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Rachel Jones. Photo: Adama Jalloh.

MEET 8 ARTISTS WHO BROKE BIG IN 2023 — FROM SCULPTOR MIRE LEE TO ABSTRACT PAINTER RACHEL JONES BY EMILY STEER December 22, 2023

Abstract painting has continued to dominate in 2023, with a host of emerging names making a sizable dent in the market with energetic works inspired by the body and its interior world. Many artists have also successfully embraced an expanded painting practice, working canvases into site-specific, immersive installations, or showing them alongside sculptural and sound elements. This year, psychological themes, unruly bodies, and political collapse have taken center stage.

There has also been a notable move beyond rigid fine art practices, seeing artists experimenting with other forms such as opera, fashion, set design, and music. The artists on this list have seen an increase in their profile this year, with institutional shows, in-depth profiles, major prize wins, unexpected leaps on the auction scene, or exciting ventures into new formats. Expect to see more of them in the new year.

Nengi Omuku



Nengi Omuku. Photo: Stephen Tayo. Courtesy of Kasmin.

Nengi Omuku's profile has been on the rise for some time, and this summer she signed with U.S. mega gallery Kasmin. The Nigerian artist combines textile and painting, often depicting hazy scenes that speak to both real world and interior, psychological spaces. Her solo exhibition "[The Dance of People and the Natural World](#)" opened in October at Hastings Contemporary and runs through March 2024. The exhibition explores her deep connection with the natural world, and the sense of peace and serenity that she finds within it, informed by her personal work as a florist and gardener.

She was included in group exhibition "Rites of Passage" at Gagosian's London gallery this spring and is showing in "Aso Oke: Prestige Cloth from Nigeria" at the Saint Louis Art Museum in Missouri through March 2024. Omuku trained at the Slade School of Art in London before returning to Nigeria. "Part of the reason I moved to Nigeria was because I felt like European art history was very heavy on me, and there was something missing—it was the soul of my practice; home was missing," she told [Artnet News in September](#). "I've re-immersed myself here in Lagos. I've become more balanced in my practice."

Mire Lee



Exhibition view of "Mire Lee: Black Sun" at the New Museum until September 17, 2023. Photo: Dario Lasagni, courtesy New Museum.

Mire Lee was standout at the 2022 Venice Biennale with a hellish structure dripping in sculptural gore and gristle. This year, the Korean artist opened her first solo institutional exhibition in the U.S., bringing flesh and technology together to chilling effect. "Black Sun" at New York's New Museum featured a site-specific installation, with Lee's signature visceral bodily decay and kinetic elements. She also showed in the long-running 58th Carnegie International until spring, with *Untitled (My Pittsburgh Sculpture)* (2022) questioning how we understand or make sense of violence and pain.

Audiences can expect her work to keep expanding in 2024. In June, she told the *New York Times* that she is "interested in making big work, like architectural scale. I'm interested in making more, like, theatrical works... I want to be freer than now."

Rachel Jones



Rachel Jones. Photo: Adama Jalloh.

Rachel Jones made her mark on the art world in a big way in 2022. But this year, she accelerated beyond it. The British artist designed a BRIT award; appeared in playful luxury brand Loewe's Spring Summer 2024 pre-collection campaign; and staged *Hey Maudie*, her first opera in collaboration with the Roberts Institute, featuring costumes by fashion designer Roksanda.

In spring, Jones opened her first solo exhibition in China. "A Shorn Root" at the Long Museum continued her exploration of raw, bodily abstraction, with mouths and teeth evoking the intertwined interior and exterior experiences of the human form. Her solo exhibition "Red, Forged" with Thaddaeus Ropac Salzburg interrogated the connections between music and painting. She left Ropac in November, saying she was "exploring different directions in my practice and want[s] to take the time out to reflect and explore this independently."

Looking ahead to 2024, Jones and the Roberts Institute hope to tour *Hey Maudie*, and the artist will open a major solo show at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora in March.

Christina Quarles



Christina Quarles in her studio. Photo by Tara Darby. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

This year, U.S. painter Christina Quarles had her first institutional exhibition in Germany at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof. In "Collapsed Time," Quarles' paintings were shown alongside pieces from the museum's collection, with gauze panels chopping up the space and adding a further layer of abstraction to the bodies that are already so entangled within her paintings.

