

I'M WITH HER

We visit the studios of five Los Angeles women who are redefining the art world from the Left Coast.

"Every 10 years or so becomes another 'year of the woman,' " says feminist art critic and curator Jenni Sorkin, who played a very big part in making 2016 one of those years by co-curating "Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947-2016" with Paul Schimmel for the March opening of Hauser Wirth & Schimmel in Downtown L.A. In the wake of that show, the gallery gave its fall slots to two other female powerhouses: Maria Lassnig and Isa Genzken. Meanwhile, the Broad's debut special exhibition was filled with 120 works by Cindy Sherman, just as Catherine Opie pulled the rare L.A. trifecta with concurrent shows at LACMA, MOCA and the Hammer Museum. And that's to say nothing of the numerous rising stars making their debuts at a raft of pioneering female-helmed galleries (like Various Small Fires, Shulamit Nazarian, Honor Fraser, Ltd Los Angeles, Harmony Murphy and Night Gallery).

Still, says Sorkin, despite this year's recent flurry of activity—or the possibility of the first female POTUS—we're still far from parity for women artists in museum collections, solo exhibitions and gallery representation at large. "There is still so much work to be done," says Sorkin. "Let me be clear: I am very proud of 'RITM.' It is an important group show that consciously crafts an argument that abstract sculpture by women in the post-war period to the present absolutely changes the terms of historical engagement, as the canon has largely focused on male abstract painters. It offers an alternate historical trajectory. Group shows can initiate new ideas, but they cannot create systemic institutional change."

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE
PRODUCED BY TAL JAFFE



PHOTO © BRIGITTE SIRE, 2016; COURTESY THE ARTIST VICTORIA MIRO, LONDON



NJIDEKA AKUNYILI CROSBY

When Nigerian-born artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby opens the door to her East L.A. studio, it's not the optical overload of her densely collaged figurative paintings pulsing from the walls that first catches my attention. Nor is it the box of gigantic grapefruit picked fresh from her Highland Park yard on one of the work tables. Or the hundreds of vintage reference images of family, friends or socialites in the pages of *Ovation* magazine (Nigeria's analogue to *US Weekly*) that are scattered about the floors of this former furniture shop. No, it's two words printed down the left side of a faded blue T-shirt she's wearing: "Slow Down." Wishful thinking for the 33-year-old rising star, whose increasingly coveted works on paper can't leave the studio fast enough. Often built from family or staged photos shot with her husband, they're rendered in acrylic shaded with pencils, which are then layered with hundreds of acetone photo transfers (of, say, Nigerian star Genevieve Nnaji, fashion ads from Lagos-based designer Maki Oh, or street photos the artist snapped on trips home), as well as a diminishing supply of ceremonial aso-ebi fabrics, from her brother's wedding or her mother's senate campaign. Within the process, Akunyili Crosby's materialist mash-ups juxtapose everything from African dictators to American pop, the influence of blaxploitation movies on Nigerian street style to British colonialism and the works of Vilhelm Hammershøi to Josef Albers via seductive patchworks whose unique visual language winks at the art historical while simultaneously writing a new chapter.

In the past year alone, Akunyili Crosby—whose first name is pronounced "nnn-jee-deh-car"—has participated in several group shows (including the Whitney's current portraiture survey, "Human Interest") and five solo efforts (at L.A.'s Hammer Museum, Mark Bradford's Art + Practice, the Norton Museum of Art, the Whitney's billboard project and London's Victoria Miro Gallery, where she'll

make her solo European debut in October), while earning a spot on *Foreign Policy*'s 2015 list of the Leading Global Thinkers.

"There's only so much I can make," she laughs, admitting she took on an assistant for the first time in her career to help prep for the highly anticipated London exhibition. Pointing to a massive blank sheet of French cotton paper, affixed with a black and white portrait of her aunt wearing a flower dress while sitting atop the lap of Akunyili Crosby's maternal grandmother, she adds, "Sometimes I start with just one idea, sometimes I know what the whole piece will be, but for this one I just know that I want to have this image in it."

