

TriBeCa Gallery Guide: New York's Most Vibrant Art Scene

The large-scale arrival of new and veteran dealers has given the neighborhood its first unifying theme in 60 years. Here are three walks with our critics, a springboard to explore.

By Will Heinrich

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Galleries have been moving to TriBeCa for a good five years, but the migration has finally hit critical mass. As everyone from tiny new project spaces to the blue-chip titan David Zwirner floods in, this cast-iron and cobblestone neighborhood in Manhattan — south of Canal, north of Vesey and west of Broadway — is no longer just one option of many. For any New York-area gallery that needs to move or is opening another branch, TriBeCa is now the most exciting place to show contemporary art — the destination that has to be considered.

There are now at least 41 galleries in TriBeCa, according to the real estate broker Jonathan Travis — who placed 22 of those himself — compared with fewer than 20 galleries two years ago, and still more are set to move in. It's not just because a savvy real estate broker found a cache of dormant retail spaces, either. Rather, the neighborhood's layout and architecture — an endearing mix of sudden broad vistas, quiet nooks and river views — offer the perfect compromise between the art world's romantic 1960s conception of itself and its current professionalized reality.

Once the home of New York's central wholesale food market, TriBeCa is full of the same kind of industrial warehouse buildings and creaky tongue-and-groove wooden floors that give SoHo so much of its character. When the market moved to the Bronx in the early '60s, the neighborhood was left with a desolate appearance that lasted long enough for a star turn in "Ghostbusters," filmed two decades later outside Hook & Ladder Company 8 on North Moore Street. Still, 1980s TriBeCa was also magical, with air that often smelled of black pepper or roasting nuts, thanks to a few holdout wholesalers.



Works by Milton Graves, the visionary drummer who died this year, at Artists Space. In his remarkable practice and worldview, art, medicine, plants, human perception, the nervous system and the cosmos are all connected. Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times



Looking south on Cortlandt Alley in TriBeCa. An Rong Xu for The New York Times



Exiting from Theta, at 184 Franklin Street, a gallery whose entrance is a basement vault hatch. An Rong Xu for The New York Times

Pop stars and hedge funders moved in next, and soon condo towers were sprouting from every available lot. The once-sleepy enclave has filled up with overpriced restaurants, over-loud mobile phone conversations and too many tiny dogs. But the large-scale arrival of the art world gives the neighborhood its first unifying theme in 60 years.

What TriBeCa offers in exchange, apart from a brief window of affordable retail space, is a mixed-use ambience that provides art with a more lifelike context than it ever really gets in Chelsea. A painting simply looks different in a place where people live and work than it does on a windy block of nothing but galleries. Many of the people who've been living in TriBeCa the longest are also artists themselves, which makes for a particularly vibrant and engaged audience. "It's real artists," said Pascal Spengemann, the co-owner of the year-old Broadway Gallery (and an expat of Marlborough Gallery in Chelsea). "Art lovers, people with an investment in the scene, curators. It's been really great."

Other recent arrivals include Chapter NY, a gallery that, after starting life in a tiny Chinatown space and a few years modestly situated at a mezzanine level on East Houston Street, finally has its first substantial footprint on Walker Street. "It's incredible," says Nicole Russo, Chapter's founder. "It's busier than I've ever been on the Lower East Side. The combination of being a storefront and being on such a good block with so many great galleries has really paid off."

