

ART SY

Isaac Julien: "The Most Influential Artists of 2023"

By: Allyssia Alleyne

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Header, from left to right: Portrait of Henry Taylor by Fredrik Nilsen. © Henry Taylor. Courtesy of Henry Taylor and Hauser & Wirth; Portrait of Mandy El-Sayegh by Abtin Eshraghi, 2023. Courtesy of Mandy El-Sayegh and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London; Portrait of Lauren Halsey by Russell Hamilton. Courtesy of Lauren Halsey, David Kordansky Gallery, and Gagosian.

What does it mean to wield influence in 2023? As institutions are questioned, gatekeepers are unseated, and social media is giving a microphone to the masses, it's clearer than ever that it's not just about the size and strength of the platform you've built, but what you choose to do with it. Here, we share 10 artists who've sparked important conversations, amplified voices in their communities, and drawn attention to the causes they care about this year, from early-career artists gathering momentum to award-winners and trailblazers.

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Nan Goldin

B. 1953, Washington, D.C. Lives and works in New York, Paris, and London.



Portrait of Nan Goldin by Thea Traff, 2022. Courtesy of Gagosian. Nan Goldin, *The Hug*, New York City, 1980. © Nan Goldin. Courtesy of Stedelijk Museum.

For decades, photographer Nan Goldin has used her platform to compassionately document the lives of those on the margins. In the process, she's highlighted the human toll of social ills such as the AIDS epidemic, drug abuse, domestic violence, and the opioid crisis, among other political issues.

This activist streak has thrust Goldin into the spotlight in recent years. Earlier this year, *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed*, director Laura Poitras's documentary about Goldin's zealous campaign against the Sackler family (whose company, Purdue Pharma, manufactured and marketed OxyContin), followed up its 2022 Golden Lion win with an Oscar nomination. Meanwhile, the Stedelijk Museum's exhibition "This Will Not End Well" (on view until January 28, 2024) sets out to chart how Goldin has engaged with social issues historically. The art world seems to respect her all the more for it: This spring, Gagosian signed Goldin to its roster, and she was voted at the top of *ArtReview's* Power 100 list earlier this month.

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Marina Abramović

B. 1946, Belgrade, Serbia. Lives and works in New York.



Portrait of Marina Abramović in her solo exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2023. © Marina Abramović. Photo © Royal Academy of Arts, London / David Parry. Courtesy of the Royal Academy of Arts.

Marina Abramović, the “godmother” of performance art, broke new ground in September when she became the first woman to receive a solo retrospective in the 255-year history of the Royal Academy in London. The critically acclaimed exhibition saw her restaging some of the most iconic works of her career—including *Nude with Skeleton* (2002) and *Imponderabilia* (1977)—with 42 artists trained in the Abramović method.

This cross-generational impulse carried over to the three-day Southbank Centre takeover in early October, where Abramović turned the Queen Elizabeth Hall into a platform for provocative durational performances for artists that have followed in her footsteps, including Yiannis Pappas, Miles Greenberg, and Carlos Martiel—using her position as tastemaker to shine a light on the creators moving the medium forward.

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Isaac Julien

B. 1960, London. Lives and works in London and Santa Cruz, California.



Portrait of Isaac Julien by Thierry Bal. Courtesy of Isaac Julien.

With “What Freedom Is To Me,” Tate Britain gave Isaac Julien his long-overdue flowers, as the artist’s first ever U.K. survey. In showcasing four and a half hours’ worth of the artist’s work, which spans film, multiscreen installation, dance, music, and sculpture, the institution centered narratives of racism, queerness, sexuality, colonialism, and migration—themes that are now hotly discussed, and that Julien has been exploring for decades.

While the Tate show thrust him most directly into the spotlight, it’s not his only accolade of the year. There was his gallery show at Victoria Miro, which ran concurrently with the Tate exhibition; *Lessons of the Hour* (2019), Julien’s portrait of Frederick Douglass, which was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery and American Art Museum; and *Lina Bo Bardi – A Marvelous Entanglement* (2019), his immersive film installation about the Italian Brazilian modernist architect, which just closed at the Yale Center for British Art. Plus, he landed at number five on ArtReview’s Power 100 list.

