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Natalie Haddad, "Four Artists Recall a Year to Forget," *Hyperallergic*, January 2, 2021.

HYPERALLERGIC

Art

Four Artists Recall a Year to Forget

Judith Bernstein, Carroll Dunham, Alia Ali, and Tomashi Jackson talk about what got them through 2020.

by Natalie Haddad | January 2, 2021

Despite the difficulties and restrictions imposed upon galleries and museums by the pandemic, many artists continued to work and exhibit. Among the artists who maintained a busy practice in 2020 were Alia Ali, Judith Bernstein, Carroll Dunham, and Tomashi Jackson, who all undertook new projects, participated in talks, opened multiple in-person and online exhibitions, and found ways to overcome the physical and mental barriers that arose for many creatives over the year.

The artists shared by email the impact of the year's manifold crises on their art and the challenges of working in 2020. The responses below have been edited for length and clarity.

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IMPACT ON MOTIVATION AND PRACTICE

Judith Bernstein: It's always super important to me to continue my work, mostly for my own sanity and also for my legacy. It's hard to make art because there is a malaise, a depression, that is endemic to this timeframe, with the virus, all the deaths across the US and the globe, the election frenzy, and the economic downturn. This timeframe has shone a spotlight on systemic racism directed toward people of color, in addition to the injustices relating to their health and economic issues. It's an extremely trying time.

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Judith Bernstein, "Hot Hand (Blue)" (2020), acrylic on canvas, 89.5 x 89.5 inches (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Alia Ali: COVID has revealed a lot about the people and institutions that we are taught to trust most, like our governments and healthcare systems. We've realized that we can't rely on them and instead we have to rely on ourselves. When we find ourselves in these particularly vulnerable circumstances, times when we feel so paralyzed, I think these are the moments when art becomes really substantial, significant, and quite literally moving.

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JB: My work has always been political, and has always been driven by an activist mindset. This year was even more of a motivation to make my voice heard.

Carroll Dunham: Not in an obvious way, but I assume in hindsight such things might be more clear.

AA: Art sets us in places of emotion and motion. Exploring these things has always been a goal in my work. I think what really motivated me to continue to be critical about what is happening was the desire to provide alternative ways of seeing for people who are experiencing the world as dystopic, perhaps for the very first time.

Tomashi Jackson: We all just kept meeting and checking in and having phone calls to figure out how to get the work done, even as some definitions changed beneath our feet. I am supported even though I cannot physically be with my teams in New York City or Los Angeles right now. I don't feel alone too often.



Carroll Dunham, "Big Men (1)" (2019-2020), urethane, acrylic and pencil on linen, 84 x 65 inches
(courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery)

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JB: I made some paintings that dealt directly with this timeframe: works related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the word “corona” specifically; works having to do with the Black Lives Matter movement and the surge of protests spurred on by the murder of George Floyd. Also included were several anti-Trump paintings that shine a light on the corruption, hypocrisy, and horror of his presidency. I show Trump for what he is: a fool and a monster capable of taking down our democracy. Like Count Dracula, Trump can continue to resurface, now and after he leaves the White House. As I said in my *Cabinet of Horrors* show at the Drawing Center (2017), Count Trump has turned into Frankenschlong!

TJ: In Cambridge, Massachusetts, I worked on a solo show of new works on paper at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University, returning to my research interest in the history of school desegregation in the United States. With COVID-19 necessitating immediate sheltering in place, that effort, with my team of student research assistants, became focused on the publication for the postponed exhibition, which is a collection of transcribed interviews conducted in isolation and archival documents from the lives of Pauli Murray and Ruth Batson.

AA: My work focuses, particularly over the last two years, on migration, borders, and the crisis in Yemen, and obviously things that have happened socially and politically over the last year have really affected those themes. In terms of navigating particular ideas in my work, intellectually things didn’t change much. But these recent lockdowns in response to COVID have given me more room to concentrate, and to focus on digging deeper into some of these ideas.