Credit: Tribeca Gallery Walk

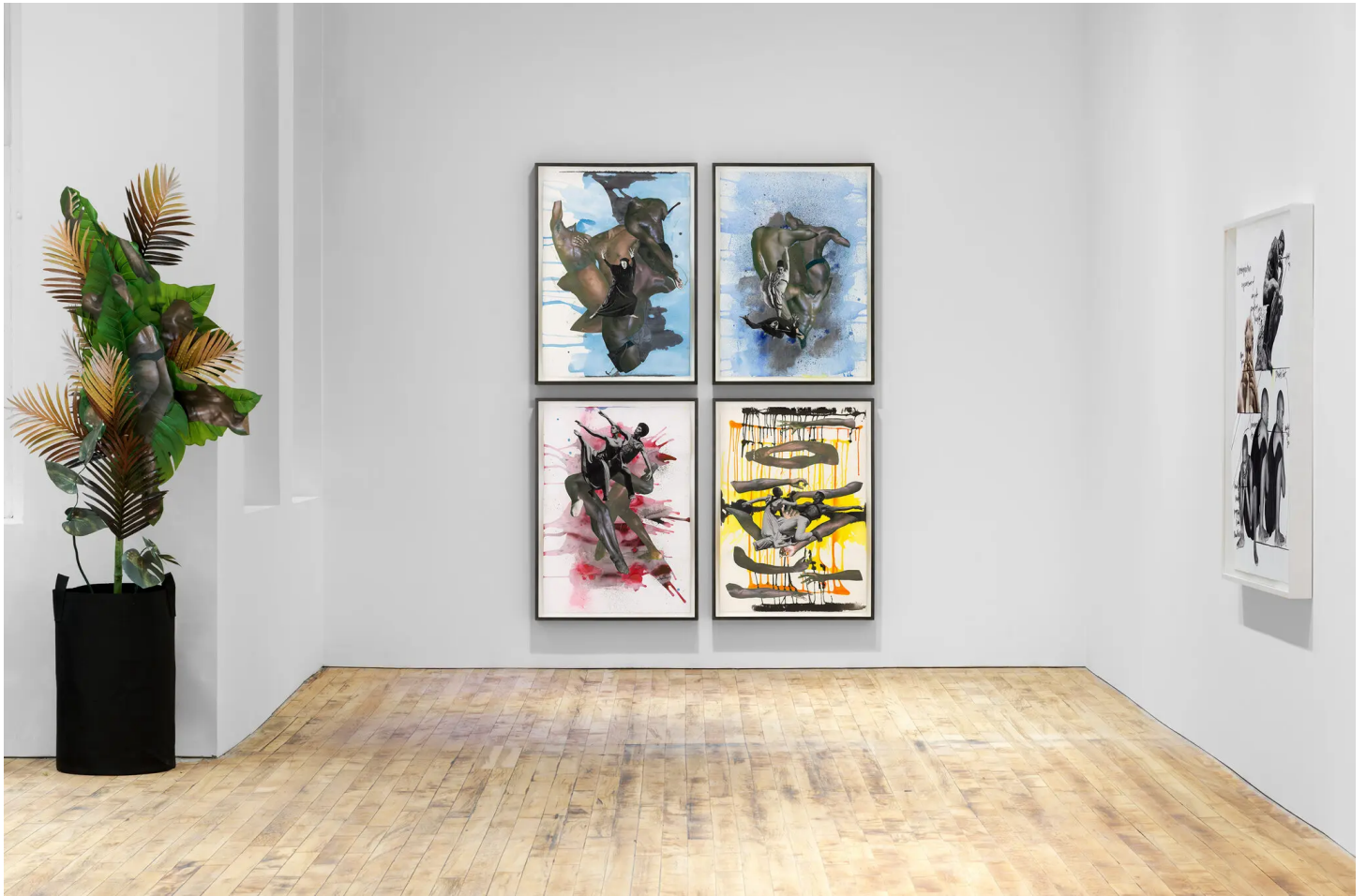
The shift in attention downtown doesn't mean Chelsea is over. Given the sheer number of art galleries still there, as well as the brand-new buildings erected by most of the neighborhood's megadealers and the reopening of Dia Chelsea, "over" would be hard to imagine. And in a moment when canons of all sorts are toppling, and when notable art galleries have spread up the Hudson and from Miami to Los Angeles, it no longer makes sense to imagine a single center to the gallery scene, anyway. But even a diffuse scene has its hot spots.

