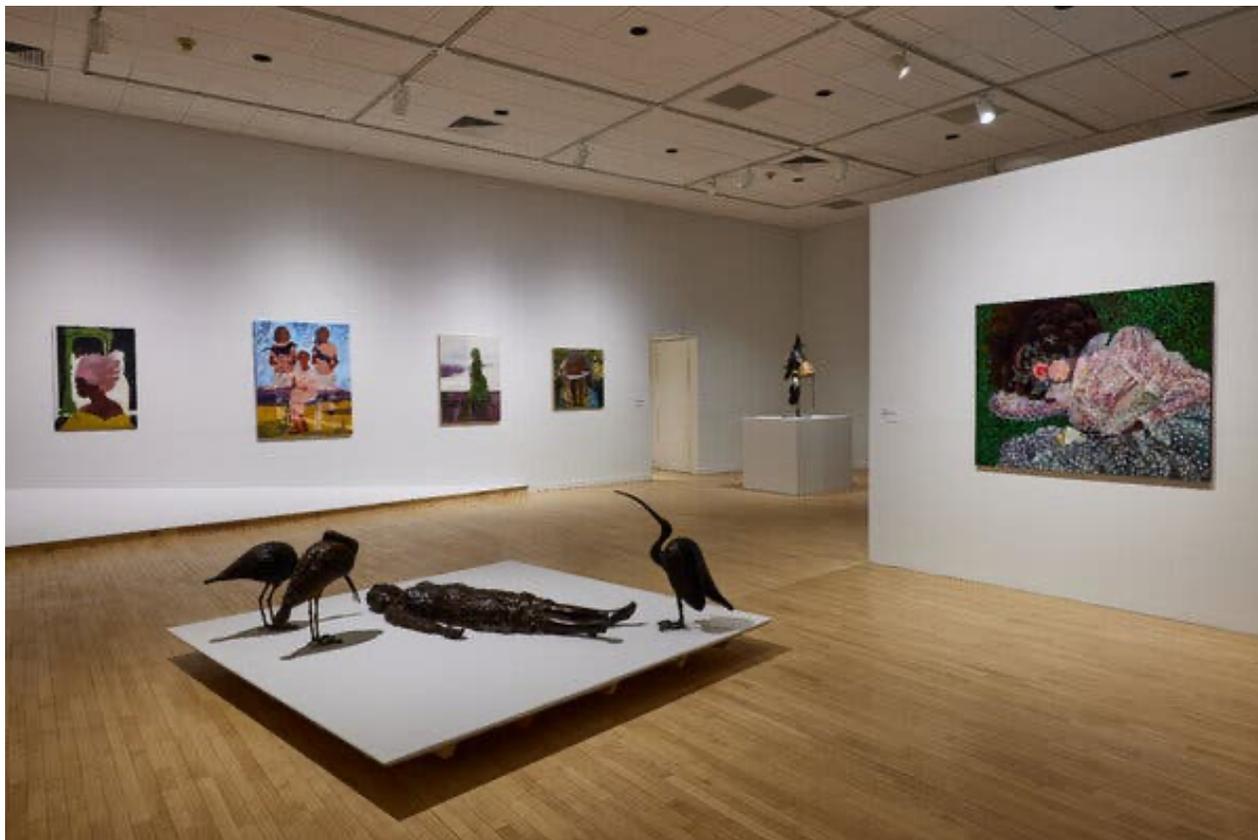


# The New York Times

Rose B. Simpson "3 Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now"

By Holland Cotter, Roberta Smith, and Martha Schwendener

September 1, 2021



Installation view of "Born in Flames: Feminist Futures" at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Clockwise from left, four paintings on the wall by Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum; a sculpture by Rose B. Simpson; a painting by Firelei Báez, and a sculptural tableau by María Berrío. Photo: Argenis Apolinario

Radical feminist futures at the Bronx Museum; February James's excellent New York debut; and sculptures from Argentine Concrete artists.

**'Born in Flames: Feminist Futures'**

Through Sept. 12. Bronx Museum, 1040 Grand Concourse, at 165th Street, Morrisania, 718-681-6000, [bronxmuseum.org](http://bronxmuseum.org) (718) 681-6000, [bronxmuseum.org](http://bronxmuseum.org).

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The Bronx Museum of the Arts, which turned 50 this year, was founded partly as a way of bringing mainstream art from Manhattan to the borough. Its debut exhibition in 1971 featured loans from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In the decades since, the programming has been increasingly responsive to global consciousness and its South Bronx neighborhood, making the museum — which is admission free — one of the most adventurous art spaces in the city.