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Jesse Darling
B. 1981, Oxford, England. Lives and works in Berlin.



Portrait of Jesse Darling. Courtesy of Arcadia Missa, Chapter NY, Molitor, and Sultana. Jesse Darling, installation view in "Turner Prize 2023" at Towner Eastbourne, 2023. Courtesy of Turner Prize.

For his Turner Prize-winning exhibition, on view at Towner Eastbourne until April 14, 2024, Berlin-based artist Jesse Darling held a mirror to his British homeland, reflecting the bleak consequences of the Conservative government's recent anti-immigration and austerity policies through a series of mangled sculptures. The installation creates a series of "checkpoints" out of twisted metal crowd barriers, a sad maypole fashioned from police tape, faded patchwork Union Jacks, and piles of dusty three-ringed binders, among other depressing detritus.

If the work was too subtle, Darling seized the opportunity to say the quiet part out loud during his televised acceptance speech, calling out the legacy of neoliberalism in the U.K., extolling the value of arts education of children of all socioeconomic backgrounds, and waving a Palestinian flag pulled from his pocket—taking every opportunity to spread his message to the masses.

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Lauren Halsey
B. 1987, Los Angeles. Lives and works in Los Angeles.



Portrait of Lauren Halsey by Russell Hamilton. Courtesy of Lauren Halsey, David Kordansky Gallery, and Gagosian. Lauren Halsey, installation view of the eastside of south central los angeles hieroglyph prototype architecture (I), 2022, in "The Roof Garden Commission: Lauren Halsey" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2023. © Lauren Halsey. Photo by Hyla Skopitz. Courtesy of the artist, David Kordansky Gallery, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Entering the eastside of south central los angeles hieroglyph prototype architecture (I) (2023)—Lauren Halsey's rooftop commission at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art—was like walking into an Ancient Egyptian temple. But the symbols decorating the walls told a story of community with one foot in the present and the other in the future. There were protest slogans, uplifting phrases, and snippets of ads for Black businesses, along with etchings of spaceships, lowriders, and Black hairstyles.

A close look at the sphinxes revealed the faces of three of Halsey's family members and her partner. (Curator Abraham Thomas put it best when he called it "an Afrofuturistic, ancient, funkified spaceship.") The commission is a celebration of Blackness and the artist's South Central L.A. roots—themes that have run through both her artistic practice and her activism, which, since 2020, has included running a community center for Black and Brown folks in her hometown. Last month, Halsey signed with Gagosian, so we can expect major opportunities ahead.

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Mandy El-Sayegh
B. 1985, Selangor, Malaysia. Lives and works in London.



Portrait of Mandy El-Sayegh by Abtin Eshraghi, 2023. Courtesy of Mandy El-Sayegh and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London.

London-based artist Mandy El-Sayegh presents a compelling mode of abstraction underpinned by hidden personal and political narratives. Using painting, collage, and silkscreening techniques, she combines fragments of text (newspapers, advertisements, and her father's Arabic calligraphy, for instance), symbols, and images into dense, grid-like collages. Born in Malaysia to a Chinese mother and Palestinian father, El-Sayegh has been quietly picking up speed over the last couple of years, scoring a nomination for the Max Mara Art Prize for Women in 2017, and staging her first institutional show at London's Chisenhale Gallery in 2019.

Her career has only accelerated further since she joined Thaddaeus Ropac in 2020: This year, she had a solo show at the gallery's London space, which ran concurrently with a joint show (with Kader Attia) at Lehmann Maupin also in London. She also had a solo show at the Tichy Ocean Foundation in Zürich, as well as another solo at Lehmann Maupin in New York. Along with establishing herself as an artist to watch among gallerists, she's increased her profile among art buyers, too, boasting a 41% increase in Artsy followers year over year.

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Refik Anadol

B. 1985, Istanbul. Lives and works in Los Angeles.



Portrait of Refik Anadol, 2019. Courtesy of Refik Anadol Studio and bitforms gallery. Refik Anadol, installation view of "Unsupervised" at the Museum of Modern Art, 2023. © 2023 the Museum of Modern Art. Photo by Robert Gerhardt. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art.