A geographical change also doesn't imply more substantive changes, at least so far. Gallery programs have diversified somewhat in recent years, and so have their curatorial teams. But ownership in TriBeCa remains overwhelmingly white, as it is in Chelsea. What we can hope for is that as more spaces open for the very first time, we'll start to see a difference.

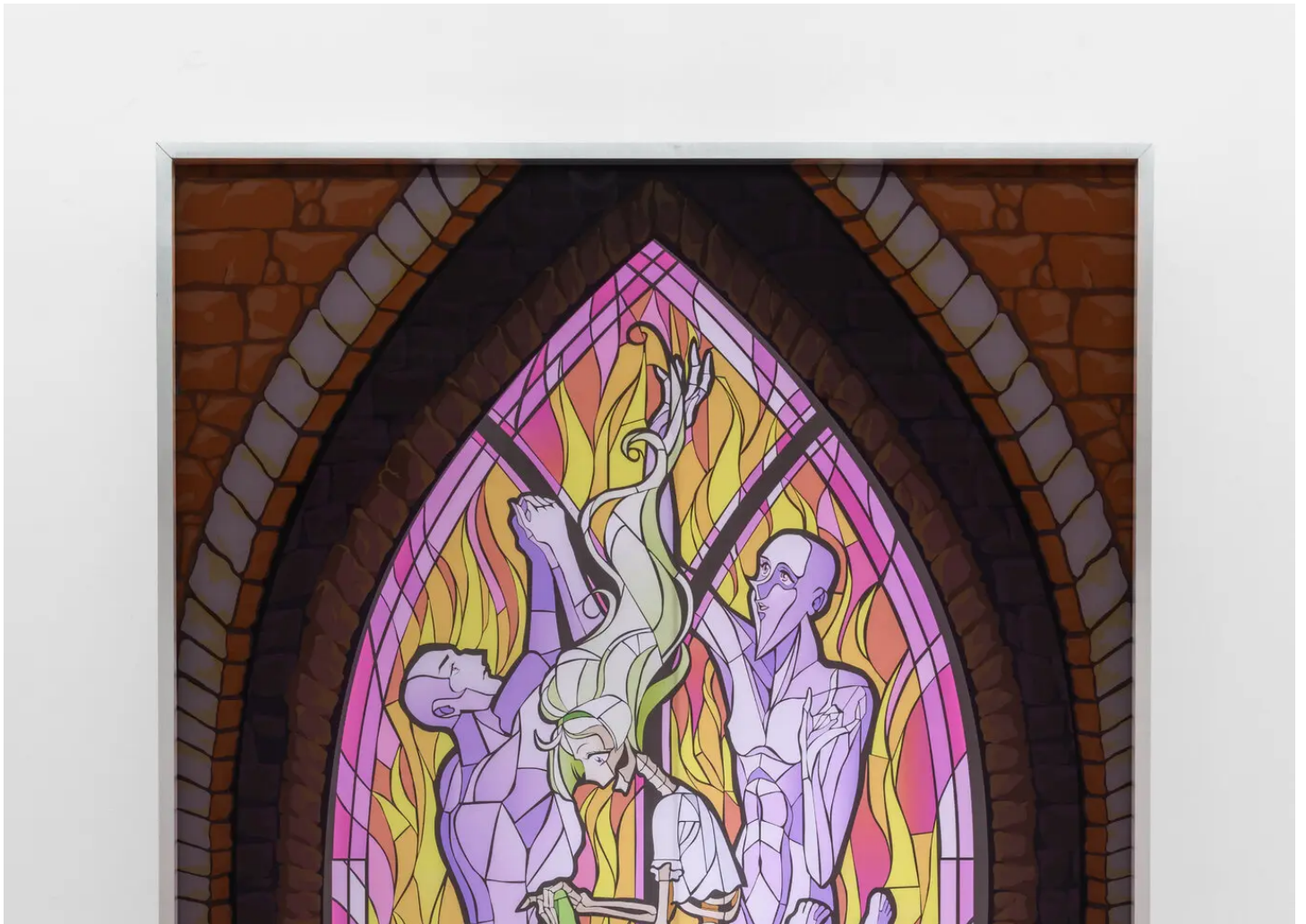
We've divided the best of the shows that are currently open into three itineraries organized around the neighborhood's most gallery-dense arteries: Walker Street, White Street and lower Broadway and Cortlandt Alley. Get a couple of Boccini cookies from Grandaisy Bakery at 250 West Broadway, take a few minutes in adjacent TriBeCa Park to admire the red brick majesty of the AT&T Building and the tide of oaken water towers receding north through SoHo, and use the following as a springboard to explore.

Itinerary 1: Walker Street and Surroundings

Walker Street, the artery that connects TriBeCa to Chinatown, is now the red-hot center of the center. The former Chelsea gallerist Josée Bienvenu's new venture, Bienvenu Steinberg & Partners, and a new branch of David Lewis Gallery of the Lower East Side join many others just on the block between Church Street and Broadway. With the arrival of David Zwirner's new kunsthalle-style space 52 Walker, led by Ebony L. Haynes, the street now has as much weight as Chelsea or the Upper East Side. On Lispenard, a block north, visit Denny Dimin, Canada and other galleries, stopping for an espresso at La Colombe, in a house that once hosted Frederick Douglass. *WILL HEINRICH*



“Kandis Williams: A Line,” at the new 52 Walker, marks the entry of David Zwirner and Ebony L. Haynes to TriBeCa. Williams worked with Black dancers versed in ballet and modern dance. 52 Walker





Julien Ceccaldi's "Haul From Hell" (2021), artist custom lightbox; layered plexiglass with digital prints, LED lights, at Lomex gallery. Julien Ceccaldi and Lomex



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Gauri Gill's show at James Cohan, which includes work from the "Acts of Appearance" series. The photographer invited Maharashtra villagers to create fantastically inventive masks. Gauri Gill and James Cohan

Gauri Gill at James Cohan, 52 Walker Street

The Delhi-based photographer Gauri Gill's solo show in James Cohan's new TriBeCa space is one of the most original and imaginative I've seen so far this season. It's both contemplative and outgoing. Gill's photography is often a collaborative enterprise, as is the case with two recent and continuing series excerpted in "A Time to Play: New Scenes from Acts of Appearance."

For the earlier one, "Field of Sight," begun in 2013, she made large-scale, black-and-white photographs of barren-looking, low-horizon farmlands in the western Indian state of Maharashtra, not far from Mumbai. A single male figure is present in each picture, usually standing with his back to us as if gravely contemplating what's in front of him. He is Rajesh Chaitya Vangad, a resident of the region and an artist specializing in a type of folk painting practiced by the Warli Indigenous group, often done on house walls and characterized by a vocabulary of nature-related symbols and figures.

In the photographs, Vangad's art is also present "live." At Gill's invitation, he has covered the surface of each photograph, top to bottom, with networks of tiny, meticulously drawn figures suggesting humans, animals and divinities. Together, they depict scenes of everyday life with its pleasures and politics but also its stresses resulting from poverty, environmental degradation and, most recently and catastrophically, Covid-19. In a 2021 piece titled "The Great Pandemic," the landscape is half-obsured by a rain of tiny images of hospital beds, and towering over everything is the figure of the Earth Goddess, Dhartari Devi, ordinarily a source of beneficence, but here holding a symbol of the coronavirus menacingly in her hands.

Gill's "Untitled (69)" from "Acts of Appearance" (2015-ongoing). Her show is one of the most original and imaginative this season. Gauri Gill and James Cohan

Rural life is also the setting for the series of large-format color photographs called "Acts of Appearance," though in these the mood is, on the whole, antic and upbeat. Gill's collaborators here are a group of Maharashtra villagers who, once a year, stage a three-day festival called Bohada, for which they create fantastically inventive, brightly painted papier-mâché masks. Traditionally the masks, made for performances, depict Hindu or tribal deities. But for the photographs, Gill asked the villagers, under the supervision of two master mask-makers, the brothers Subhas and Bhagvan Dharma Kadu, to expand their repertory to include fabulous animals, birds and insects as well as mechanical forms: clocks, cellphones, computers. They then shot the villagers wearing their creations while participating in the drama they know best: daily life.

