

WIDEWALLS

11 Contemporary Artists to Watch Right Now

By Elena Martinique, Published September 23, 2020

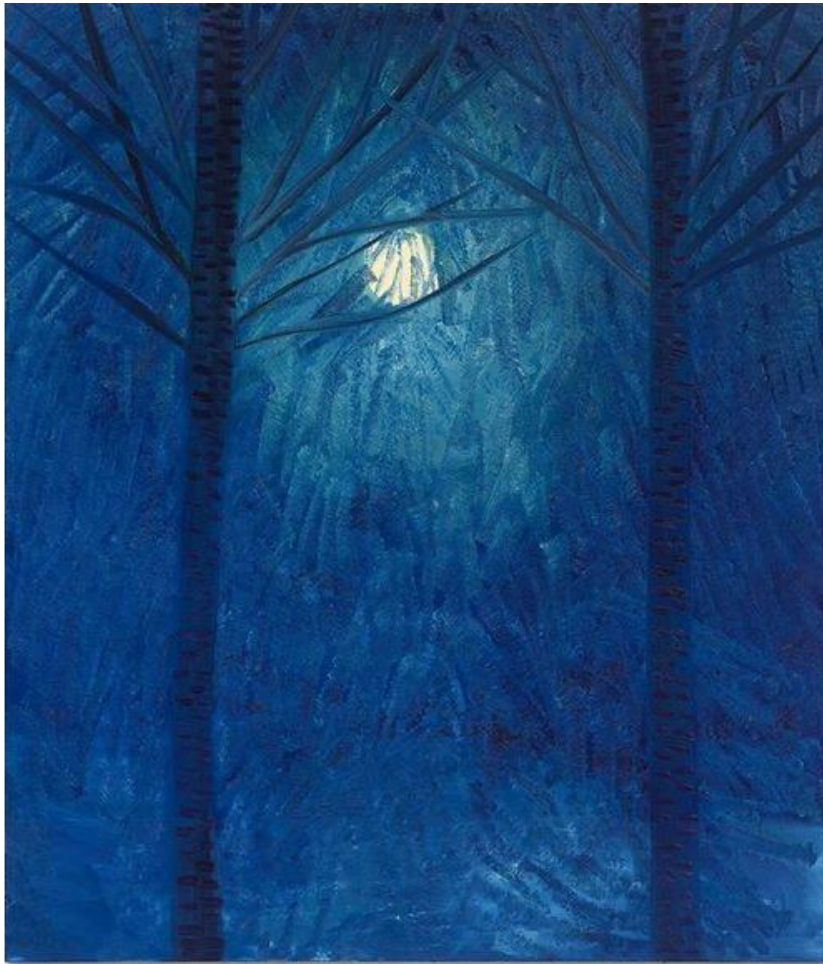


Navigating the world of contemporary art can be intimidating. It is ever-changing and it shifts according to countless factors. Every year, **a new batch of artists appears**, getting picked up from prominent galleries and drawing attention from collectors and art enthusiasts alike.

Here, we highlight **11 contemporary artists to watch in 2020**, whose reputations and markets are on the rise. These artists are featured in shows all over the world, they make noise at major art events, they capture the attention of powerhouse collectors and break auction records and most importantly, they continue to expand our understanding of what art can be. Furthermore, these artists seem to be bringing portraiture back into the spotlight, so it is indeed an exciting moment on the art scene right now.

Featured image: Detail of the exhibition Petrit Halilaj. To a raven and hurricanes that from unknown places bring back smells of humans in love. Palacio de Cristal, 2020. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia. Photo credit: ImagenSubliminal (Miguel de Guzman and Rocio Romero). All images courtesy Museo Reina Sofia.

Featured image: Paul Mpagi Sepuya - Figure (_2100565), 2017, via Instagram.



Matthew Wong

A promising self-taught Canadian painter, **Matthew Wong** captivated the art world with his striking canvases of vibrant landscapes, forest scenes and still lifes. Being on the autism spectrum and grappling with depression since childhood, the artist tragically took his own life in 2019, only a year after his first solo show in New York drew wide acclaim.

Painting and drawing seriously only since 2013, Wong has developed a distinct visual language that invokes a range of art historical precedents. Combining stylized representations, bright colors and mystical themes, he painted **rich, evocative scenes** of imaginary landscapes and half-remembered interiors.

