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Young at Art

Some of today's hottest new art world discoveries were definitely not born yesterday.

By Linda Yablonsky



Barbara T. Smith with *The Field Piece*, 1968–1972, in 1971. *Courtesy of the Artist, The Box, Los Angeles/Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York*

Last fall in New York, one of the most talked about works at the Independent Projects art fair was a fountain of foaming soap bubbles. As mountains of suds rose and fell, the sculpture, *Cloud Canyons*, continually morphed into different shapes. It was fun to watch, and nervy enough to suggest the hand of a new artist with nothing to lose. Imagine the startled expressions on fairgoers' faces when they learned that it was by the Filipino-born David Medalla, 72, who made the sculpture in 1963 and had been absent from the New York scene for decades.

The art world's obsession with youth may be fading. With prices for even facile works by emerging talents accelerating at warp speed, collectors hunting for greater substance are turning to artists who are pushing 80, and counting. Many of these game-changers- broke out in the 1960s and '70s and were driven by feminist, racial, and gender-identity politics to alter every existing medium and invent a few new ones. By experimenting with nascent technology and unconventional materials that included their own bodies, they opened the door for much of the video, performance, and digital art we have today.

But back then they didn't fit into any mainstream categories or prevailing styles. What's more, many had the bad luck to be women or minorities at a time when the market shunned almost everyone who wasn't white and male. Or, like Barbara T. Smith, 83, who anticipated the kind of endurance art that has lately been in vogue, they lived in provinces like California, which the East Coast establishment had a hard time accepting as a place for serious art. Fortunately, these undervalued artists are finding champions in people half their age—curators and dealers who learned about their work in school and can now give them the kind of prominence they never enjoyed.

The most striking example may be the painter Carmen Herrera, who turns 100 this month. Born in Cuba, where she studied architecture, she has lived and worked in New York for more than 60 years. Her circle included Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning, yet she was relegated to outlets for Latin American art. She emerged on the contemporary art scene only in 2009, when she was given an attention-getting solo exhibition in Birmingham, England. Another solo show followed at London's blue-chip Lisson Gallery, giving her commercial traction and a major presence at art fairs, where people are regularly stopped in their tracks by her radiant abstractions. One of these is presently hanging alongside paintings by Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella in the exhibition inaugurating the Whitney Museum of American Art's new building in New York, and Herrera will have her own show there next year. "The more I saw of her work, the more groundbreaking it seemed," says Dana Miller, the show's 41-year-old curator. "Carmen was engaged with the same investigations as Stella, but she didn't get the same critical attention. The stories I've heard—gallerists told her they couldn't sell a woman's work!"

Art fairs have largely contributed to the resurgence of older artists by providing dealers a platform to present little-known works in an up-to-date context. "We used the opportunity of the fair to do some good for the artist and his legacy," says Adam Lindemann, the dealer and collector who brought Medalla's *Cloud Canyons* to the Independent Projects art fair. Leslie Tonkonow did the same last year at her booth at Art Basel Miami Beach, where densely rubbed graphite drawings on paper scrolls unspooled from the wall with a majesty that attracted gaggles of admirers. The works looked like the type of painting-and-sculpture hybrids popular now, but they were made in the 1970s by Michelle Stuart, an 82-year-old artist who signed with Tonkonow in 2010, after about a decade without representation. "Michelle was a huge influence on me when I was in school in the '70s," says Tonkonow, who has placed pieces by Stuart with museum curators. "They're people in their 30s and 40s who came of age professionally when Michelle wasn't that visible," she says. »

Tonkonow also represents Agnes Denes, who, at 83, is typical of the current zeitgeist. This spring, sponsored by the Nicola Trussardi and Riccardo Catella foundations, Denes has reprised her legendary public artwork *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* for Expo Milan 2015. She first made the piece in 1982, on two acres of landfill that would become New York's Battery Park City. Massimi liano Gioni, 41, artistic director of the New Museum, as well as the director of the Trussardi Foundation, calls it "one of the most powerful urban interventions in the history of land art." At his invitation, Denes is installing the piece on a vacant lot in Milan. "I have always been a fan of looking back or sideways," Gioni says. "Not because I get a narcissistic kick out of 'rediscovering,' but because it's important to cultivate a sort of biodiversity in the art world by expanding its vocabulary and cast of characters."

The New York gallerist Alexander Gray, 44, works almost exclusively with overlooked artists of advancing age. His roster includes the painters Jack Whitten, 75; and Joan Semmel, 82; the sculptor Melvin Edwards, 77; and the 80-year-old conceptual and performance artist Lorraine O'Grady. Each has made a powerful impact on younger artists, but until Gray came along, all were a distant memory. "It's uncanny how today's process-based abstraction parallels Jack Whitten's increasing visibility," Gray notes. "And when Lorraine shows up at a Lower East Side gallery opening, the kids flock around her. She loves it." O'Grady was in the 2010 Whitney Biennial, and Edwards's retrospective at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas is on view through May 10. Despite his towering presence on the African-American art scene in New York, he didn't have much of a market until five years ago, when Gray got involved.