The alternative universe that she and they have produced is visually spellbinding. And as the writer Hemant Sareen notes in an essay accompanying the show, their collaboration has an ethical dimension. Photography, when introduced to India by Europeans in the 19th century, was a tool of control, with the colonial eye behind the lens, the passive Indian body in front of it. Here the transaction is changed, leveled. Photographer and subject meet on shared cultural ground; both are artists, and creativity flows both ways.

HOLLAND COTTER

Through Nov. 13, 52 Walker Street; 212-714-9500; jamescohan.com.

Ernie Barnes at 55 Walker, 55 Walker Street

An installation view of Ernie Barnes's strange, wonderful show at 55 Walker. Ernie Barnes Family Trust and Andrew Kreps Gallery; Dawn Blackman

Born in Durham, N.C., in 1938, Ernie Barnes used an athletic scholarship to study art, later playing in the N.F.L. and making paintings that appeared on the TV show "Good Times" and on a Marvin Gaye album cover. This strange and wonderful show, copresented by Andrew Kreps and Ales Ortuzar in a space shared by three galleries at 55 Walker, concentrates on Barnes's football-themed works from 1961 to 2003. One pair of canvases from 1990 renders football scrums as wriggling piles of sinuous bodies with exaggerated tendons, in a dark style, reminiscent of 1930s expressionism, that Barnes called "neo-mannerist." (Downstairs, Bortolami presents trippy, Tarot-card-like paintings of torsos by Nicolás Guagnini.) *WILL HEINRICH*

Through Oct. 30, 55 Walker Street; 212-741-8849, andrewkreps.com; bortolamigallery.com.

Julien Ceccaldi at Lomex, 86 Walker Street

Japanese anime and manga are futuristic forms of animation and comics — but their approaches to gender are often as backward as a sexist 1930s cartoon. The French Canadian artist Julien Ceccaldi looks to queer, androgynous and gender-shifting manga and anime in his show, “Centuries Old,” to create sharp-edged neo-Pop paintings and sculptures using mannequins and dress forms to imagine new human beings. Some, like “Haul from Hell” (2021), a lightbox mimicking a stained-glass window, or the sculpture “Marie-Claude” (2021) seem like a French approach to Halloween, in which the ghosts and ghouls of manga past are reconfigured in the gallery present. *MARTHA SCHWENDENER*

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Through Nov. 7, 86 Walker Street, No. 3; 917-667-8541; lomex.gallery.

Mitchell Charbonneau at Off Paradise; Someday Gallery, 120 Walker Street

Distressing metal folding chairs with a sledgehammer is a young man’s game, and Mitchell Charbonneau, whose first show with this gallery includes more than a dozen such examples of abused furniture, is only 27. But the chairs, which are surprisingly expressive when grouped in pairs, like lovers, or uncanny towers, are actually cast, exactly, in resin before being painted in muted office-work tones of beige, black or green. A few trompe-l’oeil Little Trees air fresheners, cast in bronze but painted to look as if they were just stolen from a taxi cab, add an entertaining accent to a promising debut. On your way downstairs, stop on the third floor, where Brittni Ann Harvey is showing beguiling collages and intriguing sculpture at the brand-new gallery Someday. *WILL HEINRICH*

Through Dec. 7, 120 Walker Street; 212-388-9010; offparadise.com.

