

# The Delirious State of Being



On the day when I began to reflect on 2021, news poured in: Kyle Rittenhouse, a then 17-year-old White teenager who openly carried a loaded semiautomatic rifle during civil unrest in Wisconsin, where he fatally shot two men and wounded a third in August 2020, was acquitted on all five charges. The theatrical trial had played out like a travesty that profoundly exposed the fault lines on all fronts of our society. Our current cultural landscape seems to operate in parallel to the Rittenhouse narrative: it is unfair, divisive, and chaotic.

Whenever economic disparity increases exponentially, the art business booms. As homelessness, inflation, environmental damage, deteriorating infrastructure, and public-safety crises are growing out of control, Los Angeles is at the forefront of art prosperity, propelled by a great moment of transition to establish itself as the new cultural capital. Notable incoming galleries are Lagos-based Rele, New York's Clearing and Harper's, and Chris Sharp returning from Mexico City. More are on the way, with David Zwirner and Sean Kelly soon to set foot in LA. Meanwhile the local galleries are expanding. Young gallerist Matthew Brown opened his second space on the same street in Hollywood; David Kordansky has increased his gallery's square footage to cover half of the entire city block in Mid-Wilshire; Vielmetter took over four spaces in the same building in downtown; and Hauser & Wirth's second LA space is under way. For the first time in history, LA galleries are even extending their presence to New York: Nicodim and François Ghebaly both opened outposts there to feature LA artists, such as Simphiwe Ndzube and Sayre Gomez, respectively. Kordansky will soon join them.

Much of the prosperity is driven by the insatiable appetite for figurative paintings—



especially portraits of Black men and women. Even galleries who financially struggled before the pandemic have found themselves in a cushy position. Many of those celebrated paintings are produced in similar formulas: either imitating the minimal, full-length portraits of Barkley Hendricks (1945–2017) or Njideka Akunyili Crosby's textured compositions, or distorting faces—as an attempt at the manners of Francis Bacon or Adrian Ghenie—with smears, collages or finger dabs. Visiting galleries, museums, and art fairs is like stepping into the onslaught of tawdry copycats. Visual fatigue is epidemic.

Beneath the surface of vigorous trading, problems run deep. Black Lives Matter is now exploited as a branding strategy. Political correctness has become the new instrument for both PR and commodification opportunities. These tendencies culminated in the current show "Black American Portraits" (11/7–4/17/22) at Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), featuring nearly 150 works by many darlings of the market to accompany the blockbuster touring presentation of "The Obama Portraits" by Kehinde Wiley and Amy Serrano. The populist and apologetic posture of the exhibition has little to do with the criticality of art or the educational nature of a museum; it undoubtedly cheerleads market speculation and complies with capitalist consumer culture. Exhibitions such as this reduce the artistic discourse and the effort for diversity to merely an identity-based tokenism without nuances or critique. The artistic criteria by which works were selected seemed undetermined. A fine art professor in LA lamented to me: "The Black portrait show became a case of exclusivity—because when you herd together that many artists, one cannot help but wonder why others were *not* included."

There were, nonetheless, memorable exhibitions and occasions in 2021. Among them was the visionary "Not I: Throwing Voices (1500 BCE–2020 CE)" (4/1–7/25), curated by José Luis Blondet from LACMA's encyclopedic collection, which examined ventriloquism as both a theme and a methodology; Jennifer Packer's extraordinary painting show held at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (7/1–2/21/22); the California African American Museum's survey of Sanford Biggers' textile works, which are informed by African American history (7/28–1/23/22); Harold Mendez's poetic photography, installations, and sculptures at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, that explored the constructions of fiction and truth, history and geography (9/26/20–1/10); Peter Wu's Epoch, a science-fiction-like,

virtual exhibition platform constructed with animation and rendering software; and Kelly Akashi's exhibition of sculptures and crystalline photography at François Ghebaly that articulate the passage of time, emotional experiences, and memory (11/5–12/4).

For the last two years, violence has characterized the pandemic era. It felt personal when waves of hate crimes against Asians and Asian Americans swept the nation. As the turmoil threw everyone into disbelief, the Asian American art community in Los Angeles—in response to our collective experiences—banded together on Zoom for monthly meetings, which then matured into a space for taking actions to gain visibility, representation, and gate-keeping positions, expand discourses and conceive projects, in a hope for reshaping the areas of exhibition, pedagogy, canonization, and art history. Acute issues have come to light during the discussions: who can be identified as Asians or Asian Americans? Why do Asian American artists resist being labeled as Asian American artists? What have the more accomplished Asian American artists done to mentor younger artists? What will Asian American camaraderie look like? What can we learn from Black artists' solidarity? Projects in the pipeline include a joint publication with the East Coast community to feature Asian American artists; an annual Asian American artist and cultural worker retreat; a symposium focusing on the research of the late art historian Karin Higa (1966–2013); and a series of conversations on reforming curriculums and the educational system at large.

For the time being, as many artists and cultural workers in LA either have had or are about to have their Covid booster shots, optimism seems in the air. However the questions of how to navigate the feverish market and political correctness with honesty, and how to achieve true inclusivity with integrity, are yet to be answered. Like the broken American judicial system, the art ecosystem is also in need for repair, so that, as anthropologist Anna Tsing states, "art can foster the curiosity and openness that generates the new sensibility we need to work with and through problems."

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Opposite page, top: Installation view of "NOT I: Throwing Voices (1500 BCE–2020 CE)," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2021. Photo by Laura Cherry. Courtesy Museum Associates/LACMA.

Opposite page, bottom: Screenshot of Epoch gallery with **KEIKEN's** *Okapi*, 2021, digital sculpture, dimensions variable, and **JENNIFER WEST's** *Skyscraper Painted Hacker Cats*, 2020/2021, HD video: 1 min (looped). Courtesy the artists and Epoch.

This page: **KELLY AKASHI**, *Cultivator (Fruiting Whorl)* (detail), 2021, carved, polished, and waxed travertine, cast lead crystal, and lost-wax cast bronze, 47×45.5×6.5cm. Photo by Paul Salvesson. Courtesy the artist and François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles.