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10 Under-Recognized Artists Who Got Their Due in 2021

BY ALEX GREENBERGER

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After June 2020, almost every institution made a declaration that they would implement changes to become more inclusive. Their promises posed an interesting question: What would happen if museums made a priority of showing works by more artists of color and addressing art history's lacunae? In other words, would what it look like for museums to do what they were supposed to be doing all along?

The good news is the art history is changing. The bad news is that it's changing slowly. In 2021, for every survey devoted to a buried giant of the past century, there was, it seemed, another, even bigger one given over to one of art history's most revered white male artists. This is currently the case this winter at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, for example, where an Etel Adnan show is awkwardly made to share space with a Wassily Kandinsky survey. Since 2010 alone, the Guggenheim has held seven Kandinsky exhibitions across its various museums. Until 2021, Adnan, who died this year, had never had a New York museum show.

Still, there were overlooked figures who, at long last, got their due in 2021 as museums began to alter their ways. With each of these showcases, whether in the form of standout displays in group shows or

as long-overdue retrospectives, these artists shined anew and earned their place in the annals of art history.

Below, a look at 10 artists who emerged from art history's shadows, thanks to major presentations this year.

Pacita Abad



A 2018 survey of Pacita Abad's work at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in Manila.

Photo : Courtesy Pacita Abad Estate/Photo Pioneer Studios

Pacita Abad, who died in 2004 at age 58, has been a cult favorite for a while for her paintings made using a technique she called *trapunto*, which involved texturing her canvases about the immigrant experience by stitching them and stuffing them. Praised within certain circles for her innovative combinations of craft and fine-art styles, and for her depictions of communities that often go invisible, the Filipina artist has been the subject of several posthumous surveys. One arrived in Dubai this fall when the Jameel Arts Centre opened a concise exhibition of her rich paintings. Curated by Nora Razian, that show was considerably smaller than one planned for 2023 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, but it still attested to the fact that Abad had been overlooked for far too long.

Alma Thomas



Alma Thomas, *Breeze Rustling Through Fall Flowers*, 1968.

Back in 2019, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York reopened after a \$450 million renovation, abstractions by Alma Thomas shared space with paintings by Henri Matisse—a sign that even the most august institutions were no longer ignoring her. (As of fall 2021, the museum has removed her work from view, though the Matisses have stayed.) A giant within the history of abstraction, Thomas’s work was the subject of a modest but important exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem five years ago, but it wasn’t until 2021 that she got the full-scale survey she has long been in need of. The Columbus Museum in Georgia and the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia, significantly expanded many people’s understanding of Thomas’s oeuvre, showing that she did far more than create brilliantly hued abstractions using what she called “Alma’s Stripes.” Curated by Jonathan Frederick Walz and Seth Feman, the show exposed often-unseen sides of her oeuvre, including her job as a teacher in Washington, D.C. and the rarely exhibited clothes she handcrafted.

Koga Harue



Koga Harue, *Umi (The Sea)*, 1929.

Photo : National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art's show "Surrealism Beyond Borders" (which is now en route to Tate Modern in London), one artist in particular stood out among the crowd: Koga Harue, a Japanese painter who proffered a style known as *kikai-shugi*, or machine-ism. Though he only lived to be 38, Koga emerged as one of Japan's most important artists during the early 20th century. He advocated for Scientific Surrealism, a tendency that was less dreamlike than what was seen in Europe—and seemingly more objective. In his masterpiece, *Umi (The Sea)*, from 1929, a bather standing atop a submarine salutes an ocean filled with fish and gadgetry, as though the boundary between man and machine has totally imploded. Koga was the subject of a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, Hayama in Japan back in 2010, but he's never had a major survey stateside. As our understanding of Surrealism expands, he's overdue for one in the U.S.

Maria Martins





Maria Martins, *O Impossível* (The Impossible), 1940s.

Photo : Photo Vicente de Mello/Banco Itaú, São Paulo

One of the more surprising omissions from the Met's exemplary Surrealism survey was Maria Martins, who redefined sculpture in her home country of Brazil with writhing forms that exuded an overt kind of eroticism. (For that reason, curator Mario Pedrosa once labeled them "obscene.") Those in Brazil were in luck, however. To tie in with the country's bicentennial, the Museu de Arte de São Paulo held a group of shows devoted to Brazilian art history under the aegis of its acclaimed "Histórias" series, and one was given over to Martins's work. Martins was well-connected with the American and European art scenes of her day (she was friends with Marcel Duchamp, and likely inspired one of his final works), but this exhibition, curated by Isabel Rjeille, is important because it devotes so much space to the Brazilian aspects of her art, in particular the mythologies and Indigenous traditions she was drawing on.

Maryan





Maryan, *Personnage in a Box*, 1962.

Photo : Courtesy Venus Over Manhattan, New York

According to art historian Ziva Amishai-Maisels, Maryan may have been the first artist ever to paint the carnage of the Nazis' concentration camps. That alone would qualify the Polish-born artist as an artist worthy of a deep dive, but there are many other aspects of his life and oeuvre that make him worth noting, including his ties to the postwar French art scene, his use of figuration at a time when it was considered anathema to art-making in some circles, and a film he made during the '70s that connects his own experience as Holocaust survivor to the global fight against fascism. Never before had Maryan been the subject of a proper retrospective until Alison M. Gingeras curated one for the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami this year. The show makes a solid case for writing Maryan into the history of postwar art for good.

Shigeko Kubota





Shigeo Kubota, *Berlin Diary: Thanks to My Ancestors*, 1981.

Photo : ©2021 Estate of Shigeo Kubota/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Courtesy Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna/Photo Denis Doorly/Photo ©Museum of Modern Art

It's possible that the trajectory of video art history may not have been the same were it not for Shigeo Kubota. During the '60s and '70s, at a time when most videos were being shown almost exclusively on small monitors, she realized that these moving images need not only be seen on a screen—they could also appear in expansive sculptures meditating on humanity's relationship to the natural world and her heroes, which included Marcel Duchamp and her husband Nam June Paik. Kubota's reputation has long paled in comparison to Paik's, but in 2021, the world finally saw just how important she was. Japanese audiences got the most expansive view of Kubota's work with a retrospective that is currently touring the country, but New York audiences got a taste, too, in the form of a small but well-rounded survey at the Museum of Modern Art curated by Erica Papernik-Shimizu.

Hervé Télémaque



Hervé Télémaque, *One of the 36,000 Marines over our Antilles*, 1965.

Photo : Photo Hugo Glendinning

It can be shocking just how much art by today's youngest sensations looks a lot like paintings by Hervé Télémaque, who has long been a giant of the French art scene, having lived there since the early '60s. Born in Haiti, the 83-year-old artist was given a survey this year at the Serpentine Galleries in London; it may have been only a quarter of the size of his 2015 Centre Pompidou show, but it was no less significant. (The Serpentine's show was curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Joseph Constable with Elizabeth de Bertier.) On view at the Serpentine are paintings that evince Télémaque's flirtations with multiple art movements, including Surrealism and narrative figuration. These visually striking works combine an array of imagery—advertisement-like pictures, portraiture, and semi-abstract elements—and occasionally pay mind to political issues like Haiti's history of colonialism and the Négritude movement.

Heidi Bucher





Installation view of "Heidi Bucher: Metamorphoses," 2021, at Haus der Kunst, Munich.

Photo : Photo Markus Tretter/ ©The Estate of Heidi Bucher and Haus der Kunst

Momentum surrounding the under-recognized Swiss sculptor Heidi Bucher has been building since 2017, when her work appeared in the main exhibition at the Venice Biennale. A proper showcase for her latex casts of architectural spaces could not have come soon enough, and finally, in 2021, one arrived at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, where 150 of her works were exhibited in a big retrospective curated by Jana Baumann. That show, which is also set to travel to the Kunstmuseum Bern and Muzeum Susch, piquantly highlights Bucher's interest in the relationship between one's body and its environment, with certain sculptures hung from high above like flayed skins in a butcher shop.

Karimeh Abbud



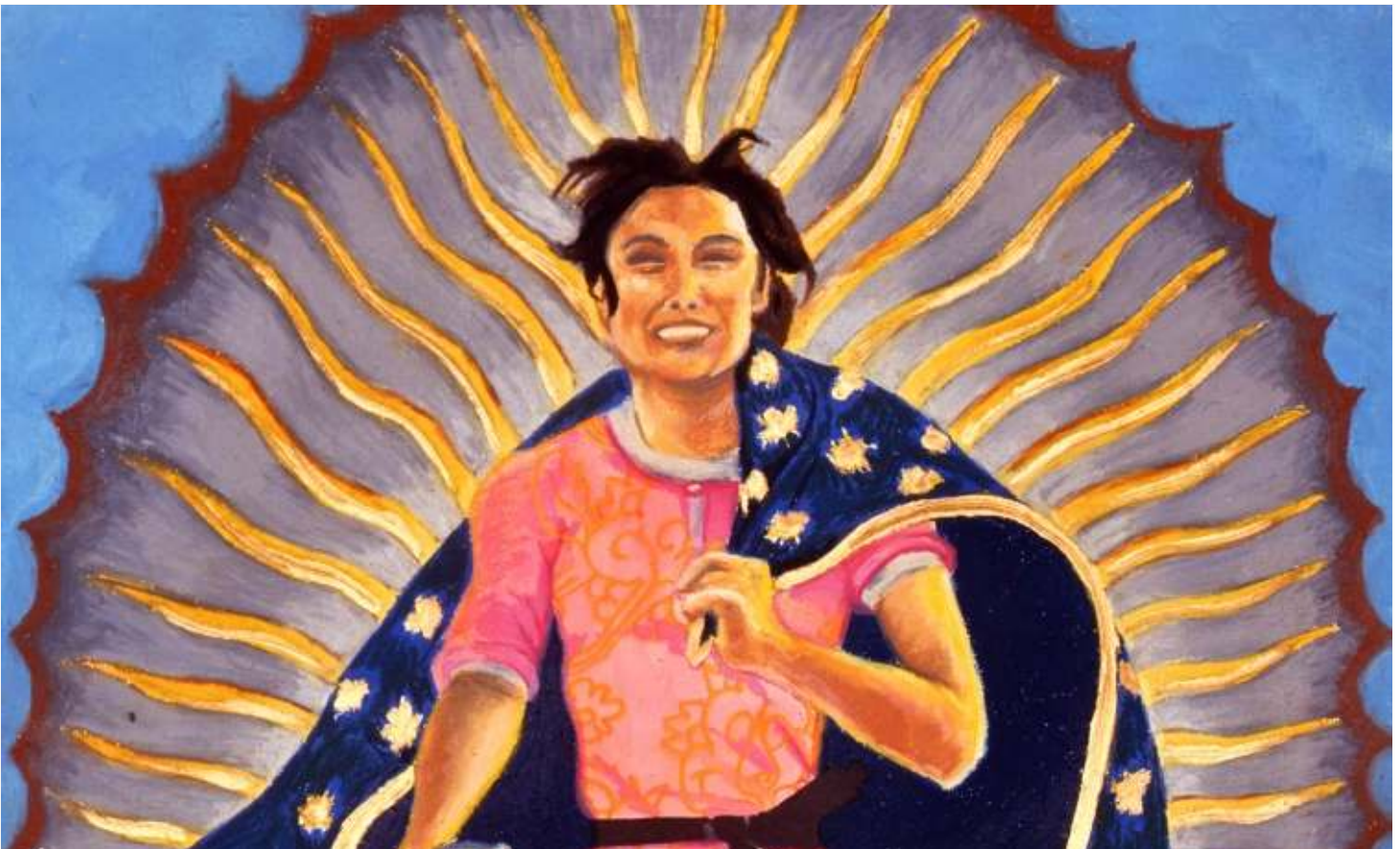


Karimeh Abbud, *Three Women*, 1930.

Photo : Photo Issam Nassar

In the first half of the 20th century, Karimeh Abbud reshaped photography in the Middle East when she became the first woman artist to operate a portrait studio in Palestine. The images she shot—memorable pictures of middle-class Palestinians—contained none of the harmful trappings of Western ethnological photography. Although some believe she was among the first women photographers in the Arabic world, Abbud was barely known at all until the Darat al Funun art space in Amman, Jordan, staged a show of her photography in 2017. She's still never had such a major showing in the U.S., although the Metropolitan Museum of Art featured her in its bracing exhibition “The New Woman Behind the Camera,” which is now on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

Yolanda M. López





Yolanda López, *Portrait of the artist as the Virgen of Guadalupe*, 1978.

Photo : Courtesy the artist

Mainstream recognition for Yolanda M. López finally arrived this year, just at the end of a fabulous career. A little more than a month before López was scheduled to have a show at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in California, the artist died at 79. When that exhibition opened, the public saw what a giant she had been for Chicanas and Latinas, who found empowerment in her feminist paintings of the Virgen de Guadalupe. López often made it her mission to render women of all generations active figures, and in so doing, she frequently smashed stereotypes. Upon her death, the MCA show's curator, Jill Dawsey, remarked that López was "one of the most celebrated figures in the history of Chicano/a/x art, even as she was largely ignored by the institutional art world." No longer can it be said that López was totally elided from art history.

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