

Top 10 post-pandemic art exhibitions in a world still testing positive for Covid

Exhibitions throughout the year echoed hope and anticipation — and an on-going frustration.



Petroglyphs found on the Indian Head Trail in Big Bend National Park. Photo by Barbara Purcell.

By **Barbara Purcell** - December 21, 2021



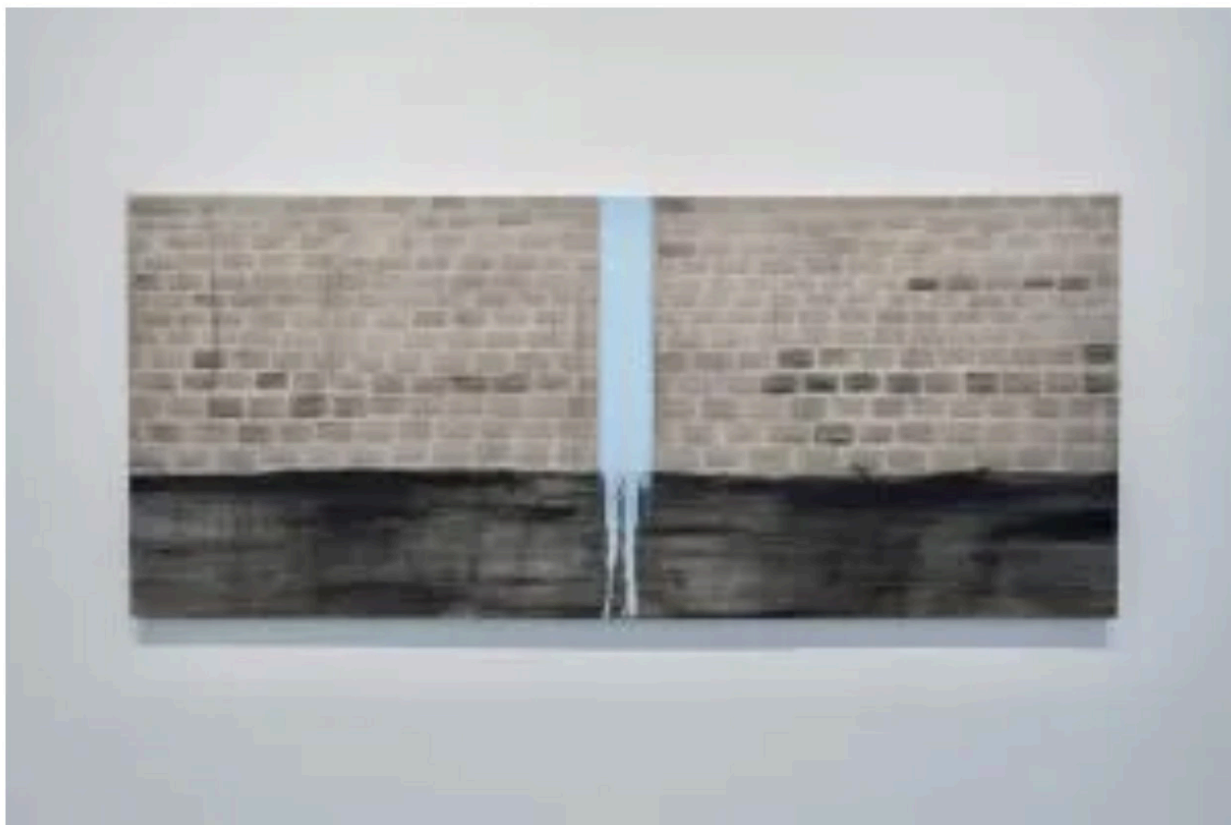
If there is one thing we've learned in 2021, it's that "post-pandemic" is nothing more than a quaint little term. Exhibitions throughout the year seconded this notion, ranging from hope and anticipation to on-going frustration. Listed chronologically are my top 10 art picks in a world still testing positive for Covid.