It felt like while everything was at a standstill, it was exactly the moment in which we, as artists, had an opportunity to do the opposite. Not to stand still but to activate new narratives, ideas, and thoughts.

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Installation view of *Tomashi Jackson: Love Rollercoaster*, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio
(photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

TJ: Continuing to work has helped me not to descend into outright despair at times. Sometimes the deadlines are lifelines. I didn't expect to enjoy the studio visits over Zoom with students so much. They take a lot of energy. A lot. But I recall being so inspired and uplifted by many of the visits and how we are all making what we can wherever we are.

During the emergency pivoting that happened in March and April, I did a lot of thinking and rethinking about how to create accessibility to an exhibition through cross-institutional programming collaborations, so I will have to return to those cross-disciplinary experiments as well.

CD: I can't answer that question [of motivation] under "normal" conditions and I have no good answer now. Art appears to be my "purpose," and it wants to be served. I am very available at this point in my life so there is a lot to do.

CHALLENGES TO CREATING AND EXHIBITING ART

JB: So much is online now, and will remain so for quite a long period of time, even after the pandemic is over. For my *HOT HANDS* show at the Box [in Los Angeles], I obviously didn't travel there for the show. So we installed it entirely over FaceTime.

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TJ: How do I make whatever the work is? How can that work be made accessible without large gatherings? What do I need to make that happen without endangering myself or those I need to work with? What needs to go where and how will it get there?

Just a lot of teamwork, patience, trust, professionalism, and good cheer. A lot of agility and figuring out new solutions that we never imagined needing when these commitments were made.

CD: The more challenging aspects of my exhibition in New York turned out to be social, not logistical: no opening, none of the usual random encounters, so a complete absence of the usual cues that make things feel “real” in the art scene. This was both very pure and surprisingly disconcerting, and gave me a lot to ponder.



Installation view, Alia Ali, *The Red Star*, featuring multi-channel video projections of the film *Mahjar* (2020), Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College (courtesy the artist)

AA: For someone like me, who is an immigrant and a migrant, where my family, friends, and mentors live in different parts of the world, I am always thinking about the logistics of how my community can experience my work.

Whenever I show my work in exhibitions, I always think about how it is documented and how it will reach the people who cannot actually leave their homes because of accessibility, or because of their passports, or because they're banned from particular countries. This is the case with my family in Yemen, who are banned from the United

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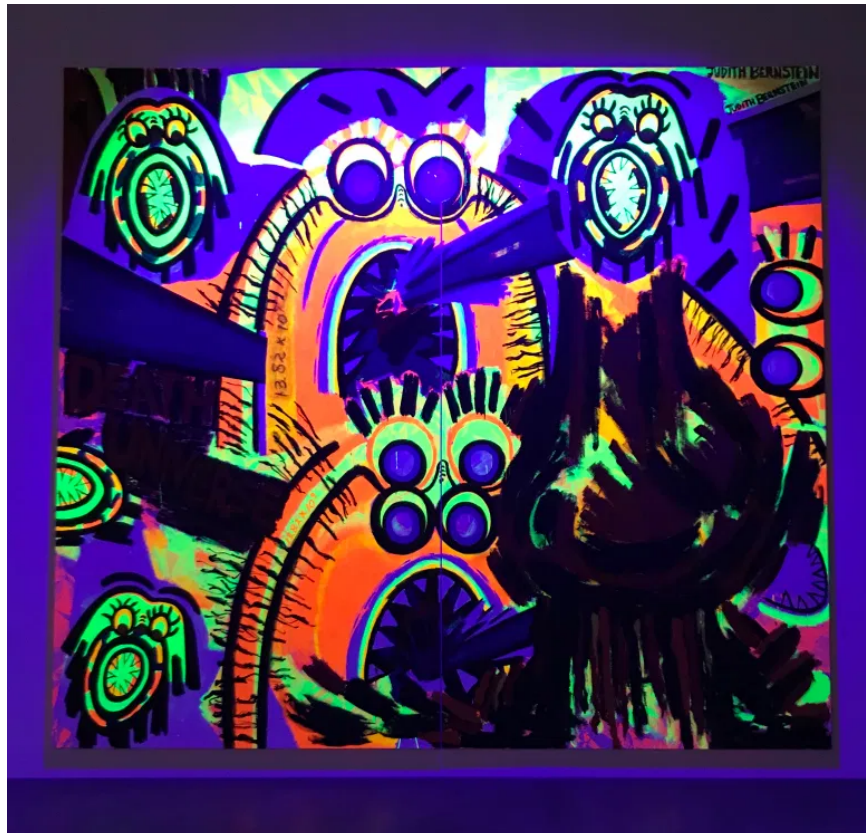
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States, and thus never be able to see my exhibitions in the US. I'm always thinking about how my work is documented so my family can still experience it.