While the use of generative artificial intelligence in art has only become a mainstream concern this year (largely due to discussions around copyright and compensation for artists unknowingly included in data sets), there's no shortage of artists who have been using this tech long before it hit the headlines. Among those artists is the L.A.-based Turkish artist Refik Anadol, best known for his site-specific "Machine Hallucinations" series, where data sets of images are turned into morphing abstract visualizations. One recently ran on the new Sphere in Las Vegas, using raw, public domain images from space taken by satellites and spacecraft.

In February, New York's Museum of Modern Art gave Anadol its seal of approval, acquiring the much-talked-about work that had been on display in its lobby: *Unsupervised: Machine Hallucinations MoMA* (2022) uses an algorithm trained on images in the museum's archive to "dream" digital artworks. While not without its detractors (critic Jerry Saltz compared it to a "half-million dollar screensaver"), Anadol's work has further advanced discussions around the place and value of generative AI in the art world, which is only just getting started.

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Ed Ruscha

B. 1937, Omaha, Nebraska. Lives and works in Culver City, California.



Portrait of Ed Ruscha by Sten-M. Rosenlund, 2010. Courtesy of Ed Ruscha and Gagosian.

Ed Ruscha, *Actual Size*, 1962. © 2023 Edward Ruscha. Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art.

While flirting with the future, the MoMA is still as intent as ever on commemorating those who have shaped the present, as it's done with "ED RUSCHA / NOW THEN"—its jumbo exhibition dedicated to the 85-year-old artist. The show, which runs until January 13, 2024, spans more than 200 objects—not only the wordplay paintings for which the artist is best known, but also photography, books, sculptures, and installations, including the *Chocolate Room* he originally staged at the 1970 Venice Biennale, where he screenprinted chocolate onto paper that cover the walls.

As a final flourish for the year, Ruscha created an original work for The Beatles' final single, the serendipitously named "Now and Then": a meeting of two 20th-century creative forces, still revisiting their pasts and expanding their legacy in 2023.

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Henry Taylor

B. 1958, Ventura, California. Lives and works in Los Angeles.



Portrait of Henry Taylor by Fredrik Nilsen. © Henry Taylor. Courtesy of Henry Taylor and Hauser & Wirth.

"Henry Taylor: B Side," on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art until January 28, 2024, is the first institutional survey of the African American painter's career, encompassing his portraits of everyday people and family to celebrities (Cicely Tyson, Miles Davis, Jay-Z), fellow artists (Noah Davis, David Hammons, Deana Lawson), and political figures (Barack and Michelle Obama; Black Panther Party co-founder Eldridge Cleaver). The show also, poignantly, includes his painting of the 2016 police killing of Philando Castile, a Black man, during a traffic stop. Taken together, the works present Taylor as a chronicler of America's collective memory, who preserves its stars with the same tenderness as those that have been hitherto overlooked.

"Maybe as you get older, you're trying to pay homage to people that you care about, who've been an influence and who've been in the struggle, you know what I'm saying?" he told *Artforum*. "A lot of galleries that didn't have people of color, you know, they're embracing a lot of diversity now. You know how this shit is changing, bro."

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Cecily Brown
B. 1969, London. Lives and works in New York.



Cecily Brown, *The Picnic*, 2006. © Cecily Brown. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

British painter Cecily Brown has no shortage of commercial accolades under her belt. One of the most expensive female artists at auction, she set a personal best in 2018, when *Suddenly Last Summer* (1999) sold for \$6.7 million at a Sotheby's auction, and she has had 11 paintings sell for seven digits this year alone.

She was given a critical boost earlier this year, too, thanks to "Death and the Maiden" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a major career survey charting her use of vanitas, still life, and memento mori. The show was, surprisingly, her first major exhibition in New York, and the museum's first show dedicated to a living British artist since Lucian Freud in the early 1990s—another impressive accomplishment for an artist who has already made such a deep mark on contemporary painting.

Correction: A previous version of this article misstated Lauren Halsey's birth year. She was born in 1987, not 1985.

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