1938 Herrera married an American, Jesse Loewenthal, and moved with him to New York, where she began to get serious about painting. In 1948, after the couple relocated to Paris, Herrera fell in with a group of expats experimenting in abstraction, a school loosely known as the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, and exhibited alongside Piet Mondrian and Josef Albers. Still, her work never sold. "She had three things working against her," says Tony Bechara, a fellow artist and longtime friend. "She was a woman. She was Cuban. And she was shy." The rejection stung, and yet, "it liberated me," Herrera says, to make art as she pleased. Finally, four years after Loewenthal's death in 2000, a gallerist planning a show of female geometric painters visited Herrera's apartment and was astounded by what he found; he not only put her in the exhibition but also linked her with megacollectors like Estrellita Brodsky and Agnes Gund. Somehow, her moment had arrived. ("They took their time," she says dryly.) Her paintings are now part of the collections of MoMA and the Tate Modern; next fall, the Whitney Museum of American Art will host a solo show with four decades of her work, starting in the '40s. "That's the chapter when she should start entering your art history textbook," says Whitney curator Dana Miller. "There is this mythic aspect to her biography, but even with no backstory, the work speaks for itself."

## Joan Jonas, the Experimental Alchemist

Joan Jonas, a diminutive woman with a forceful presence, reconfirmed her status as a high priestess of the avant-garde earlier this year with *They Come to Us Without a Word*, an ecologically themed multimedia installation and performance piece that was arguably the biggest hit of the 2015 Venice Biennale—"a triumph," declared the *New York Times*.

Originally trained in sculpture, by the late '60s Jonas was ensconced in the experimental art scene of downtown New York and was exploring a host of other mediums. In the 1970 performance piece *Mirror Check*, she examined herself, naked, with a mirror, intending to present a woman reclaiming her body. In the 1972 video piece *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*, the artist, wearing a doll-like mask, caricatured femininity with a series of dainty movements. Jonas's interests, though, encompass not just the roles women play but also folk tales, rituals, and humans' impact on the natural world. The result is an ever-expanding collection of works that incorporate everything from drawing to soundscape to projection, often all at once, and have an almost mesmerizing sensory power. "Before I could think of myself as an artist, I had to find my own language," she says. "I'm still experimenting with how to make images."

## Teresita Fernández, the Micro/Macro Master

During the daytime, *Fata Morgana*, a mirrored canopy made of 229 perforated golden discs installed above the walkways of New York's Madison Square Park, leaves dappled patterns of sunlight on the concrete tiles below. At night, it reflects the light of passing cars, turning regular city sights into stars. "I'm interested in making people think about what they're seeing or not seeing," Teresita Fernández says. "And about why that is." She also explores the way seemingly opposed concepts, like darkness and light or the vast and the tiny, are intertwined. For a 2014 solo show in the cavernous space of MASS MoCA, she installed 40,000 tiny pieces of graphite along the walls; this past fall at Lehmann Maupin gallery, her Rorschach-blot-shaped sculptures in ceramic, bronze, and concrete were both airy and densely heavy. "She wants viewers in a state of active attention," says MASS MoCA curator Denise Markonish. If you spend time beneath *Fata Morgana*, for example, as time passes, "the shadows shift and you understand more about how Earth rotates," Markonish explains. "It's a kind of sublime experience you get to be inside of."

## Catherine Opie, the Unflinching Observer

In one of Catherine Opie's early-'90s self-portraits, the word *pervert* has been cut across her chest. "The LGBT community were calling themselves normal, but anybody in the leather community was abnormal," the photographer recalls. "That binary was upsetting to me." Ever since, she's been exploring the creation of identity and the shifting contours of community, focusing her lens on Malibu surfers and empty freeway overpasses; most recently, she's taken on both Elizabeth Taylor's home and numerous national parks (intentionally blurred: "I'm always trying to recategorize the iconic"). "Her work makes an impact," says Jennifer Blessing, who curated Opie's 2008 Guggenheim solo show and considers her a master in the vein of Walker Evans. That will certainly be true next month, when Opie's troika of solo shows open at the Hammer and MOCA museums in Los Angeles and at Lehmann Maupin gallery in New York. "If you make powerful work, people assume you're, I don't know, edgier than you are," says Opie, who lives in L.A. with painter Julie Burleigh and their son. "I'm much funnier and more sociable than my photographs."