This year, the artist became **an art market sensation**, with many of his paintings setting **auction records**. His painting *Homecoming* from 2017 went for almost \$400,000 in the Hong Kong leg of Christie's Global ONE sale on July 10, blazing past its estimate of between \$59,000 and \$83,000, while *Warmth* from 2017 sold for around \$340,000, over five times its estimated price range of \$50,000 to \$80,000.

Featured image: Matthew Wong - Look, the Moon, 2019, via [Instagram](#).



Amoako Boafo

A portraiture and figurative painter from Ghana, Africa who is based in Vienna, Austria, Amoako Boafo explores the relation of the personal and the structural by **centering Black subjectivity and care**. As the artist himself explains, his portrait practice is about *"representation, documenting, celebrating and showing new ways to approach blackness."*

Set against single color background, Boafo's portraits are soft and serene, while sending powerful messages. Drawing from his own upbringing and life, the artist challenges **preconceived notions regarding identity**, such as the tradition of males being raised to be aggressive and masculine.

Boafo was awarded with the jury prize Walter Koschatzky Kunstpreis in 2017 and the renowned Strabag Price 2019 and is collected by private and public collectors, most recently Kehinde Wiley and The Albertina Museum and the Hessel Museum of Art. This year, his painting *The Lemon Bathing Suit* from 2019 fetched \$881,550 at Phillips' 20th Century & Contemporary Art Evening Sale in London, eclipsing the estimate of \$38,700-\$64,500 more than ten times over.

Featured image: Amoako Boafo - Joy Adenike, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Mariane Ibrahim.



Titus Kaphar

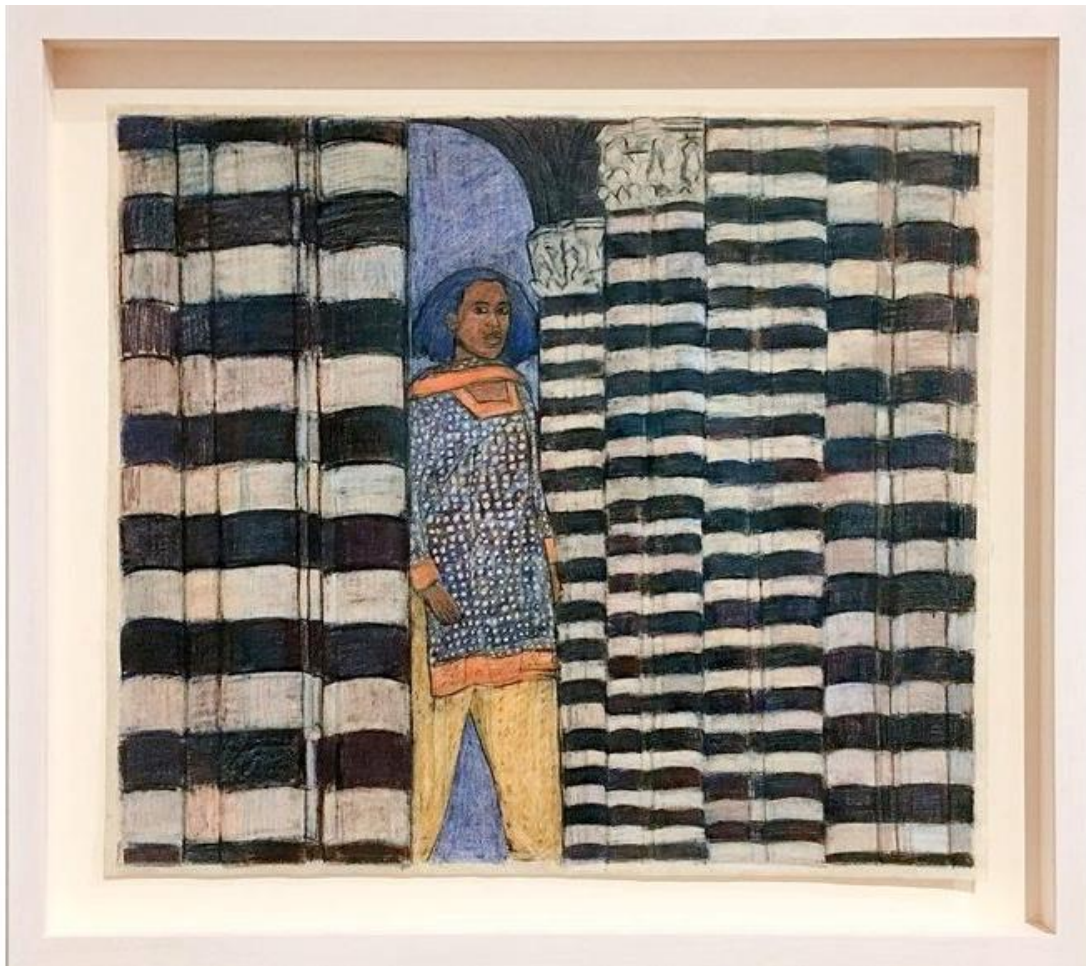
The work of the American artist Titus Kaphar explores **the history of representation** by bringing formal innovations to styles and mediums, emphasizing the physicality and dimensionality of the canvas and materials themselves. Spanning paintings, sculptures, and installations, his practice seeks to bring forth the contemporary relevance of history.