Itinerary 2: White Street and Surroundings

The lower half of TriBeCa’s gallery scene is anchored by White Street, with new arrivals dotted along either side of its airy intersection with Church Street and Avenue of the Americas. A pop-up space at 281 Church Street has also been mounting interesting shows, and apexart just closed a memorable show of vintage taxidermy. Start near White Street’s western end at Luhring Augustine with a terrific show of Georg Baselitz prints from the 1960s. *WILL HEINRICH*

A long-distance collaboration between John Tsombikos and Enno Tienen at the 281 Church Street pop-up in TriBeCa. Simbarashe Cha for The New York Times

Sawangwongse Yawnghwe's "Protest III" (2021) at Jane Lombard. His paintings related to Myanmar's complex history juxtapose panels of narrative scenes with ones of abstract patterning. Sawangwongse Yawnghwe and Jane Lombard Gallery

Lex Brown at Deli Gallery, 36 White Street

You might not realize that Lex Brown's new video is the centerpiece of her show "Defense Mechanisms," given that it's playing on an old TV set near the back of the space. But "Communication" (2021), which features the artist playing nine characters, forms an emotional and conceptual core from which the exhibition flows. By turns funny, absurd, and meditative, the video concerns a fictional tech company's attempt to gentrify a city and displace residents by using "plot holes" — bombarding people with information so they're no longer in control of their minds or actions. Sound familiar? "Communication" ends with a character rediscovering her inner voice — a process that, in Brown's case, I imagine gave her the freedom to make the disparate work on view. *JILLIAN STEINHAUER*

Through Nov. 13, 36 White Street; 646-634-1997; deligallery.com.

Sawangwongse Yawnghwe at Jane Lombard, 58 White Street

In the supposedly globally conscious New York art market, we find little work that deals with the modern political histories of much of the larger, non-Western world. The artist Sawangwongse Yawnghwe, in his United States debut, offers one welcome corrective in work that reviews and updates one of those histories, that of the Southeast Asian country of Myanmar, formerly Burma.

Yawnghwe was born there in 1971. By that time his family had already left the country to escape the first of what would be a succession of military coups. The most recent took place in February 2021, and much of the show seems to be a response to that event in the form of diptych paintings that juxtapose panels of narrative scenes with others of abstract patterning.

The narratives are drawn from news photos, which record a history that is complex, even contradictory. In one painting, we see an image of the Burmese-born Louisa Benson, Myanmar's first Miss Universe contestant, posing in a bathing suit. In a second, from the 1960s, she appears as a rifle-toting rebel. The politician, Aung San, sometimes referred to as the father of modern Burma, also appears in two mages. In one, dated 1941, he's receiving military training from the Japanese Army, though in World War II he aligned himself with Britain — which claimed Burma as a colony — to defeat Japan. A photo image in another painting shows Aung San in 1947 in London to negotiate Burma's independence, which he achieved but with compromises that alienated several of the country's ethnic and religious minorities, resulting in conflicts that are very much alive today.

In short, history as Yawnghwe depicts it, is indirect, opaque and unsettling. And in this context, the panels of abstract patterning — based on traditional Burmese fabric designs — function as balancing, steadying elements. As to the exhibition title, "Cappuccino in Exile," that's directed at us in the West, who tend to react to life-or-death conflicts in distant lands, when we react at all, with the emotional equivalent of a mild espresso buzz. *HOLLAND COTTER*

Through Oct. 30, 58 White Street; 212-967-8040, janelombardgallery.com.

Ruby Sky Stiler at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, 7 Franklin Place

In the ultra-stylized portraits of this Brooklyn-based painter, flesh resolves into Euclidean shapes and decorative patterning: eyes and breasts appear as little half-moons, foreheads and shoulders as perfect semicircles of pink and powder blue. They may seem easily digestible at first, but come closer. These paintings are actually wall reliefs: The models' wavy hair consists of incised resin blocks, and the backgrounds are tessellated tiles overlaid with pasted paper. Stiler knows her art history, and steeps these portraits in an omnivorous collection of ornamental motifs: Roman friezes, Victorian wallpaper, Matisse's stripes and squiggles, the ceramic tiles of Gio Ponti or Roberto Burle Marx. But in two self-portraits, featuring the artist cradling an old-time painter's palette, you also sense a sourer side. Those millennial pinks, those curves, those Insta-ready backgrounds: It's as if the annals of art history fed directly into the Wing. *JASON FARAGO*

Through Oct. 30, 7 Franklin Place; 212-375-8043; nicellebeauchene.com.