Much like her paintings, Akunyili Crosby's life is a cross-cultural layer cake: She grew up lower-middle class and Igbo (indigenous people from southern Nigeria) in a provincial eastern town only to leapfrog into the high life in Lagos and Abuja when her mother went from being an unknown professor of pharmacology to helming Nigeria's Food and Drug Administration and, later, the Ministry of Information. After moving to the U.S. at age 16, Akunyili Crosby attended Swarthmore, where she met her future husband, an American sculptor. The two then moved to L.A. after he got accepted to CalArts.

"It's a weird space when you grow up poor then end up with this other class because you don't really feel like you fit anywhere," says Akunyili Crosby, who hopes to reconnect with humbler roots through a 2017 textile project which will incorporate a custom commemorative photo fabric of her design invoking her wedding (which was actually attended by the former Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan) that will later be reinterpreted by Mexican artisans. "What happens if I have this traditional thing created this whole other way, what would that translation do?" she asks. "That could add a whole other fascinating next level."

PORTRAIT BY BRIGITTE SIRE



KATHRYN ANDREWS

Walking into the Highland Park studio of Kathryn Andrews one could easily get the impression of entering into an avant-garde architecture firm that doubles as a novelty shop. In the front office you'll find schematics for *Sunbathers I* and *Sunbathers II*, the fanning and spritzing monoliths (one emblazoned with the phrase "Beyond This Point You May Encounter Nude Sunbathers") that have adorned Manhattan's High Line since May. Her storage areas brim with precisely coded boxes of performance props and found objects, everything from Vegas coffee cups to vintage beer cans and color-coded cigarette boxes. Meanwhile, the studio is filled with photo proofs for her recent *Door Girl* sculptures (life-sized portraits of American Apparel-esque models in absurdist poses framed inside steel doors) and various movie props in one corner vying for placement in future concepts—think Lucille Ball lipstick prints and the front page of "The Gotham Globe" from *Batman Forever*. It's all part and parcel of an increasingly complex sculptural practice mining the intersections of advertising appropriation and Pop icons, Minimalism and market politics.

"The work really deals with how we see images and materials differently," says Andrews. "I try to set up situations that add a variety of ways of looking. Take the logics of Pop Art and Minimalism; I'm interested in what happens when we collide the lessons of the two."

What began about six years ago with a simple exploration of birthdays and clowns as fodder (Warhol-meets-Heilmann paintings of candles or shiny metal fences anchoring balloons and rainbow-colored costumes that come with rules for

exhibition/ownership) has turned into a world of Andrews tropes—not unlike those mined by her former boss Mike Kelley—which now include Santas, Easter Bunnies, hobos and superheroes.

"It's like a system that's branching," she explains. Last fall, those branches spread into the political sphere with "Kathryn Andrews: Run for President," a traveling mid-career survey that debuted at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in November and just opened at the Nasher Sculpture Center on September 10. It includes paintings depicting historic Presidential campaign posters while housing well-known costumes for the Joker, Spider-Man or Wee Man embedded with the outfits worn by Jack Nicholson, Tobey Maguire and the *Jackass* star Jason Acuña. It even explores the subversive identity politics of Mr. T, as captured in a photo of him at a White House Christmas party wearing a Star of David chain and a sleeveless Santa suit, with Nancy Reagan perched on his lap.

This fall she's ratcheting up the dark humor even further with her *Black Bar* wall works for her new solo show at L.A.'s David Kordansky gallery opening in November. The shadow-box-like sculptures feature hand-silkscreened images of girls, picnic foods, cartoons and sharks hidden behind a layer of printed Plexiglas.

"I'm very interested in the phenomenon of how we want to view an artwork as a self-contained, autonomous, unchanging thing," she says. "But there's an inherent problem with that way of thinking because the second you put it in a new context, it takes on a new meaning."

PORTRAIT BY STEVEN PERILLOUX



EVE FOWLER

Most people know Eve Fowler via her Day-Glo posters featuring pungent snippets of verse from Gertrude Stein (*The Difference Is Spreading; Anyone Telling Anything Is Telling That Thing; Rub Her Coke*), or as the creative force behind Artist Curated Projects, the acclaimed gallery at her Hollywood apartment that has given early shows to promising Angeleno newcomers like Dashiell Manley, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer and Alex Becerra over the past eight years. But when Fowler was first emerging on the scene in the mid '90s, after getting her MFA in art and photography from Yale, the Philadelphia-born artist earned her stripes with a four-year portraiture project capturing gay male hustlers on the streets of New York and Los Angeles, some of which are now in the permanent collections at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and in newsprint books sold at Printed Matter.