Manipulating his paintings and sculptures in a range of ways, such as cutting, shredding, stitching, twisting or breaking them, he reconfigures them to reveal **unspoken truths about the nature of history** as well as **the power of a rewritten history**.

Kaphar is a recipient of numerous prizes and awards including a 2018 MacArthur Fellowship, a 2018 Art for Justice Fund grant, a 2016 Robert R. Rauschenberg Artist as Activist grant and a 2015 Creative Capital grant. He is also a founder of NXTHVN, an arts incubator and residency program based in New Haven, Connecticut.

In 2020, Kaphar's painting appeared on the cover of TIME Magazine amid the Black Lives Matter protests.

Featured image: Titus Kaphar - Seeing Though Time, 2018, via Instagram.



Mequitta Ahuja

A contemporary American painter of African American and South Asian descent who lives in Weston, Connecticut, **Mequitta Ahuja** casts herself as mythic warriors, epic heroes, and power figures descending from traditions across cultures. She synthesizes her multicultural heritage into works that evoke the process of identity construction.

Taking inspiration from Mughal manuscripts, Buddhist wall drawings, and Western art technique, she explores multiple modes of representation, including abstraction, text, naturalism, schematic description, graphic flatness and illusion. Through her practice, she poses timely questions about the power dynamics underpinning image production and art history.

Ahuja is the recipient of the 2018 Guggenheim fellowship award.

Featured image: Mequitta Ahuja - The Italy Drawings - Duomo, 2014, MIA, via Creative Commons.



Petrit Halilaj

A Kosovo-born artist living and working between Germany, Kosovo and Italy, **Petrit Halilaj** examines the recent history of his country and the consequences of the political and cultural tensions in the region. His work often draws from his personal experience, reflecting on memory, freedom, cultural identity and life discoveries, while confronting collective memory. Throughout his oeuvre, the artist seeks to understand what notions of “home”, “nation” or “cultural identity” might mean.

The artist represented Kosovo's national pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale. His solo exhibition *To a raven and hurricanes that from unknown places bring back smells of humans in love* is currently on view at Palacio de Cristal, Parque del Retiro in Madrid until February 28th, 2021. This immersive show brings together a range of installations that explore topics such as home, nation, love and cultural identity.

Halilaj's work was recently featured in an exhibition at gallery Fondazione Merz in Turin, Italy. He has also pulled his work from the 2020 Belgrade Biennale, after the organizers of the exhibition dithered over how to present his nationality in accompanying materials.

Featured image: Detail of the exhibition Petrit Halilaj. *To a raven and hurricanes that from unknown places bring back smells of humans in love*. Palacio de Cristal, 2020. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia. Photo credit: ImagenSubliminal (Miguel de Guzman and Rocio Romero).



Genieve Figgis

An Irish contemporary painter born in Dublin, Genieve Figgis explores images from art history through a **modern lens of figurative abstraction**. Referencing Irish-English literature and the works of Old Masters, she paints scenes depicting bourgeois homes, traditional portraits, or landscapes, often haunted by spectral figures and leering creatures with canes and top hats, often unrecognizable under a fat smear of paint.

Figgis' works are characterized by psychedelic pastel color palette, thickly slathered acrylics and a Rococo-like style, appearing almost macabre. Using dark humor, Figgis offers a **ghoulish yet amusing comment on the state of society**.

