

# BEST IN SHOW

*Six artists who are taking their work to a new level.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEVI MANDEL



## JULIE CURTISS

Julie Curtiss dates the beginning of her self-avowed “Medusa complex” to the afternoon she discovered a braid of her mom’s hair in an old suitcase in their Paris apartment. Her mother was going gray, but the braid was brown. “It was like a piece of herself that still remained young,” says the 36-year-old French-Vietnamese artist, a graduate of l’Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the Art Institute of Chicago, who was a teenager at the time. “It was cut off but kind of alive.” Tresses, piled, twisted, cascading, and coiled, figure prominently in Curtiss’s darkly humorous, surreal dreamscapes and sculptures that are focused primarily on the female body and psyche. “Painting hair, for me, is kind of meditative, in the way that I focus on something and try to reveal its pattern,” she says. Working from her imagination, Curtiss, who counts René Magritte, the Chicago Imagists, and Nicole Eisenman as influences, builds her images in crude drawings on tracing paper until she arrives at the composition she’s after. Her fine, repeated brushstrokes—and their eye-popping, visceral graphic punch—command attention, as seen in several paintings in progress at her Brooklyn studio, some of which will be included in her New York solo show at Anton Kern, in April. (She drew rave reviews for her solo outing last May at Various Small Fires, in Los Angeles.) One depicts “a weird panorama” of a pair of legs, wearing pointy heels, lying inert in the grass under a blue sky, waiting, observing, or possibly dead—it’s not really clear. Because she crops her subjects closely to show only parts of bodies, such as conical breasts or gnarled, manicured hands, “there’s so much left out that you feel you’re just seeing a fragment of a puzzle,” Curtiss says. “I like that ambiguity.” DIANE SOLWAY

## VAUGHN SPANN

As a boy raised by his grandparents in Orange, New Jersey, Vaughn Spann made pictures of the things and people he saw. So he was surprised to discover that little of the life he depicted showed up in his art history textbooks. Once enrolled in Yale’s M.F.A. program, from which he graduated in 2018, the Newark-based artist set out to paint what he knew, exploring the contemporary realities of African-American life. Spann, 26, was included last year in group shows at Almine Rech, in London; David Castillo, in Miami; and Night Gallery, in Los Angeles. He also



had his first solo show, in New York, at Half Gallery. He has developed “a pluralistic practice,” as he calls it, devoted to both figurative and symbol-laden abstract work that uses not just canvas but also silk, paper, and terrycloth, which he stitches together with an industrial sewing machine. The idea, he says, is to create “an amalgamation of materials that have charged messages about the discarded, the abject, the beautiful, and the sublime.” ANTWAUN SARGENT »



## JANIVA ELLIS

In 2012, Janiva Ellis took a break from painting. She left the California College of the Arts and went to New York hoping to find inspiration. When it didn't come, she moved back home to Hawaii to think through her feelings of isolation, which she was convinced stemmed from having grown up in "a place where I didn't know any black person until I was 18." By 2017, the artist, who is now 31, had returned to New York, and to painting. Her solo show, at 47 Canal, explored doubt as a pressure cooker—"the hysterical moments when you realize your perceptions of safety are false"—through the lens of memory, race, and media that informed her childhood. Soon after, she emerged as one of the breakout stars of the 2018 New Museum Triennial, with three seemingly pastoral scenes subverted with pure mayhem. In the cartoonish *Doubt Guardian 2*, a black woman stands in a lush, grassy field, her fist clenched in despair, as she watches what seems to be a lobotomized, sleepwalking black figure carrying a lamb around its neck. Like much of Ellis's art, the painting is a dizzying, psychologically astute mash-up of faces, masks, media, and religious references that, says Ellis, "reconcile who I am, how I feel, and how I'm perceived." A.S.