"I did it in part to say something about identity politics, because I really wanted to connect to something that was gay," says Fowler, who followed that work with erotic images of her girlfriends and lesbian luminaries (like K8 Hardy in crotchless pants) and a series of "wrapped books"—first shown in 2010 at Kathryn Andrews' home gallery, Apartment 2—comprised of tables full of '70s and '80s texts sourced from the sale racks of the One National Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles that she wrapped in Xeroxed paper collages of vintage photos, old *Artforum* pages and archival gay rights imagery. Around this time, she was also making photograms with Anna Sew Hoy (under the banner of Two Serious Ladies), launched ACP (to address "the artist's lack of power") and began pouring over

lists of gay books and films, which got her reading Stein's "Tender Buttons."

"I had been reading so many books with gay content for a few years, but I was struck by this because it was written in 1914 and seemed so coded and queer," says Fowler, who was given a free studio by her former partner in ACP and started printing Stein's lines on Colby posters—first, *This Is It With It As It Is*; then, *It is so, is it so, is it so, is it so is it so is it so.*, which was later immortalized in oil by Nicole Eisenman—which she tacked to telephone poles between Downtown L.A. and Hollywood. Fatefully, she received some instant (and instantly rewarding) validation from an unlikely source.

"The second after I put one up this kid came over and said, 'What does that mean?' I said, 'It's from a poet named Gertrude Stein. It doesn't necessarily have to mean anything,'" recalls Fowler. "He said, 'Cool, it's like music.'" Six years on, Fowler's musical text works have become their own icons: now in paintings made to resemble '60s and '70s graphic design, walnut sculptures with bronze inlays, billboards, and a new series of red, white and blue collages clipped from earlier collages featuring every line from every Stein text, which will soon grace the walls of New York's Participant, Inc. While Fowler is fiercely devoted to ACP, she argues her own work is ultimately about frustrations that ironically mimic those of Stein, the ultimate Gladwellian connector who gave platforms to countless famous artists while toiling (largely) in the shadows during her lifetime.

"People know who she is as a cultural figure who helped Picasso and Matisse but even today people still don't read her books," says Fowler. "I really do understand that frustration."

PORTRAIT BY STEVEN PERILLOUX

Paint
how
wear



ANNA SEW HOY

Though Anna Sew Hoy's mother taught art in Auckland—and befriended top Kiwi practitioners like Terry Stringer and Robin White during her daughter's infancy—becoming an artist wasn't really an option for the younger Sew Hoy as a teenager in Santa Monica, California. "I was steered toward classical violin and to be a doctor or something," says Sew Hoy, "that Asian immigrant cliché." Her orthopedic surgeon father did, however, give her some creative license with his stainless steel hip replacements as a child. Years later, he cast her wrist and ankle for *POW!*, Sew Hoy's 2008 installation at LA><ART that featured the two life-size plaster casts (visitors signed the wrist and tagged it with "Vote Obama" slogans). "It was to show the passing down of manual knowledge and how this cannot happen through reading," she explains. In a subsequent opening at the Art, Design & Architecture Museum at the University of California, Santa Barbara, visitors inked the ankle cast with lines of scripture that were later crossed out (causing a minor controversy).

"It's sort of like a public square for two hours. If you did it today it would all be Black Lives Matter and Trump signs," says Sew Hoy. Her works have certainly skewed more conceptual since she studied with Lynda Benglis and Alice Aycock at New York's School

of Visual Arts: tumbleweeds made of Sapporo beer cans; stoneware dreamcatchers; faceted orbs that contain viewfinder-esque holes that are glazed on the inside, wrapped in cloth, and filled with sunglass lenses and hangers made of extruded clay, dressed in denim. Still, everything for the Chinese-American artist goes back to the body and her early love of Rodin.