Beginning her career on social media due to having little opportunities to exhibit, Figgis was catapulted into the New York art scene after her work caught the eye of Richard Prince who bought her painting. The galleries eventually caught up and in 2015, London's Almine Rech began representing her.

Featured image: Genieve Figgis - Powder room, 2017, via Instagram.



Ida Ekblad

A contemporary Norwegian artist, **Ida Ekblad** is best known for **lyrical paintings and concrete sculptures** incorporating found objects and materials, but her practice also incorporates performance, filmmaking as well as poetry. Her expressive paintings often depict winding and twisted lines, some indicate human-like figures, others resemble landscapes.

Drawing from **a wide variety of inspirations and art historical references**, such as CoBrA, Situationism and Abstract Expressionism but also pop cultural aesthetics like graffiti or cartoon that indicate, Ekblad creates semi abstract works characterized by the energetic movement of the compositions, the bold application of color and the attentive use of found materials.

Ekblad's work is in the collections of Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich; Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo; and Zabłudowicz Collection London/Sarvisalo/New York.

Featured image: Ida Ekblad at Giti Nourbakhsh © BERND BORCHARDT./



Salman Toor

A Pakistani artist, **Salman Toor** explores **queer diaspora through a lens of classical portraiture** that is at once nostalgic and contemporary. Combining academic technique with a quick, sketch-like style, Toor offers intimate glimpses into the imagined lives of young, queer Brown men residing between New York City and South Asia.

Toor's narratives are drawn from lived experience, enhanced with fantastical elements. In works characterized by recurring color palettes and references to art history, Toor creates **idealistic settings**, showing friends dancing, binge-watching television shows, playing with puppies, and gazing into their smartphones - all in the lush greenish interiors. While his subjects seem freed from the impositions placed upon them by the outside world, there is also a palpable sense of nostalgia and alienation.

The artist will soon have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, as part of the museum's emerging artists program. *Salman Toor: How Will I Know* is postponed due to COVID 19 pandemic and the final date is yet to be announced.

Featured image: Salman Toor - Four Friends, 2019. Oil on panel, 40 × 40 in. (101.6 × 101.6 cm). Collection of Christie Zhou; image courtesy the artist.



Tala Madani

A Los Angeles-based Iranian artist, Tala Madani is celebrated for paintings depicting a combination of violence, frustration, perversity, and playfulness in absurd scenes that contain bald, middle-aged men. Narrative and rich in irony, these works depict deadpan and brushy scenes of fictive rituals.

Featuring figures simultaneously innocent and nefarious, furtive and self-aware, or comical and violent, these paintings form **a grotesquerie populated by dichotomies**. Featuring homosexual orgies, terrorism, tattoos, and body hair extensions, these works create a humorous discourse on cultural and sexual identity and traditional norms. Her figurative style combines the radical morphology of a modernist with a contemporary sense of sequencing, movement, and speed.

Featured image: Tala Madani - Untitled, 2019 © 2019 Andrea Rossetti.



Shara Hughes

An American contemporary painter, **Shara Hughes** balances abstraction and representation, labor and spontaneity, difficulty and ease. She depicts **imagined colorful landscapes** populated by floating moons, gnarled trees, and blazing sunlight.

Defying conventional depictions of space and light, she uses texture, pattern, and perspective to describe a space in ways that maybe don't always make sense. This is further enhanced with bold, clashing colors and shifting perspectives that manifest into dream-like landscapes.

Her work belongs to many prominent museum collections including the Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; the Denver Museum of Art, Denver, CO; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, FL; the Jorge M. Perez Collection, Miami, FL; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; the M Woods Museum, Beijing, China; the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; and the Whitney Museum of Art, New York, NY; among others.

Featured image: Shara Hughes - Reaching My Plateau, 2016, via [Jonathan Lurie](#).



Paul Mpagi Sepuya

An American photographer and artist, **Paul Mpagi Sepuya** is driven by a critical understanding of art history, deconstructing archetypal subjects like the male nude and self-portrait from a specific queer perspective. Using his friends, lovers or acquaintance as subjects and enabling them to become **active collaborators**, Sepuya breaks the traditional relation between the subject and the author, examining both the individual and collective, personal and political.

Meditating on the fragmentation of queer and photographed bodies, he creates this **erotic queer space** where experimentation is possible. As he once explained, he wants *"these queer, black photographs to exist within historic and contemporary conversations about photography as a whole, affirming the medium and my personal investment in its possible futures."*