More than 40 artists are featured in the pop-up exhibition "The Femme Abstract." Photo by Barbara Purcell

"The Femme Abstract"

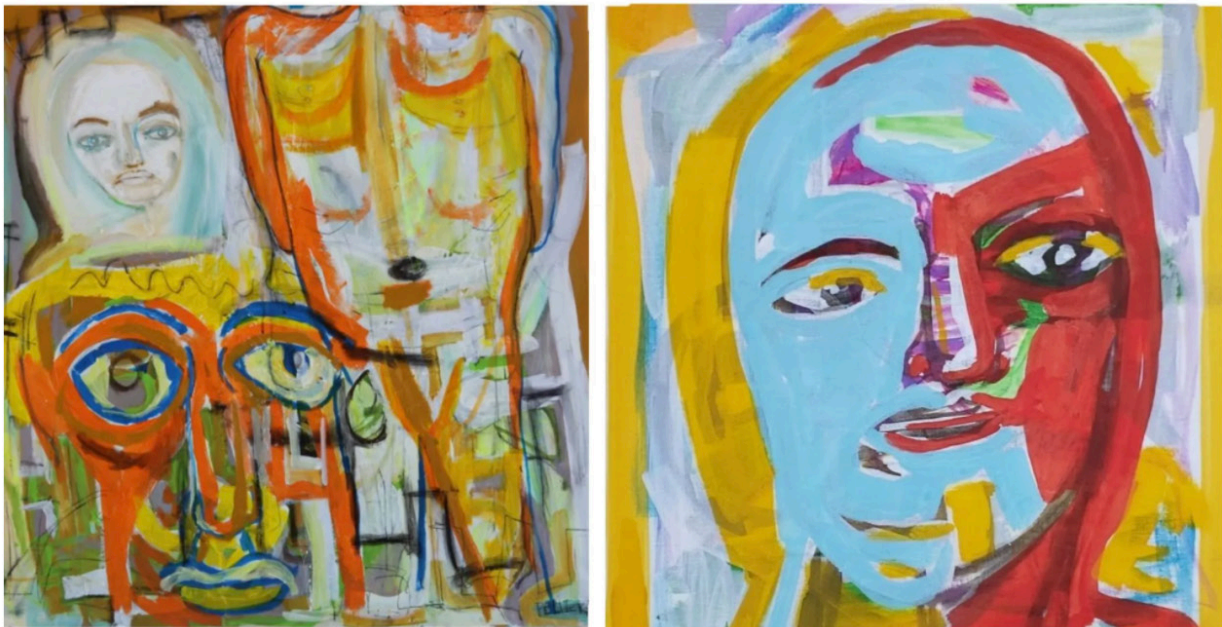
This [tellement belle group show](#), which featured over 40 local female artists, energetically ushered in 2021 just hours before the ball dropped. Curator Moya McIntyre took over an empty 20,000-square-foot office space in East Austin for the two-month pop-up that woke up the art scene after nearly a year of hibernation. Sumptuous sculptures and paintings, along with theatric installations, made for an auspicious start to a year already deemed infinitely better than its predecessor.



Renee Lai, "Bricks & Blue," 2020, oil paint and graphite on linen, 36 x 84 inches. Courtesy the artist and Grayduck Gallery

"Renee Lai: A Study of Fences"

Lai's [solo show at grayDUCK Gallery](#) in January featured a series of paintings and drawings inspired by the various picket fences found in the artist's own Austin neighborhood. But their ominous shapes and shadows reconsidered the idyllic archetype of the white picket fence as something more sinister. Lai's uneasy depictions of suburban enclosures spoke to the barriers, both physical and invisible, put into place by a society increasingly polarized by fear.



Jerome Pelitera's paintings on exhibit at the Zilker Gallery, in the Barbara Jordan Terminal at the Austin Bergstrom International Airport, including "Garden" (left) and "Abelia."

"Jerome Pelitera: Before We Take Off"

This [one-man painting exhibition](#) was held in one of the more unusual galleries in town: Austin International Bergstrom Airport. (Across from Gate 17.) The pandemic presented a golden opportunity to artist (and airline employee) Jerome Pelitera, whose six-month solo show featured a cast of bold neo-expressionist faces; the kinds of characters we might avoid sitting next to on a flight, but look great on a wall. As the vaccine rolled out, and passengers rolled onto planes, "Before We Take Off" arrived right on time.



At San Antonio's Artpace, "After Carolee: Tender and Fierce" considers woman-identifying Texas-based artists who cite the pioneering Carolee Schneemann as a major influence. Photo by Beth Devillier, courtesy Artpace.