"In art school these days we talk about de-skilling, but my sculpture is handmade so it's made to be viewed in the round, and it's definitely made with the person looking at it in mind—it anticipates that," says Sew Hoy, whose recent shows at L.A.'s Various Small Fires and New York's Koenig Clinton feature examples of her *Mirror Blob*, a work fitted with mirrors inspired by those in the rafters of Shinto temples. Meanwhile, the artist's *Psychic Body Grotto*, a new bronze "figurative gazebo," is destined for the Los Angeles State Historic Park this fall.

"There's going to be a multiplicity of surfaces," says Sew Hoy of the flowing, wasabi-like texture of the *Grotto*, which she first mastered with plaster while creating a piece representing the sushi condiment at SVA. "It's a lookout place for unexpected things to happen and it's against the Cartesian," she says, asking, "Why do rooms always need right angles?"

PORTRAIT BY STEVEN PERILLOUX



SOJOURNER TRUTH PARSONS

In an era when identity politics are so prevalent, specifically in the U.S., it's easy to trivialize the travails of our neighbors to the north. Imagine the journey of a Black-Mi'kmaq-Caucasian Canadian painter born to an absentee father and a single mother who enlisted a craft-crazed grandmother to watch her child while she earned a living as a graphic designer for a television station in Victoria, British Columbia.

"My nana was a knitter. She made crazy shit around me all the time, blankets and sweaters and hats with so many colors and patterns, but I felt really strange growing up," says Sojourner Truth Parsons. Her name was picked out by her mother who was visiting a Judy Chicago exhibit in 1984 when baby Sojourner kicked as she was passing a reference to the 19th century abolitionist and activist.

Though she wanted to "be a star" as a child, Truth Parsons' younger sister—now a professional dancer and choreographer—proved the more talented performer. "I would always draw out the things I wanted to be," she explains of her early sketches of legs doing splits or turns. "I just pull from my life. My dad wasn't around much when I was growing up so I had all these watercolors of this black man. It's always been an expression of a personal journey."

After graduating from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and burning through a few Canadian galleries, Truth Parsons' journey ultimately led her to a residency at New Mexico's Santa Fe Art Institute in 2014, where she used sand, acrylic and ceramic to make collaged canvases with warm colors and pink poodles to tackle notions of rejection and shame. That year she also connected with Davida Nemeroff and Mieke Marple, the founders of Los Angeles' Night Gallery, who invited Truth Parsons to show these works in "Hot House," their 2014 pop-up show in Harlem during New York's Frieze Week. A year

later, she ducked out to Mexico City "to get away for a bit," but Nemeroff encouraged her to come back to the States and check out L.A. for a few months in order to make a new body of work.

"When I first got here, I was out at the Beverly Hills Hotel and the Chateau Marmont and I was really overwhelmed. I'm sober so I'd just be talking to these beautiful lips, mouths and cigarettes. That's what was coming at me, these glamorous, weird experiences," says Truth Parsons over a kombucha in her new light-and-flower-filled loft studio overlooking Downtown L.A. Evoking the single point perspectives of Matisse interiors, Tom Wesselmann's early Pop Art icons, the sex appeal of Patrick Nagel posters and the dark beauty of Hollywood glitz, her sand-covered acrylic collages and canvases were an instant hit with collectors and earned Truth Parsons shows this year at New York's Tomorrow Gallery and Night, where she will make her solo debut September 16. While she could easily forge a factory from her recent works, Truth Parsons lives by the Rosemarie Trockel adage: "The minute something works, it ceases to be interesting. As soon as you have spelled something out, you should set it aside."

"I don't think the world needs more objects. You don't need my painting in that way. What I can offer is my feelings and emotions towards the world," she says. "I'm looking at art through my heart. Maybe that's selfish, but I want to find something I didn't know was there."

While this "selfishness" led her to painting scenes of women looking away from the viewer for Tomorrow—reflecting her retreat from the Hollywood fast life into a more domestic existence in Pasadena—Truth Parsons is showing an entirely new body of work at Night about "women, women, women and the sun," she says. "I want to find the painting, I don't want to make it. It's so much about vibes."

PORTRAIT BY STEVEN PERILLOUX