CD: When the lockdown started in March I was already essentially finished with a group of paintings I was planning to exhibit at Gladstone Gallery in New York in the fall. The exhibition ended up happening, a bit later than originally intended, but otherwise as planned. I am making plans with other galleries I work with for projects over the next couple of years, assuming all planning now has to be somewhat provisional but that things will gradually become less unsettled.

AA: Because of the lockdowns, the exhibition and public programs [at the Benton Museum at Pomona College] have been organized in such a way that caters to a much wider audience virtually. In a way, this has allowed for art to transgress borders to an even further extent. Rather than focusing on the negative ways COVID has impacted the art world, I'm choosing to embrace some of these things.



Judith Bernstein, "Death Universe #1" (2018), acrylic and oil on canvas, 150 x 168 inches (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

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SOURCES OF SOLACE OR INSPIRATION

AA: Being able to carve out a path and a radical narrative of potentiality for Yemenis that is different from the one of pain and suffering. The idea of Yemeni Futurism is a huge inspiration in my work. The notion itself draws on different identities, but always comes back to our roots.

Digging into the story of Queen Belquis of Saba'a from 3000 years ago inspired me to dive even deeper into our past, in order to reimagine radical futures 3000 years from now. Being able to spend time in Roswell [Artist-in-Residence program (RAiR), Roswell, New Mexico] gives me a lot of room to draw out this idea of Yemeni Futurism.

TJ: I belong to multiple communities and being among people organizing ourselves with what we have and the generosity of those who support our efforts is grounding and affirming. My best friend inspires me daily with her work that centers on economic democracy for BIPOC communities. I know people in Los Angeles who facilitate fresh food delivery to communities in need and needle exchange for people on the streets suffering both homelessness and crippling addiction during all of this. I am fortunate to have eyes and ears on people who are actively taking this pandemic seriously, not giving up hope, and just leading by example.

JB: Rage. Rage and depression propelled me forward. But also some hugs and kisses from my cat!

TJ: Before everything changed I joined a drag band called D'TALENTZ at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 2019. We created a new music video in isolation from our locations in four American cities — our lip-synced interpretation of Quincy Jones's 1990s classic four-part love song "The Secret Garden." [...] We raised \$9,000 with ticket sales and our REPARATIONS TOUR 2020 concert merchandise that Walk the Walk 2020 dispersed among three BIPOC led community organizations focused on ballot protection in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. People in attendance said it was magical and they could feel it for days afterward. That was amazing.

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Carroll Dunham, "Big Men Up Close/Three" (2019-2020), urethane, acrylic and pencil on linen, 45 x 48 inches (courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery)

CD: My wife and family, friends, books, television, podcasts, YouTube, and the art in my house by others. Thinking about how many times in human history things like what we're going through have happened and the planet still spins.

INSIGHTS FROM 2020

JB: Time keeps moving forward at an extraordinary pace. And it moves even faster for someone who is much older (78, in my case!).

AA: Years ago, when I started my career, one of my mentors and dear friend Stephen Di Renza told me: "If your focus is money, then happiness may or may not come. But if your focus is happiness, you'll get everything."