Elizabeth Jaeger's black ceramic ovoids, including "Office" (2021), are at Jack Hanley. Elizabeth Jaeger and Jack Hanley Gallery

Elizabeth Jaeger at Jack Hanley Gallery, 177 Duane Street

This ambitious young sculptor and ceramist presents here more than a dozen black ceramic ovoids — some as large as a cat bed, but most about the size of a Balthazar boule — that each have an aperture on top and small figures in their interior. Crane your neck over each, and you will find strange, often tender scenes of children sitting on benches, office workers hunched over their desks, or a horse asleep on its side. They're like Pompeian dioramas, or maybe gladiatorial arenas, and each stands on a rickety artist-made plinth made of black-powdered wire, compounding their fragility. Yet one of the great delights of Jaeger's art is that, as you gaze down at these fragile little creatures, your mastery and superiority start to give way to deep concern, as if you couldn't bear to see them hurt. *JASON FARAGO*

Through Nov. 20, 177 Duane Street; 917-965-2337; jackhanley.com.

David L. Johnson at Theta, 184 Franklin

David L. Johnson's debut, at a gallery that is itself less than six months old, is his deft evocation of the bland hostility of contemporary public spaces. To a series of beguiling large photos of desk plants taken through bank windows, and a video of a warbler recovering from its own shocking window encounter, Johnson, a recent M.F.A. graduate, adds a series of idiosyncratic metal devices hung at knee height. One square green plate mounted with narrow triangles looks like a Renaissance-era Spanish helmet; a black semicircle studded with two-inch bars could be the jaw of an equine Steampunk robot. It's surprising how beautiful they are, considering that their original purpose, before Johnson liberated them from Manhattan buildings, was to prevent passers-by from sitting on protruding standpipes. (Note that the store sign with a theta symbol is actually for a fish restaurant — the gallery is across the street.) *WILL HEINRICH*

Through Nov. 5, 184 Franklin; 917-262-0037; theta.nyc.

Itinerary 3: Broadway and Cortlandt Alley

A number of transplants are now located near or on lower Broadway, at TriBeCa's border with Chinatown. But the most exciting development is the cluster of small spaces upstairs in two office buildings at 373 Broadway (Queer Thoughts, JDJ) and 368 Broadway (Page NYC, Kapp Kapp). *WILL HEINRICH*

Viewing Adrienne Rubenstein's works at Broadway Gallery: left, "The Forever Mug" (2021); right, "Ophelia in the Snow" (2021). An Rong Xu for The New York Times

Viewing Robin F. Williams's "Speak of the Devil," 2021, left, and her "Mood Swing," 2020, at PPOW Gallery. An Rong Xu for The New York Times

Installation view of Milford Graves's "Fundamental Frequency," easily one of the best shows in town right now. An Rong Xu for The New York Times

Robin F. Williams, PPOW, 392 Broadway

Robin F. Williams is a distractingly good painter. For several years, she's been exploring the interplay of different textures and techniques, but the works in her exhibition "Out Lookers" take that inquiry to a new level. Each figure has its own surface quality, whether the reflective ethereality of the "Ghost in Labor" (2020), the marbleizing of the "Out Witch" (2020), or the stain-painted "Bechdel Yetis" (2020). The form is so captivating, it almost overwhelms the content: a series of supernatural female figures. Many have a playful, impish quality, and they seem to stand out at the same time that they blend in. Williams has made a practice of painting women who flout societal rules, but here the rules have changed. These creature-women inhabit a world that's all their own. *JILLIAN STEINHAUER*

Through Nov. 13, 392 Broadway; 212-647-1044; ppowgallery.com.