It was the early work of another neglected black artist, the 81-year-old Color Field painter Sam Gilliam, that interested David Kordansky, a 37-year-old dealer in Los Angeles. Gilliam's lyrical "Drape" paintings from the '60s and '70s—twisted and hugely scaled unframed canvases—are in the collections of major museums, but his life and career were in free fall until 2013, when Kordansky mounted a show of his abstractions, curated by a market darling, Rashid Johnson. Kordansky started his business 12 years ago with artists primarily of his own generation, but he confesses that the latest crop leaves him cold. "You have all these little burgomeisters making their process paintings without knowing that Sam Gilliam had done it all in 1968," says Kordansky, who also represents the 88-year-old ceramic sculptor John Mason. "There's not a lot of young art that I'm interested in now. It's super-cynical. So I look to these older artists, who ask more existential questions."

So do young art stars like Nate Lowman, who did a show in January with the 73-year-old sculptor Keith Sonnier at Eneas Capalbo's tiny Manhattan gallery, the National Exemplar Gallery. "Nate's my neighbor," Sonnier says. "He suggested we do something together, and Eneas likes to couple younger artists with older ones." Capalbo, 39, calls Sonnier one of his favorites. "When I started the gallery, I wanted to show things that weren't so familiar. His art shaped what we have today."

Similarly, the postconceptual photographers Liz Deschenes and Sara VanDerBeek have helped draw attention to Barbara Kasten, 79. For much of her career, Kasten was hard to categorize and virtually absent from public view. Her brilliant stroke was to marry the handmade and the mechanical in photographs of architecturally-inspired mirrored objects built in her studio. The results are beautiful abstractions, but because she identified herself as a photographer, sculptor, and painter, dealers didn't know how to place her. Finally, four years ago, the New York gallerist Stefania Bortolami spotted a couple of Kasten's staged photographs at Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain, the annual art fair in Paris, and eventually signed her up. "I knew Barbara's work from school and told Stefania to see it," says her gallery partner, Christine Messineo. For her, Kasten is an analog precursor to the digital manipulations of today and a weather vane for artists like Deschenes, VanDerBeek, Walead Beshty, and Eileen Quinlan, who also use film. "Barbara Kasten: Stages," the first major survey of her multidisciplinary work, is on view through August 16 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. "She's become a role model for younger artists, her new peer group," says Alex Klein, the show's 36-year-old curator. "Younger artists see her work on the Internet and mistake it for digital media."

Likewise, Betty Woodman, 84, was misperceived as a ceramist even though her pots often serve as canvases for her paintings. Her work caught the eye of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, whose Salon 94 gallery, in New York, embraces ceramic sculpture and design as well as fine art. "People used to think you couldn't make art out of clay, but that attitude has broken down," says Woodman. "She's in a hurry in a different way than younger artists," Greenberg Rohatyn speculates. "Because she doesn't think she'll be here much longer. She's really determined. Her work is so good that it fills me with anxiety—I want to deliver for this woman!"

The Paris dealer Emmanuel Perrotin had similar feelings about Pierre Soulages, 95, and Claude Rutault, 73. Both are revered in France, but Rutault was relatively unknown in New York, and Soulages had only four small shows there since the '60s. When Perrotin opened his Manhattan branch in 2013, he gave them both solo shows. Meanwhile, the Lebanese-born Etel Adnan had wide renown as a poet and an essayist, but when Photios Giovanis showed the 90-year-old's abstract landscapes at his Callicoon Fine Arts in downtown New York, the gallerist broke new ground. "Small as her paintings are, they're emblematic of a historical moment where different places in the world come together in a single figure," he says. "I think that's why she has risen to prominence."



Another artist who was ahead of the curve is Lynn Hershman Leeson. Though vaguely remembered for her identity-slipping performances of the '70s, what connects with audiences today is her interactive art, which anticipated the digital revolution and the withering of privacy. At 73, Hershman Leeson recently had the satisfaction of seeing a 50-year survey of her work at the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, 60 percent of which had never been exhibited anywhere. She was poised for rediscovery, therefore, when Bridget Donahue, 35, opened her gallery on the Lower East Side this year with "Origins of the Species," a sweeping show of Hershman Leeson's photographs, drawings, and wallpapers detailing the social and ethical issues surrounding genetic manipulation. The artist says that people in Donahue's generation get her, "because many of my works, like my telerobotic surveillance doll or my breathing machines, were born when they were."

Now that museums have whole departments devoted to performance and so-called new media art, we can look forward to discovering more of the pioneers of these disciplines. "People weren't ready to address the themes in Lynn's work back when she was making it," says Donahue of Hershman Leeson—and, by extension, of many of her contemporaries. "I'm interested in seeing who has the courage to correct some history." Stay tuned.