## ELLE PÉREZ

As a teenager, the Bronx-born Elle Pérez began taking pictures of punk nightclubs. After seeing the images online, a high-school classmate, Eleanor Condo (daughter of the artist George Condo), told Pérez, who prefers the pronouns "they" and "them," "You should definitely photograph my sweet 16." The \$500 from that job, Pérez recalls, allowed them to take a lighting class, and the ensuing support offered by the city agency Educational Alliance helped land the artist at the Maryland Institute College



of Art. Pérez, who went on to earn an M.F.A. at Yale, has been on a swift ascent ever since; this year they will present new work in the Whitney Biennial and older pieces at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Their breakout show was at 47 Canal, in March 2018, where Pérez presented a suite of breathtakingly intimate portraits and still lifes focused on private moments. Seeing those pictures, then MoMA PS1 director Klaus Biesenbach offered Pérez a show, which took place there a few months later. "I wanted to photograph immediate things in my life," says Pérez, 29, whose subject matter often relates to the queer and trans body, "but make them work on a formal level too, for people who don't necessarily see those moments in their own lives." In *Binder*, for example, a chest-flattening device dangles from a hanger on a shower rod, its worn-out form suggesting prolonged use. "You would see that garment in that state only if you were using it or had a relationship to someone who did," Pérez says. A portrait of their partner, Ian, shows a figure fresh out of the shower, looking directly at the viewer, his body saturated in red light. "I'm interested in showing how familiar you get with someone's body when they're someone you love, whom you sleep next to, whom you see." D.S. »





#### NAOTAKA HIRO

“It’s not ‘painting’ painting,” the artist Naotaka Hiro says of his work, which also encompasses drawing, sculpture, and video. At heart, it’s about exploring the great unknown: the body. To that end, Hiro, 46, fully explores his own body’s movements, changes in shape, and, ultimately, limitations. “You can’t see yourself with your own two eyes,” he says, “without help from a camera or mirror.” The resulting works, such as those in the Hammer Museum’s groundbreaking “Made in L.A. 2018” biennial and in his recent solo show at Chicago’s Shane Campbell Gallery, are just by-products of the private, high-endurance performances Hiro undertakes in his converted studio garage at home in Pasadena, California. Tethering himself to a canvas, he’ll spend hours crawling around, drawing concentric circles with oil-paint sticks on its surface. Or he’ll drip stripes of silicone along the front and back of his body until it dries, in order to create partial casts that are later rendered in bronze. Having worked as a longtime cameraman for the artist Paul McCarthy, Hiro approaches his work cinematically, even storyboarding the process before he starts, and sometimes recording the performances as he goes along. Endurance is another element in his process. “The amount of time I pose for a sculpture depends on my physical ability. After two hours, it really starts to hurt.” JANELLE ZARA

#### TRULEE HALL

Trulee Hall’s debut solo exhibition, on view at L.A.’s Maccarone gallery through March, invites the viewer into an overflowing, madcap installation of papier-mâché walls, bubbling boob fountains, and spindly resin tentacles. Flanking the gallery’s entrance are giant golden sculptures shaped like ears of corn or disembodied phallic symbols that allude to our modern relationship with nature via genetically modified organisms. Hall’s magpie output includes videos that combine live action, dance, claymation, and CGI, as well as elaborate sets, sculptures, and costumes. Her absurdist characters give physical form to Hall’s meditations on both the violence against women and female empowerment. “There’s this push-pull feeling all the time,” Hall says, referring, for instance, to the societal pressure on women “to be sexy, just not too sexy.” The Maccarone show was four years in the making—or considerably more if you count the years since she completed her M.F.A. at the California Institute of the Arts, in



2006. “You need some time to work on your own language,” she says. To support herself while she developed her creative voice, Hall, 42, worked at editing and designing sets for Six Flags theme parks and an NBC reality-TV show, and, most significantly, for the late artist Mike Kelley. Her perseverance is now paying off: This past December, she was included in the Rubell Family Foundation’s “New Acquisitions” group show that opened during Art Basel Miami Beach, and in February a new large-scale installation will be featured among the artists projects commissioned for the first Frieze Los Angeles art fair. “I’ve always wanted to build big and have my own worlds,” Hall says. J.Z.