Adrienne Rubenstein, Broadway Gallery, 373 Broadway

The paintings in Adrienne Rubenstein's "Global Warmth and Global Cooling" are full of flowers, stars and food — from otherworldly broccoli to a flat red apple that could have been lifted from Eric Carle's "The Very Hungry Caterpillar." There's also a ruby-red goldfish borrowed from Matisse and several references to Mollie Katzen, the cookbook author and artist. But loose brushwork and a gorgeous palette of sugary pastels that ease the way into deeper blacks and indigos mean that the pieces almost work as abstractions, too — pure expressions of art-historically inflected painterly innocence. *WILL HEINRICH*

Through Nov. 20, 373 Broadway; 212-226-4001; broadwaygallery.nyc.

Caitlin MacQueen's "Counterfeit" (2020) channels Cat Woman meets Emma Peel. Caitlin MacQueen and Mother Gallery

Caitlin MacQueen, Mother Gallery, 368 Broadway

Originally located in Beacon, N.Y., Mother Gallery opened a second location in TriBeCa just in time for Covid. Its belated inaugural show, "Ciao! Manhattan," is the solid Manhattan debut of the painter Caitlin MacQueen, who alternates between still lifes painted from observation, and slightly blurred, vaguely sinister narrative paintings based on images swiped from television. Each features a tall, androgynous woman — Cat Woman meets Emma Peel — in a black jump suit, whether posed before a wall of computers, at the railing on a luxury yacht or in a sleek anonymous hallway.

In "Counterfeit," the smallest and the best painting here, MacQueen renders a close-up portrait of a team member in a room with an array of small, non-Western artworks. (She could be taking a break or about to burgle the joint.) Here our subject gains rouge, eye shadow and an inner life. MacQueen's beautiful chalky paint surfaces are also most overt here, and they suggest a bright future.

ROBERTA SMITH

Through Oct. 30, 368 Broadway, No. 415; 845-236-6039; mothergallery.art.

Milford Graves, Artists Space, 11 Cortlandt Alley

Milford Graves was a percussionist who treated drumming as something more expansive than merely establishing a rhythm or tempo. Graves, who died this year, played with jazz musicians like Albert Ayler, the pianist Don Pullen and the experimental percussionist Toshi Tsuchitori, but he was also a botanist and herbalist, a professor at Bennington College, a cardiac technician, a visual artist — and he invented his own martial art, which synthesized popular Western dance moves with African warriors' poses and the gestures of the praying mantis. Percussion connected with the human heartbeat and the energy flowing through plants, and made its way into art objects, as you can see in "Fundamental Frequency" at Artists Space, easily one of the best shows in town right now.

Graves's sculptures, assemblages and diagrammatic drawings are the most visually captivating. His "Yara Training Bag," from around 1990, incorporates painted boxing gloves, punching bags, a samurai sword and an acupuncture model — elements from Yara, Graves's invented martial art form. Other sculptures include gongs, tribal sculptures, medical and astronomical diagrams, videos and printouts of electrocardiogram readings. Costumes created by Graves's wife, Lois Graves, are here, as well as hand-painted album covers and photos documenting a 1981 concert in Osaka, Japan, for children with disabilities, who responded ecstatically.

This show follows a survey at the ICA Philadelphia (and an excellent documentary, "Milford Graves Full Mantis," from 2018), but also includes contributions from Graves's collaborators: the Japanese modern-experimental dancer Min Tanaka and the artist Yuji Agematsu, who studied Yara with Graves (and whose sculptures made of scavenged materials are in "Greater New York" at MoMA PS1). The gallery handout includes Graves's "Herbal Chart," detailing the effects of various herbs on the human body. All these elements combined offer an excellent introduction to Graves's remarkable practice and worldview, in which art, medicine, plants, human perception, the nervous system and the cosmos are all connected. MARTHA SCHWENDENER

Through Jan. 8, 11 Cortlandt Alley; 212-226-3970; artistsspace.org.