It's coming on especially strong with its current group exhibition, "Born in Flames: Feminist Futures." The show takes its title from the 1983 film by the American artist Lizzie Borden: a gritty, punky docudrama about a United States in the grip of a moral revolution led by an army of women from across the social, racial and sexual spectrum. The film itself plays continuously in the show, surrounded by work by some of the best artists you'll see anywhere in the city right now.



A still from Lizzie Borden's 1983 film, "Born in Flames." Photo: Argenis Apolinario

Chosen by Jasmine Wahi, the museum's social justice curator, they include some high-profile figures (Firelei [Báez](#), Huma Bhabha, Wangechi Mutu), along with others who have steady visibility but deserve still greater recognition (Chitra Ganesh, Saya Woolfalk, Tourmaline). And of particular interest are artists who are only beginning to be familiar here.

One is the Los Angeles-based Brazilian artist Clarissa Tossin, who made a memorable impression in the Whitney Museum's 2018 exhibition "Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay," and she does again with a maplike woven hanging with an image of the Amazon and Yangtze Rivers, impossibly, meeting and flowing across the gallery floor. In a painting of comparable scale by Caitlin Cherry, figures of women intertwine to create a continuous, pulsating ocean-blue field.

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A shared theme of these pieces — fluid energy — becomes more concrete in other works in which human and natural forms merge. In "Flamingo," a portrait-style painting of a woman by the South African artist Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, human and avian features blend. And in a cast-bronze sculptural tableau by the Colombian-born, Brooklyn-based María Berrío, a prone female figure, guarded by water birds, is dressed in a gown of what seem to be flowering tendrils.



Rose B. Simpson's "The Remembering," 2020, ceramic, metal, wood sticks and leather. Photo: Argenis Apolinario

The Berrío piece is a beauty. So are two ceramic sculptures by Rose B. Simpson, an artist based in New Mexico. In her work, humanlike forms seem to be simultaneously shaped from and melting back into earth, a reminder that environmental awareness has always been intrinsic to feminist art, and still is.

So is the idea of change — physical, political and spiritual. Both the reality of it and the need for it are the messages in a short sci-fi-ish video by the non-binary Canadian performance artist Sin Wai Kin. Titled "Today's Top Stories," it presents the artist in jacket and tie — male news-anchor drag — but with a cosmic vista of planets and deep space as a backdrop. Butterflies flit around as the anchor soothingly delivers a bit of bad news: "You will cease to exist." Which is soon followed by a late-breaking development: "You are immortal."

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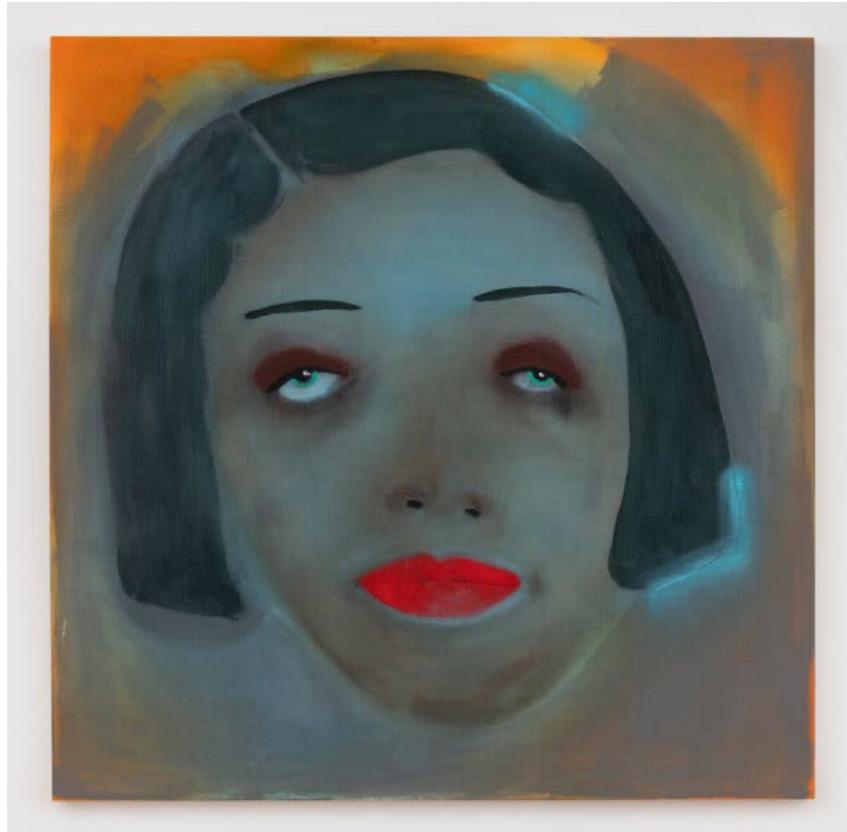
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With their planetary awareness, insistence on transformation and appetite for contradiction, the feminist futures proposed here can't come too soon.

