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CRITIC'S PICKS

A New Level of Ambition in Art by 3 Women

Three gallery shows of new work by veteran artists who happen to be women highlight their different ways and means of development, and the way they are taking new risks.

Mickalene Thomas, "March 1976," 2021; rhinestones, glitter, acrylic and oil on canvas. The artist uses collage to establish privacy for her subject. Mickalene Thomas/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

By Roberta Smith

Sept. 16, 2021

Autumn tends to be a great time in New York City's art world. The weather can be superb. There's a back-to-school excitement as galleries reopen, sometimes at new addresses, usually with new shows. Even having art fairs arrive inconveniently early this year, during Labor Day week, didn't dampen things.

As usual, much of the buzz of a new season derives from gallery solos which reveal individual artists making changes and taking new risks. Going to galleries is on one level a search for such signs of growth and the cultural optimism they engender.

Three of the most exciting gallery shows right now present the latest efforts of well-known artists: Lisa Yuskavage in Chelsea, Mickalene Thomas on the Upper East Side and Alison Elizabeth Taylor in TriBeCa. We get to see what's utmost on their minds as reflected in markedly different, and improved, work fresh out of the studio, often completed during the pandemic. All of which makes them very satisfying to visit and mull over, especially in the ways they deal with the lives of women.

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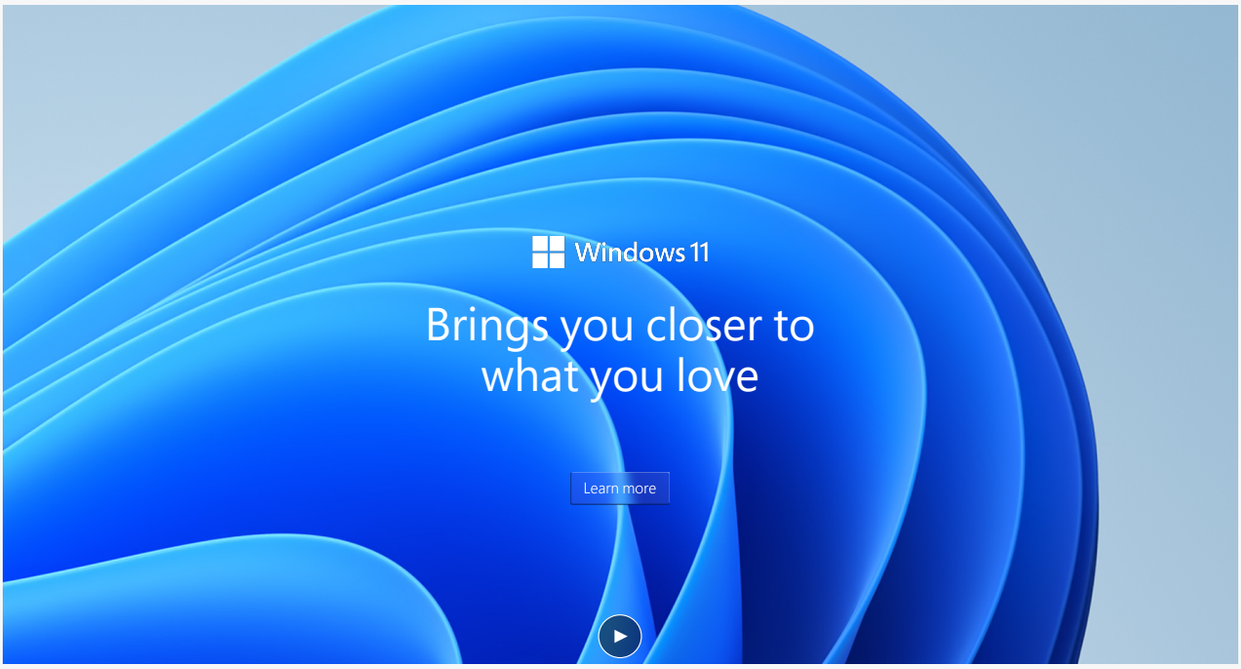
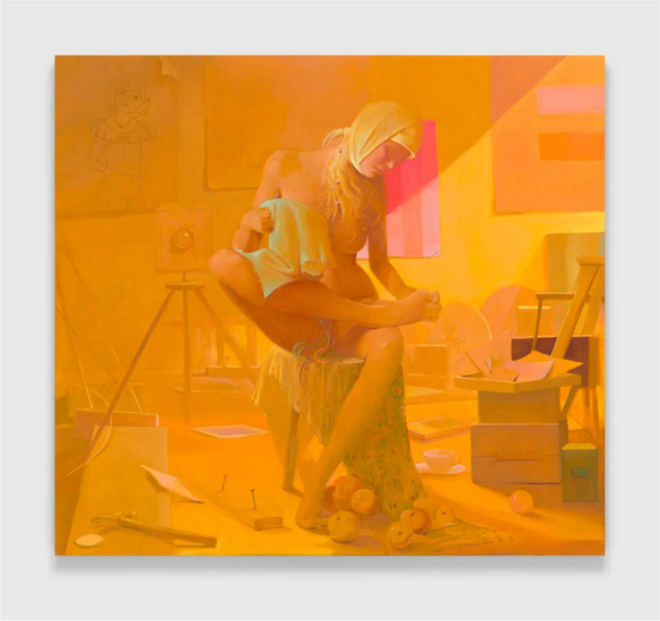


