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Allison Janae Hamilton – Floral Mask in Bronze, 2024.
Photograph: Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen

'I'M CHALLENGING THE NARRATIVE': WHAT TO EXPECT AT THIS YEAR'S ART BASEL MIAMI

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Art has a very inconstant relationship with politics – ask an artist if they want to make a political statement and they are likely to bristle. Yet, look beneath the surface of any interesting piece, and you'll almost certainly find definite connections to larger social structures and conversations that are in fact very, very political.

Scanning the offerings of [Art Basel Miami](#) Beach this week, one finds much art that is political in precisely this way – not so much so on the tip of the iceberg, but very much in the intellectual and artistic inspiration beneath. Take, for instance, the gorgeous bronze floral mask exhibited by the mixed media artist Allison Janae Hamilton – at first it comes off as a stunningly beautiful piece of layered flower blooms, but look deeper into the origins of this piece and a different story surfaces.

In an interview, Hamilton said the series this piece comes from originated with fencing masks worn by Black soldiers during the second world war. The pieces come from a larger project in which Hamilton envisions a vertical continuum between earthy materials like bronze and what is ethereal and skyward, placing them into a complex, cyclical set of interrelationships. It is a part of creating Hamilton's own discourse of Black feminism.

"My experience of Black girlhood and womanhood always was and still is really anchored in the land," she said. "It's not something that's always thought of first and foremost in our discourse of Black feminism. For me it's the core because of how I grew up with my family in Tennessee."

Land and origins are important to Hamilton, and for her exhibiting art in Florida is not a neutral act. A longtime Floridian who has transplanted herself to New York City, she is aware of the need to represent her Florida – a place that’s very different from the one that emerges in the national news. “As a Floridian, I’m very proud to be from my state. I try to present Florida in a way that’s very different from how it’s talked about politically. I think there’s almost an erasure of Black life in Florida, and I’m challenging the narrative of those who live there.”

The Korean-American artist Ken Gun Min also challenges perceived narratives with his art. Seeing himself as a storyteller and a sifter of the material of urban environments, he integrates into his elaborate creations materials that he garners from thrift stores, estate sales, the streets, neighbors and friends. The resulting works do not necessarily reflect their humble origins, as Min’s scenes radiate hope, fantasia, and a baroque beauty – even as they also contain feelings such as melancholy and a wary reserve.

Min’s intricate contribution is centered around an elaborate folding screen and an enormous painting situated across a corner of his exhibition space, both depicting a dense imaginary landscapes that might be termed “queer fantasia”. Another of his works, a portrait of a transgender woman clutching her chest amid windswept trees, rolling tides and a breathtaking sky, brings elements of the heroic and the mythical. It is one in a series of paintings of trans people, inspired in part by his walks around the West Lake neighborhood in his home city of Los Angeles, where he would meet potential subjects. “When making the body of work based on West Lake, I gathered the stories from many different people, while I also gathered my materials. I think the story and the person come first – I try to find the connection to that person and where I am, and I weave those things into my creation. And then I send it into the world.”



Work by Ken Gun Min.
Photograph: Image courtesy of the artist and Nazarian / Curcio

For Min, what is political about his art is simply centering the LGBTQ+ individuals that he does, as well as creating from his own position as an Asian-American gay man. “Asian gay men are situated in a very unique space in the western world,” he told me. “Our masculinity is always questioned, and throughout western art history, we’ve been out of the picture for a very long time. As a gay Asian man who works in the art world, I really want to push the boundary of the conception of beauty.”

The artist Ebon Sodipo was very clear about what inspires her to create: “Being able to talk about myself and other Black trans women is probably what drives me to make this work,” she said. This year, Sodipo is exhibiting from a series of collages built up from a personal archive of Tumblr images. She places these collages on mylar, a shiny, lustrous material; the partial reflections that audiences can see of themselves when viewing her work are to her point, as is the material’s connotations with water. “Glittering surfaces remind us of water, in a lizard-brain sort of way,”

she told me. “They bring this drive out of us, a need for survival, to quench a thirst – one that’s been with you for longer than you’ve known. I was relating this to transition, to things that would pull my body in a direction.”

Sodipo takes a very clear-eyed approach to the political impact that her work could have in a place like Art Basel, noting that Black trans women – the very people for whom she most creates – were unlikely to encounter the work in such a space. “I don’t want to overstate, it’s being exhibited in an insular world. It’s being seen by people who are not particularly affected by anti-trans politics. I want the work to be seen by Black trans women.”

She also explained that her hopes as an artist were to create not so much for the immediate political moment – where she pointed out that basic material things like mutual aid for vulnerable trans people are a much more pressing need – but to add to the historical record the voices of people like herself. “The aim for me is to add another page to what we consider Black history. It’s not going to do anything so much to address current political realities, but the long run is what I’m thinking about.”

At first glance, Sanford Biggers’s work seems altogether separate from politics. His art pieces modeled on tiles and quilts have a sense of formal precision and abstraction, seemingly divorced from anything representational. Biggers was drawn to his patchwork aesthetic because he found the patchwork to be a basic and highly mutable form – essentially a powerful roadmap of how to pursue a diverse array of different artistic projects. He has drawn on the history of textiles, particularly Black quilts, for his pieces here.



Sanford Biggers – Kind of Real, 2024.
Photograph: courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen

Biggers likes that his works require interpretation, and that they are open to various ways of being seen. This to him is an asset, as it necessarily forces him to let go of any particular narratives surrounding his work, imbuing it instead with meanings as multiple as its audiences. “Art had always been coded,” he told me. “It’s interesting because there isn’t one specific answer, or result that everyone is supposed to get. That’s one of the things that art can do that not everything can do. Decades ago I gave up the idea that I can control the narrative, and I embraced the idea that my work is multivalent. Everyone brings into the idea their experiences with my art.”

This method does have a political angle, as Biggers sees it as being reflective of the multiple nature of identity in a world where we can have various social media avatars, and also in which we can act very differently in various “in real life” contexts. “It’s like a patchwork of our virtual lived experiences,” he told me. “We’re different people day to day, month to month, decade to decade.”

Biggers also argued that his work was in conversation with larger historical narratives playing out across vast expanses of time, even posing his work as potential objects for future ethnography. “I am this late-stage collaborator

with works over 150 years old," he told me, in reference to the antebellum-era Black quilts that he draws from for his own creations. "I feel like I'm getting at this transgenerational stage of history. Textiles and fabric are the palimpsests of history, they draw us into the history of commerce, capitalism, colonialism, so much."

Now in her 70s, the artist Bonnie Lucas sees herself as having gone her own artistic way for 50 years. Briefly a member of the in-your-face, feminist art collective the Guerrilla Girls, she found herself not fitting in to their aesthetic – or any particular aesthetic at all. According to her, she has always created art based on a love of very feminine things, and that has put her on the outs of the New York art world. She recalls being mocked at one art opening for daring to wear a pretty floral dress, and another time she was chided for declaring: "I create feminine monsters."



Bonnie Lucas – Spoiled, 1986. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and ILY2, Portland

Lucas reveals another side of political art, that of the outsider artist whose disinterest in engaging with trends or favored discourses – or simply opting out of the sexist art world of the 1970s and 80s – is a statement in and of itself. This year her booth is simply a testament to her creative staying power, displaying work from across the decades of her artistic output. "I am appalled and upset by the ways women have been excluded from the art world," she told me. "My art is about storytelling from my own point of view. My work is not in praise of women but about being alive as a girl."