That phrase continues to be a compass in every decision I make. [...] I think this year stressed the fact that really all we have is our happiness and the people who are closest to us. For me this means taking care of one another, continuing to cook, live, and give love in everything that we do. Sure, being an artist is a profession, but it is also a way of life.

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TJ: Police brutality is indeed a public health crisis. Again and again. Deeply so.

Complete selfishness creates chaos. Kindness eases change.

CD: Keep your side of the street clean, and try to be aware of the time.



Tomashi Jackson, "A Phyx for Crystal Mason in Fort Worth, TX" (2020), archival print on PVC marine vinyl, campaign sign, acrylic paint, muslin, safety pins, acrylic yarn, American canvas, 86 x 53 x 2 inches (courtesy the artist and Night Gallery)

*Alia Ali's exhibition **FLUX** ran from February 21 to November 15, 2020, at the New Orleans Museum of Art, and in May 2020 she completed her MFA at CalArts. Her current exhibition, **Project Series 53**, at the Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College (September 1, 2020-May 16, 2021), features two large-scale installations, حب // LOVE and النجم الأحمر // The Red Star; the latter includes her film مهجر // Mahjar and explores the theme of Yemeni Futurism. In collaboration with Kimberly Varella of Content Object Design Studio, she produced a catalogue to accompany the Benton exhibition, with contributions from Rebecca McGrew, Daphnide Toussaint, and Michael Rakowitz. She is based in Los Angeles and Marrakech and is currently a resident in the Roswell Artist-in-Residence program (RAiR) in Roswell, New Mexico.*

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*Judith Bernstein's exhibition of new paintings, **Hot Hands**, opened at the Box in Los Angeles in October (through January 23, 2021), and she held two online exhibitions in 2020, at Kasmin Gallery and Venus Over Manhattan, both in New York. In addition, she produced a project, GASLIGHTING, for Artforum and participated in Zoom panels for the New Museum, the Jewish Museum, and several other institutions. Her work was included in the publications A Woman's Right to Pleasure by Amir Marashi and Truth Bomb by Abigail Crompton. She made videos for the New Museum, the Brooklyn Rail, the Box, and Kunsthall Stavanger in Norway, and worked on a zine with Carroll Dunham for King Kong magazine. A founding member of AIR Gallery and a former Guerrilla Girl, Bernstein is preparing for a 2021 solo exhibition at Karma International in Zurich. "And in addition to all this," she says, "I worked on new paintings! What a year!"*

*Carroll Dunham's current exhibition of new work opened at **Gladstone Gallery** in New York on November 18 (through January 9, 2021). The show was preceded by one of recent monotypes at **Gladstone Gallery** in Brussels (March 13-July 11, 2020) as well as an exhibition of paintings at **Gerhardsen Gerner** in Oslo (May 14-June 20, 2020) and one of drawings from 1990 to 2009 at **James Barron Art** in Kent, Connecticut (February 4-March 1, 2020). Dunham has been exhibiting his paintings and drawings since the 1970s and has had nearly 100 solo exhibitions since 1980; in 2004 he received the Skowhegan Medal for Distinction in Painting. His work is included in multiple public collections worldwide. His collaboration with Judith Bernstein for King Kong magazine will be released this month.*

*In 2020 New York-based multimedia artist Tomashi Jackson won the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant and had solo exhibitions at Night Gallery in Los Angeles (**Forever My Lady**, January 11-February 8, 2020) and the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio (**Love Rollercoaster**, September 26-December 21, 2020), which examined the origins of democracy and voter suppression. She is currently conducting research for an upcoming show at the Parrish Museum (originally scheduled for 2020), part of a residency at the Watermill Center, and another at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University. Outside of visual art she is a member of a drag cover band, D'Talentz, with former Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture colleagues, and in her free time, she relates, "I started a garden on our porch, which was the first time I ever kept things alive in pots and produced things that we could eat."*