Lisa Yuskavage: New Paintings



Lisa Yuskavage, "Yellow Studio," 2021. Her paintings are "much more engaging formally," our critic writes. Lisa Yuskavage and David Zwirner

I used to respect more than like Lisa Yuskavage's work. Its eroticized Kewpie doll girls and pornographic tropes enveloped in a saccharine monochromatic atmosphere effectively conveyed the male inability to see women as anything but sex objects, as well as the damage this outlook visits upon both the see-er and seen. Yet the points the artist raised often seemed primarily conceptual and the greasy surfaces and exaggerated light seemed contrived, unpleasant.

Without changing much, Yuskavage's most recent paintings at Zwirner are miles better. Her style has had a tune up. Her paintings are emptier; the objects are still mysterious but there's little kitsch. Color, light and space are more refined and translucent, and sometimes the accompanying shadows add momentary abstractions in the background. The subjects are more mature; we see the women in studios looking serious. References to European art abound. So do examples of Yuskavage's earlier paintings, present in some paintings' backgrounds as markers of her growth.

One of the best paintings is "Yellow Studio," which depicts a

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solitary seated woman suffused in yellow light. She looks at the sole of her foot in the pose of "Boy With Thorn" (also known as "Spinario"), the famous Greco-Roman sculpture; on her head she wears a medieval wimple familiar from paintings by artists from Bruegel to Vermeer. If the women are scantily clad, the men are naked and notably wimpy.

In the luminous green light of "Master Class," which shows a marvelous abstract painting in the background, there is little doubt that the woman is the master, appraising a young man's painting. Even if her breasts are bare, and her jeans are unzipped (and she may yet appraise something other than the painting), she's in charge.

Lisa Yuskavage, "Master Class," 2021. "In the luminous green light, which shows a marvelous abstract painting in the background, there is little doubt that the woman is the master," says the critic. Lisa Yuskavage and David Zwirner

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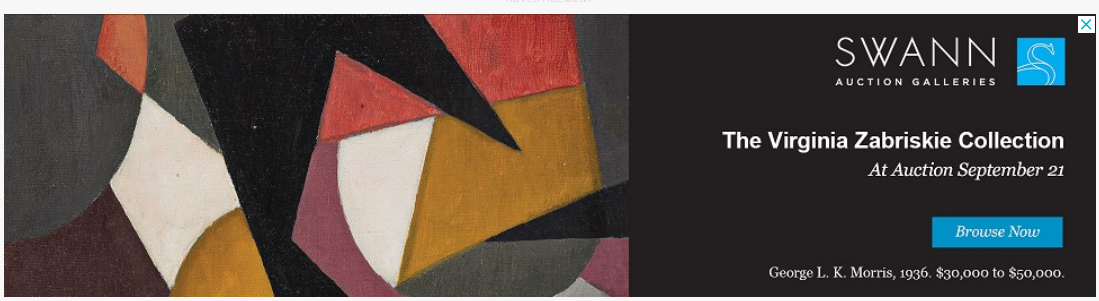

Sometimes Yuskavage's anger is quite direct, as in "Scissor Sisters," named for a band as well as a lovemaking position. It shows three tall women standing on a grassy slope, armed with short swords or a gun. They are lithe and topless, but not to be messed with. In a much smaller work — whose title cannot be printed here — we see only a woman's face and the two hands she holds close to it, middle fingers raised.

Yuskavage has made her paintings much more engaging formally. The four big studio paintings are as much color studies as narratives. Different shades of the dominant color define the crisp forms of furnishings and reiterate color samples taped to the wall. Study the backgrounds for themselves; they are, in different ways, breathtaking.

Mickalene Thomas: Beyond the Pleasure Principle

Mickalene Thomas, “May 1977,” 2021. Rhinestones, glitter, acrylic and oil paint on canvas. Mickalene Thomas/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Mickalene Thomas’s show at Lévy Gorvy is her first solo appearance in New York in seven years, so a change of some sort was to be expected. She has more than delivered. And, consistent with her independent persona, she has not joined the gallery.

