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Michaela Yearwood-Dan
Photo: Jo Metson Scott

LONDON'S NEW GENERATION OF ABSTRACT PAINTERS

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In February 2023, an abstract painting by Michaela Yearwood-Dan titled “Love me nots” hit the auction block at Christie’s London, where it was expected to fetch as much as £60,000. It sold for £730,800. Three months later, “Shine,” another work by the painter, appeared at Sotheby’s New York with a high estimate of \$80,000. It sold for \$457,200.

Just five years prior, in 2018, when the London-based artist made “Shine,” those numbers would have seemed outrageous. Stark, identity-centered figuration was the norm back then, and the work—with its competing swaths of color and Cy Twombly-esque quiggles—seemed out of step. But by 2023, something had changed. More than a dozen artworks by Yearwood-Dan appeared at auction that year and almost all of them sold for several multiples of their pre-sale estimates. One thing has become clear: No longer is her abstract work the exception. Now, suddenly, it is the rule.

Yearwood-Dan is not the only young Londoner for whom this is true; nor is she the most prominent example within the market. In recent years, painters such as Jadé Fadojutimi, Rachel Jones and Flora Yukhnovich have each become true-blue art stars—the kind whose work can fetch seven figures at auction—while like-minded painters such as Sarah Cunningham, Li Hei Di, Pam Evelyn, Francesca Mollett and Sophia Loeb appear poised to follow a similar trajectory.

Sarah Cunningham creates expressive visions of land and plants. “I don’t want a painting to be decipherable or conquerable at all. Then it becomes a dead thing,” she argues. “With nature, [there’s] so much mystery.”

These 1990s-born millennials hail from across the world—England, China, Brazil—but their careers converged at the Royal College of Art (RCA) and other top-tier London art schools. They have shared crit classes and group show walls, but what unites them now is a budding language of abstraction that is earthly, emotive and sensual. Their work brims with gestures and textures—tricks cherry-picked from modernist masters. It may feel familiar at first, but it will leave you feeling hit by something urgent and new.

“I truly feel that this is a new shift in the history of art,” says advisor-turned-dealer Louis Blanc-Francard, who organized an exhibition called “New British Abstraction” at the Center of International Contemporary Art Vancouver last year. (The show featured eight of the artists mentioned above.) “This is the new YBA movement,” he continues, referring to the wave of “Young British Artists”—Tracey Emin, Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas—who shot to fame in post-Thatcher London more than four decades ago. It is a lofty comparison from someone who, it is worth pointing out, owns works by these artists and therefore has a stake in their success. But he is not the first to make it. Indeed, it seems like the only people not rushing to ascribe bigger significance to these artists are the artists themselves.

“It is inevitable that I am a part of a generation of young artists that are exploring abstraction, but at the same time, I feel that my work is very unique,” says Loeb, 26. The Brazilian-born painter overlapped at the RCA with Evelyn, Li and co., but she’s quick to dispel the notion of an ongoing dialogue between them.

“I don’t look at their work, we’re not all going out together and talking about things or visiting each others’ studios.” For Loeb, the connection is more circumstantial. “We’re all just working through this wave of consciousness that’s happening.”

With a battery of brush techniques and a fauvist’s love of color, Loeb paints messy, magical landscapes—think Matisse on mushrooms. Her style feels fresh partly because it is just a few years old. She even knows the exact moment it was born.

Sophia Loeb places tactility at the center of her practice. “I feel very connected to the work when I paint with my hands,” says Loeb. “I feel I can be more organic, and it is easier to create a certain roughness in parts.”

That came during a flustered studio session in 2022, as the artist was preparing to leave her hometown of São Paulo, where she spent the pandemic, and return to London for the second year of her master’s degree. After two tedious semesters of remote work, the prospect of commencing study back on campus was a welcome relief. But as she stared at a stack of recent paintings, her excitement was undercut by a crisis of confidence. All the details she had labored over in previous months now felt flat and manicured—strange children of an addled quarantine mind.

Eventually, Loeb’s attention turned to an abandoned canvas. “I was really frustrated that I hadn’t finished that work,” the artist recalls with a soft, insouciant tone that completely belies the actions she describes next. “So I just put it on the floor and made this crazy abstract painting that had nothing to do with my work. I threw pigments on top and I painted with my hands and I used all of these oil sticks.” The name of that painting? “Eureka.” For Loeb, “that’s when something burst through.”

This kitchen sink approach is common among painters in her orbit. These artists’ techniques tend to be unconventional—some apply paint with brooms, others smush it on with palms, then scrape it away. They’re not precious about process, just its more mysterious effects. Many of them work “beyond strategy, even if they have a plan,” says Franck Gautherot, founder of Le Consortium, an art space in Dijon where he co-organized an exhibition called “Abstraction (re)creation – 20 under 40” earlier this year. “The good thing is they won’t tell you about it.”

