

GAGOSIAN

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At Gagosian, Art That Reverberates Beyond the Gallery Walls
In a show curated by the critic Antwaun Sargent, “Black art” and “social practice” are not just market-ready concepts.

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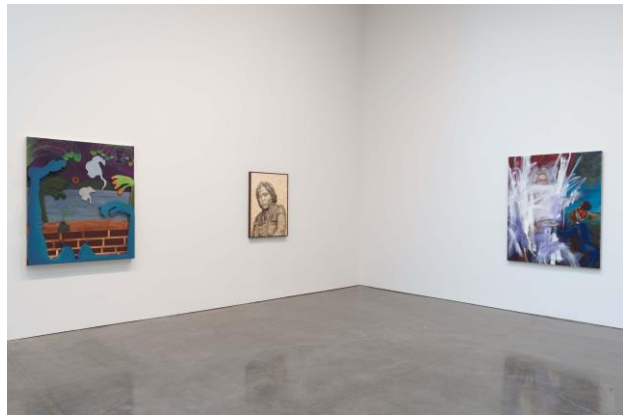
*Installation view of “Social Works” at Gagosian. From left, Lauren Halsey’s “Black History Wall of Respect (II),” 2021; Theaster Gates’s “Burn Baby Burn,” 2016; Gates’s “A Song for Frankie,” 2017-2021; and Halsey’s “Watts Happening,” 2021
©Robert McKeever, via Gagosian*

There’s a chill breeze blowing through Gagosian’s West 24th Street galleries this summer in the form of the group show “Social Works,” organized by Antwaun Sargent — curator, critic and author of “The New Black Vanguard: Photography Between Art and Fashion” — in his debut project as a Gagosian director.

The 12 artists span generations and formal disciplines. And in the work here, much of it made during the past pandemic-gripped year, they survey some of the wide social landscape encompassed by Black as an identity. Part of the terrain lies in textbook history. The “bitter trade” in Titus Kaphar’s painting of that title is European colonialism and slavery. A turbulently textured wall relief by Allana Clarke, made from rubber and hair-bonding glue and titled “There Was Nothing Left for Us,” suggests a silhouette of continental Africa. Four large abstract collage paintings by the architect and social organizer Rick Lowe, of Project Row Houses fame, take the 1921 destruction of “Black Wall Street” in Tulsa, Okla., as their subject and evoke aerial maps of wartime bombings.



Taking the tragic history of the Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa as his subject, Rick Lowe created "Black Wall Street Journey #5" (2021), an acrylic and paper collage that resembles an aerial map of wartime bombings. ©Rick Lowe and Gagosian



From left, Alexandria Smith's "Iterations of a Galaxy Beyond the Pedestal," 2021; Kenturah Davis's "The Bodily Effect of a Color (Sam)," 2021; and Titus Kaphar's "A Bitter Trade," 2020. ©Robert McKeever, via Gagosian

The show also brings the defining of Black social territory into the proactive present. Theaster Gates, who is spearheading an effort to revitalize Chicago's South Side, resurrects the spirit of the local pop deity D.J. Frankie Knuckles (1955-2014) in an altar-like installation made of 5,000 record albums once owned by this Chicago house-music pioneer. In a series of big boxy sculptures, Lauren Halsey quotes commercial signage from South Central Los Angeles to give a sense of changing daily life in the gentrifying neighborhood where she grew up. "Yes we're open and yes we're Black owned," reads one piece. "Sons of Watts Community Patrol" reads another. The largest piece, "Black History Wall of Respect (II)" needs no texts: The portraits, of protective spirits of place from Malcolm X to Nina Simone, speak for themselves.

Halsey's investment in her neighborhood also has practical, street-level extension. She has helped establish a food bank there, called Summaeverythang, which brings fresh, free organic produce to the South Los Angeles "food desert" community. And she has had a powerful example in the work of the influential art historian and gallerist Linda Goode Bryant who, in 2009 in New York City, created the urban farming initiative called Project EATS, a full-scale demonstration model of which is at Gagosian.



Works by Lauren Halsey, all from 2021, from left, “Dis n Dat,” “Venus n Serena,” “Watts Pure Produce,” “Highly Favored (II),” and “Yes We’re Open and Yes We’re Black Owned.” ©Robert McKeever, via Gagosian



Linda Goode Bryant and Elizabeth Diller, “Are We Really That Different?” (2021), presents a model of urban farming, based on Bryant’s community-based Project EATS. ©Robert McKeever, via Gagosian

In 1970s and ’80s, with her gallery Just Above Midtown, Bryant changed the city’s cultural landscape by introducing contemporary Black artists to the larger art audience. In this too, younger figures like Kaphar are following her lead. A few years ago, he co-founded NXTHVN, a dynamic mentoring workshop in New Haven, Conn., where he lives. Five artists who have emerged from it — Clarke, Zalika Azim, Kenturah Davis, Christie Neptune and Alexandria Smith — are in Sargent’s exhibition.

In short, the show usefully scrambles current market-ready definitions of “Black art” (there’s almost no figure painting here) and locates “social practice” art both inside and outside the conventional art world of galleries and museums. Gagosian is, of course, deeply inside that world and deeply conventional in every way. In fact, the single most surprising thing about “Social Works” is finding it there at all. So it will be interesting to see whether Black artists will remain occasional visitors or become full-time settlers on this particular patch of market turf. And it will be interesting to see how far the gallery will let a smart new director expand the field.