In a sense she’s doing what she always has, concocting a skillful combination of appropriations and paint, highlighted with glitter and sequins, in order to celebrate Black women, their bodies and their powerful ways of being, sometimes in terms of their dress and domestic interiors; sometimes by inserting them into the poses of white women or men in well-known modernist paintings (for example, Manet’s “Olympia” or his “The Luncheon on the Grass”). Typically, her earlier work had a definite grandeur in its scale, bright, opaque colors, thick surfaces and opulent patterns. Her furnished installation pieces extended these paintings into three dimensions.

Now Thomas had taken her style into new, less hedonistic territory. Leaving her work’s scale and grandeur intact, she has stripped everything down, using photography in several ways, emphasizing transparent layers instead of opacity. Each new work begins with a much-enlarged photograph of a seminude Black woman that ran in Jet magazine in the 1970s and is titled with the month and year of its publication. And each woman gets some privacy from the various photo-based images and patterns that Thomas collages to their bodies, like little shields. Other times the compositions are reduced to lines of fastidiously applied sequins. The result is a kind of flattened Cubism whose architectural clarity and spareness has an in-process look. In “May 1977” certain areas are filled with hand-drawn textures; in “March 1976,” some pieces of the collage seem taped on. Throughout, scrawled instructions — “Print Silkscreen Pattern” or “Paint” — appear on blank areas.

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In many ways, including their transparency, these works implicate the viewer in more complex ways than before. They indicate that, for Thomas, the future holds limitless possibilities.

Alison Elizabeth Taylor: Future Promise

Alison Elizabeth Taylor, “Night at the PS,” 2020. The artist calls her work a “marquetry hybrid.” Alison Elizabeth Taylor and James Cohan

In the past, Alison Elizabeth Taylor’s extraordinary wood-marquetry paintings have seemed interesting primarily for their bravura craft. Working from photographs, mostly her own, and using laser cutting (mainly), Taylor fashioned small pieces of various wood veneers into puzzle-like pieces fit together to form detailed images. In her first few shows at James Cohan she limited her subjects primarily to things made of wood, whether a stand of trees or the interior of a log cabin. She perfected a kind of wood-grained grisaille that became monotonous. It was almost as if Taylor loved wood too much to violate it with an unnatural color.

After tentatively broaching color in her 2017 show at this gallery, Taylor has taken the plunge into a full palette — intense, jewel-like hues that tend to steal the show. Her repertory now includes painted veneer, shellacked photographs (like the fancy swimming-pool curtains in “Midwinter”) and also real textures that have been laser-cut from photographs (like the pool’s rough stone coping). Her subject matter is no longer quite so rustic, although it’s hardly urban. A scene of small-town homeyness, “Night at the PS” gives us a view of a student play from the spectators’ point of view, showing a sea of contrasting backs and hair.

Alison Elizabeth Taylor, “Meet You There,” 2021. The artist is painting “with a new intimacy, showing us up close a dizzying extravagance of wood grains,” the critic writes. Alison Elizabeth Taylor and James Cohan

The images seem more intricate than ever. “Statuary Inc.” centers on a mesmerizing peek through a shop door to shelves full of tiny bright statues. Only secondarily do you notice the shop’s exterior, a complex orchestration of painted brick, peeling paint, exposed brick and graffiti. Another tour de force is “Rock Shop,” which centers on a display of sliced agates and geodes in colors that verge on the artificial — each stone is a little painting edged in glitter. Much of the hilly southwest landscape out the window is also painted.

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It's great to see Taylor expanding her art, but marquetry remains her focus. The show's largest work, "Meet You There," takes us into familiar territory but with a new intimacy, showing us up close a dizzying extravagance of wood grains, mostly unpainted, in a forest of spindly trees and branches. Only the pink sky of a fading sunset is painted. Taylor's art brings to wood what Lisa Lou's brought to beads: a new level of ambition and artistry with broad appeal that insists upon being taken seriously.

Mickalene Thomas: Beyond the Pleasure Principle

Through Nov. 13 at Lévy Gorvy, 909 Madison Ave., at 73rd Street, (212) 772-2004; levygorvy.com.

Lisa Yuskavage: New Paintings

Through Oct. 23, David Zwirner, 533 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 727-2070; davidzwirner.com.

Alison Elizabeth Taylor: Future Promise

Through Oct. 23, James Cohan, 48 Walker Street, TriBeCa, (212) 714-9500; jamescohan.com.

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