## Anne Pasternak, the Art Activator

"I want people to immediately have their hearts racing and think, What is this?" says Anne Pasternak, the new director of the Brooklyn Museum, which along with having the most diverse audience in the city also boasts a 1.5 million-work collection, ranging from seventeenth-century Dutch portraits to Warhol silk-screens. Pasternak has plans to revamp the museum's permanent collection space and invite artists to produce more experimental projects, and envisions new programs that will take place outside of the museum's monumental Beaux-Arts building. The latter was a skill she honed at Creative Time, the public art nonprofit that she headed for 20 years, growing its budget from \$350,000 to \$5 million and, along the way, supporting ever more ambitious projects, including, in 2013, a Nick Cave performance piece with 30 raffia horses in Grand Central and, last year, Kara Walker's enormous sugar sphinx in Brooklyn's Domino Sugar Factory. "How can we create programming that brings people together to have conversations about the important issues of today?" Pasternak says. "I am an evangelist for art's capacity to not just prompt personal moments of reflection but help people look at history without blinders."

## The Showrunners

Meet Hannah Hoffman, Michelle Papillion, Maggie Kayne, Davida Nemeroff, and Mieke Marple: Five L.A. gallerists making the case—one show at a time—that when it comes to art, West is best.

Having honed her skills at New York's Gavin Brown's Enterprise, **Hannah Hoffman** opened her self-titled Hollywood gallery in 2013, right as the L.A. art-scene revival was gaining steam. Exhibiting both cutting-edge pieces (a bisecting PVC curtain by Rey Akdogan) and the work of established influencers (painted photographs by Gerhard Richter) fits in perfectly with her original goal: "to do shows that don't look like what you think a young gallery show should look like today."

In 2014, **Michelle Papillion** moved her four-year-old space, Papillion, from downtown L.A. to Leimert Park, an area so dense with creatives she compares it to the Harlem Renaissance. The gallery has since become "a scene all unto itself," she says, where seasoned collectors mingle with local musicians, dancers, and DJs. "I love diversity, which is why no two artists in my program are the same," she says.

**Maggie Kayne** burst into L.A.'s art world in 2011, when she opened Kayne Griffin Corcoran with heavy hitters Bill Griffin and James Corcoran. In 2013, the gallery moved from Santa Monica into a 15,000-square-foot mid-Wilshire location that befits its blue-chip roster (Kayne, Griffin, and Corcoran have hosted shows by the likes of David Lynch and James Turrell). Gradually, Kayne has come to believe that "L.A. is the most relevant place for art right now. It's open to shifts in perspective in a way New York is not."

"I opened the gallery as an artistic experiment," says mixed-media artist **Davida Nemeroff** of Night Gallery, which she launched in 2010 in a Lincoln Heights strip mall. It had black walls, was open only from 10 P.M. to 2 A.M., and quickly became *the* spot to see provocative work (and the cool kids). A year in, she partnered with **Mieke Marple**, and in 2013, they moved downtown into a large warehouse—and began to hold daytime hours. What does Marple see in the gallery's future? "World domination," she says.

## **Margaret Lee, the Triple Threat**

Multihyphenate Margaret Lee not only creates photographs, installations, and sculptures that flirt with the line between real and not real (think: a photo of a Marni boot with a lifelike, hand-painted watermelon or a sculpture with a dangling chrome banana) but is also a studio manager to one Cindy Sherman (since 2003) and a gallerist in her own right.

In 2011, Lee and Oliver Newton, now her husband, founded 47 Canal to facilitate the wild aspirations of a group of fellow self-declared outsiders without art-school degrees, who'd recently coalesced into a kind of scene. "They were creating work on their own terms and creating an audience for it, too," says Matthew Higgs, the director of the nonprofit White Columns, which gave Lee her first solo show. "So many of them have gone on to do extraordinary things." That includes Lee, a daughter of Korean immigrants who grew up in Yonkers, New York, hoping for "any glimpse of culture."

This month at Art Basel Miami Beach, she'll both run 47 Canal's booth and join an all-female show curated by collectors Mera and Donald Rubell. "She's found a great solution for being an artist in the twenty-first century," Higgs says.

## **Agnes Gund and Samantha Boardman, Studio in a School**

P.S. 123, a struggling Harlem grade school where many hallways are decorated with wild, atmospheric drawings, is just one of 200 city sites currently served by the nonprofit Studio in a School, which hires artists to teach art to kids and was founded by Agnes Gund in 1977 after she learned the city was virtually eliminating arts education (today Studio reaches nearly 30,000 students a year). This type of public-spiritedness is typical of Gund, a longtime philanthropist and legendary arts patron. "She has empathy, a fierce intelligence, enormous drive, and she's fun," says Clifford Ross, an artist and former Studio board member. "She pulls people into her path."

One such person is Samantha Boardman, a psychiatrist married to real-estate developer Aby Rosen, a prominent collector in her own right, and now a frequent Studio donor. "Aggie was a visionary in realizing that so many different qualities are enhanced by creativity," Boardman says. Adds Gund, "From the beginning, we've wanted to impart that there's no good and bad when it comes to expression. If you have a dog with five legs, sometimes it's cuter than a dog with four."