Compared to the politically charged portraiture that was so prominent in the tempestuous years of Trump’s presidency, Brexit negotiations and the early pandemic, the work of these young art school alums almost feels like a guilty pleasure. But just because their art is ambiguous doesn’t mean it is hollow.

Born in Shenyang, China, Li, 27, moved to the U.S. for college, then transferred to London’s Chelsea College of Arts to complete their degree. By the time the artist enrolled in the RCA’s postgraduate program in 2020, Li, who uses they/them pronouns, had grown tired of the work they felt they had been conditioned to make. Within these systems,

"you feel this need to play a role that the Chinese painter has always played," the artist says. "You feel like you have to show your cultural heritage to get a ticket into the ring or something."

Like Loeb, Li ultimately found freedom in abstraction. Their work today is dense and caliginous, full of chemical colors and smoky apparitions, like a night sky lit up by fireworks. "I slowly realized [my culture] is not something that I have to include," they continue. "If I'm honest with the painting, something about me will show through."

Li Hei Di used to lean towards figuration when younger. "I didn't understand abstract expressionism," they explain, "but you develop these feelings that cannot be told through language or realistic imagery. Then I understood."

"It sometimes pisses me off to be compared to other artists," acknowledges Yearwood-Dan, 30, in her London studio. "I am a Black, queer woman making this work. And when I'm compared to other people who don't sit within those intersectionalities, I get a bit like, 'Are people seeing what I've been doing?'"

Yearwood-Dan is probably also exhausted from entertaining the art historical associations so often projected onto her work. She wouldn't be the only one. Though it's easy to see echoes of impressionism, abstract expressionism and other canonical genres in the DNA of these artists, they are not nearly as obsessed with the past as the rest of us. For them, art history is a free resource—perhaps just another thing on the internet—from which Yearwood-Dan chooses to "sample the best bits." And why not? "Abstraction was dominated by American men for so long," says the South London-born artist, whose swirling compositions have featured glitter, Drake lyrics and texts from an ex. "That British women are now doing it is so fab."

Surprisingly, one of the most contemporary-feeling aspects of Yearwood-Dan's world is also one of the most traditional. Flowers and leaves are favorite motifs, as they are for Mollett, Yukhnovich and others. These subjects are as old as painting itself, but now, against the backdrop of a climate crisis, they feel fraught. Maybe that's why the botanical symbols of Yearwood-Dan's generation often appear like they're in motion. It's as if these artists are attempting to capture something exactly as it disappears before them.

Michaela Yearwood-Dan says of her impasto surfaces: "I've always been told that I use too much paint ... but I never really liked a smooth, airbrushed, perfect finish." The artist deliberately retraces her brushstrokes so that "past movements are visible in the final form."

The natural world has been central to the work of Cunningham, 31, originally from Nottingham, England, since 2018, when she participated in a residency in Panama. Thanks to an airline error, the artist arrived in the country without her paints (or clothes), so she began working with natural pigments derived from the land she was depicting. It was a happy marriage of material and subject, but eventually, Cunningham explains, "I started to feel that these paintings were meditations on a place that was not my own."

Her own "eureka" moment came years later when she, too, was working remotely on the RCA program. Isolated from her cohort, the artist developed an intense relationship with her art. "I just stripped everything back, and I started to think about imperfection and surface and emotion," she recalls. "I was reacting to how the paint hit the surface as opposed to projecting my own view on what it will be. I sort of let the painting find me."

Cunningham works slowly and intuitively. She almost exclusively paints in the dead of night and never with music or other background sounds. "I like to listen to my breath," she says. "I need that focus, I need to feel my presence in front of the painting because it's like a channel." This method is sui generis, but its logic tells us a lot about why she and her contemporaries have turned to abstraction at this strange moment in time. Art advisor Amanda Schmitt puts it well: This kind of work, she explains, is "about a gestural expression of the subject, rather than a subject that belongs to a particular group. In other words, it's about the self, rather than identity."

When discussing her practice, Cunningham refers to crystals and cosmologies, "shamanistic ideas," and something called "soul flying." Hers is a refreshingly novel perspective, which is why it is surprising to hear her openly embrace the idea that she could be a part of a rather textbook trend. "I've always looked at it as though we amplify one another."

I really hope that's the sort of energy that we can share," she says. "Painting is a very humanizing and powerful art form right now."

"I feel like everyone's really different, what they're trying to say," adds Li. "But for me, being given a voice at this time, at this age, it's really valuable. And I want to say a lot of things through my painting ... but I don't want to be so literal about it." The artist pauses. "It is about inventing a language and then trying my best to make sure this language is right, and that it represents what I believe."