"After Carolee: Tender and Fierce"

Conceived for ArtPace San Antonio's 25th anniversary, ["After Carolee"](#) celebrated the life and legacy of experimental artist and pioneer Carolee Schneemann through 14 contemporary female artists working in and around Texas. Curator Annette DiMeo Carlozzi assembled a thought-provoking show that responded to the urgency of 2020 while echoing the enduring feminism of Schneemann's praxis from half a century earlier. ArtPace held the exhibition in their Hudson Showroom throughout the springtime, though the uncertainty of the virus kept it in 3D virtual format for much of its run. (An extension into summer finally allowed for limited in-person access.)



Installation view of Manik Raj Nakra's exhibition "Wildlife" at Big Medium. Photo Tednoir Martinez.

"Manik Raj Nakra: Wildlife"

Nakra's solo show at Big Medium last April was an offbeat (if not accurate) assessment of humanity's flailing in the face of COVID. His bindi-inflected paintings of severed animal heads and myths gone awry, served as a gentle reminder that nature will keep on truckin' long after we've destroyed ourselves. Nakra's show was still early days in the promise of a post-pandemic era, but its judicious balance of hope and despair (one painting showed a new planet taking form, while another featured a bevy of decapitated monkey heads) offered an open-ended analysis of a brave new world.



Hannah Spector's "grass thing" in Patterson Park was part of Northern-Southern Gallery's citywide exhibition of 'socially distant wild art,' a pandemic responsive project. Photo: Sightlines

“Northern-Southern’s TOOO”

Curator and organizer Phillip Niemeyer kept Austin entertained throughout lockdown with a series of outdoor dispersed art adventures that sent spectators into the nooks and crannies of a rapidly changing city. [“TOOO” was the gallery’s final outdoor hoorah](#) this past spring, set to end whenever COVID did. With the emergence of the Delta variant, came the cancellation of the gallery’s post-pandemic party in September. But all was not lost: Northern-Southern moved to a new downtown location soon after. (And the unfinished business of TOOO still lingers.)



Matthew Langland, "Hierophant," 2020, acrylic on canvas, 32 x 27 in. Image courtesy the artist

"Matthew Langland: Feedback Loop"

"Feedback Loop" was a Slip 'N Slide into the subconscious over at the West Austin alternative art space goodluckhavefun. Langland's 14 paintings resembled inkblot emblems of comic-book origins, complete with catchy titles that made as much sense as you needed them to. ("Crunch Quest Questionnaire" and "Slogan Eroder" sound even better if you say them 10 times fast.) The artist's style of flat geometric forms and highly contrasted graphics came off as both mythical and psychological, engendering a feeling hard to pinpoint — perfect for a pandemic that keeps changing its tune.



Elizabeth Chiles, "Time Being, no. 14," 2020, archival pigment print on rice paper, 42 x 67 inches. Edition 1 of 5. Courtesy the artist and grayDUCK Gallery

“Elizabeth Chiles: Time Being”

Chiles’ dreamy garden of light and shadow brought viewers back to the more ruminative moments during that first spring of the pandemic.

Photos and photographic collages of delicate flowers, mainly poppies, [enveloped grayDUCK’s walls early this fall](#) with a serene feeling of impermanence. Chiles’ otherworldly images, with their billowy backdrops and near-fantasy feel, peeled back time’s passage layer by layer, until all that remained was a quiet memory from seasons past.



Installation view, Donna Huanca: Espejo Quemada, June 26, 2021–January 2, 2022, Ballroom Marfa. Courtesy the artist and Ballroom Marfa. Photograph by Makenzie Goodman.

“Donna Huanca: Espejo Quemada”

Huanca’s steel circular sculptures and [large-scale abstract paintings at Ballroom Marfa](#) considered time and place on a cosmic scale. The show’s title, which translates from Spanish as “Burnt Mirror,” offered a portal into the unknown, with its multi-sensory installations of scent, sound, and a sense of vastness inspired by the West Texas Desert. The first post-pandemic exhibition for both the artist and institution, “Espejo Quemada” asked its viewers to contemplate the cataclysms and catalysts that continually shape our existence.



Petroglyphs in Big Bend National Park. Photo by Barbara Purcell.

Big Bend Petroglyphs

Ancient rock carvings abound in Big Bend National Park, but the tricky-to-find Indian Head Trail is a treasure trove of petroglyphs that are said to date back more than 5,000 years. One such stone canvas included a date scrawled on top of the original artwork — archeologically annoying to look at, but an antique relic in its own right. (It reads: “July 31, 1902”). Rock art is the right note to end on in a year that went from post to pending: no matter how long this pandemic takes, there’s always a petroglyph to keep things in perspective.