**HOLLAND COTTER**

**February James**

Through Sept. 11. Tilton Gallery, 8 East 76th Street, Manhattan, (212) 737-2221, [jacktiltongallery.com](http://jacktiltongallery.com).



February James's "Change Comes Upon Us Like a Change of Weather" from 2020, oil, oil pastel, watercolor and acrylic on linen. February James and Tilton Gallery

February James's excellent solo debut in New York gives you a lot to work with, starting with its title, "When Chickens Come Home to Roost." It suggests that justice will ultimately be served, that evil always returns to the evildoer's doorstep. That James — in her mid-40s and based in Los Angeles — is a Black self-taught painter who is showing mostly scaled-up faces of women of color adds resonance.

Her seemingly simple color-infused faces have aspects of both caricature and abstraction. With emphatically red lips and tinted eyelids that may recall James's former job as a makeup artist, the women also evoke the techniques from Color Field stain-painting and the artifice of the portraits of the German Expressionists, the Fauves and Beauford Delaney. Given their simple means, they

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have a surprising emotional depth; their often-light-colored eyes, perhaps close to tears, are those of seers perhaps.

James's oracular, Barbara Kruger-ish titles further the effect. "The Thing I Regret Most Are My Silences" is the show's one full-length figure: a blonde wearing only underpants, perhaps confessing to her mirror. Another painting — of a woman turning skeptically toward us — answers with the warning "Your Silence Will Enfold You," a paraphrase of the more dire "Your Silence Will Not Protect You," a book of essays and poems by Audre Lorde. "Change Comes Upon Us Like a Change of Weather" seems right for the relative passivity of a serene and beautiful woman who resembles a 1930s starlet.

The show's title is also that of an installation that is less original than the paintings and centers on a sizable wood chicken coop filled with all kinds of found chicken toys and figurines. But the wood is dotted with faint, ghostly sketches of James's signature faces, which creates some new possibilities.

## ROBERTA SMITH

### 'From Surface to Space'

Through Oct. 30. Institute for Studies on Latin American Art (ISLAA), 50 East 78th Street, Manhattan, [islaa.org](http://islaa.org).



"Elevación del Triángulo" ("Triangle Elevation"), from 1956, by the Argentine artist Enio Iommi. Photo: Enio Iommi and ISLAA

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Concrete art flourished in South America during the postwar years, a strain of geometric abstraction with utopian ambitions to communicate with a universal audience. Its popularity in Argentina and Brazil is often credited to the cross-pollinating influence of the Swiss artist and designer Max Bill (1908-1994), but the show "["From Surface to Space": Max Bill and Concrete Sculpture in Buenos Aires"](#)" makes a case for Argentine innovation as a force in its own right.

Bill won the sculpture prize at the first São Paulo Biennial in 1951 with [a work that used the mathematical principles of the Möbius loop](#) and wrote an essay that same year titled "From Surface to Space," positing that people's relationship with the space around them had changed and that art should reflect that. A much smaller 1956 sculpture by the Argentine artist Enio Iommi, "Elevación del Triángulo" (Triangle Elevation), employs similar ideas — the show argues that Bill and Europe were not the only source of Concrete innovations — translating mathematically derived curves into an elegant aluminum loop mounted on a wooden base. Claudio Girola's aluminum "Triángulos Espaciales" (Spatial Triangles) from 1948 tries to activate space, showing the three-dimensional area around the sculpture. A 1948 wood and metal mobile by Carmelo Arden Quin and drawings by Lidy Prati further Concrete explorations into space and surface.

The ramifications of Concrete art were profound, particularly in Latin America, where rapid industrial development was changing culture and the environment. Concrete art may not have achieved its lofty aims, which is to harness the modern ideas and materials in order to make life better, but the cross-cultural conversation here and the important presence of Argentine artists to that exchange, is still impressive and inspiring.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

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