In autumn, Quarles inaugurated Pilar Corrias's new Mayfair gallery with a selection of dynamic paintings on walls painted in lilac and deep ochre. "Tripping Over My Joy" continued her exploration of identity and bodily autonomy, with fractured fleshy forms and a palette inspired by Los Angeles.

"We have this idea that in our art, that if we are too personal or too specific, too individual with what we work with in our practice, it's going to be selfish and nobody will relate to it..." she told Art Review in May. "I found that for my own work and for other people's work that I've really been able to connect with, it's because of tapping into this personal and individual experience, it somehow unlocks the ability to trust."

Jesse Darling



Jesse Darling at Turner Prize 2023, Towner Eastbourne. Photo: Victor Frankowski, Hello Content.

Before the winner had been announced, many critics had already claimed Jesse Darling as their top pick for this year's Turner Prize. In the exhibition currently showing at Towner Eastbourne (through April 14, 2024), the British artist's overwhelming installation captures the broken and chaotic nature of life in the U.K. The work evokes the social impact of Brexit, austerity and hostile immigration policies through mangled crowd control barriers, a maypole hung with police tape, and a precarious roller-coaster track smashing through one of the walls. Darling was nominated following two successful 2022 exhibitions: "No Medals, No Ribbons" at Modern Art Oxford and "Enclosures" at Camden Art Centre.

"What I'm trying to do is to make visible the fact that all the big stories and big structures that we really believe in are just flimsy and arbitrary," he told *the Guardian* this month. "They may all fall down—but that also means things could one day be otherwise. And that for me is hopeful. And funny, as well."

Michaela Yearwood-Dan



Michaela Yearwood-Dan. Photo by Sam Hylton. Image courtesy Michaela Yearwood-Dan.

Michaela Yearwood-Dan's booming popularity shows no sign of stopping. Her star has been firmly on the rise over the last few years, with her paintings far outpacing their estimates at auction (in spring 2023, *Love me nots* sold for roughly 12 times its estimate of £60,000, or \$76,390, at Christie's in London).

In April, Marianne Boesky Gallery opened "Some Future Time Will Think of Us," a solo show including paintings, ceramics, works on paper, and a site-specific installation, exploring her ongoing interest with optimistic queer spaces, joy, and abundance. She has appeared in numerous group exhibitions, including at CICA Vancouver ("New British Abstraction"); Gagosian Gallery, London ("Rites of Passage"); and Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati ("Ecologies of Elsewhere").

Yearwood-Dan had a sell-out booth with Tiwani Contemporary at Frieze L.A. She has also recently designed an intricate beaded bag as part of Dior's ongoing artist collaborations. "I'm reclaiming beauty," she told the Glossary in March. "For myself and for all women everywhere. And all non-binary people and all queer people. I'm reclaiming beauty and all the cis het predominantly white men making the laws across the world can go suck it!"

Doron Langberg



Portrait of Doron Langberg, 2020. Photo: Nir Arieli.

Doron Langberg had a long-running solo show at the Rubell Museum for much of 2023, which brought together a vivid selection of canvases that imbue everyday scenes of queer intimacy with heated passion. The Israeli artist often depicts himself or those close to him, from family members to friends and lovers. His work has also captured the art market: in February, Langberg debuted new canvases at Victoria Miro's booth at Frieze L.A., where they completely sold out.

The artist has a strong 2024 coming up, with solo shows planned for Victoria Miro's London and Venice spaces through early spring. "The only thing that can really protect me as an artist is to keep making work that people are interested in, and that is relevant to the conversation," Langberg told Artnet News in February. "It is the only thing that I have agency over."

Mandy El-Sayegh



Mandy El-Sayegh. Photo by Abtin Ashraghi.

Mandy El-Sayegh had three prominent commercial shows this year, at Ropac in Mayfair and Lehmann Maupin's New York and London spaces. Her intense painted installations explore the interior world, and often evoke physical places that invite introspection, from the artist's studio to the analyst's consulting room. She recently closed her first institutional show in Switzerland with Zurich's Tidy Ocean Foundation. "In Session" focused on Sigmund Freud's room, with Persian rugs, a take on his famous couch, and painted grids on the walls.

"It makes me quite paranoid," she told the *Financial Times* in August about her recent success. "I thought about changing my name to Mandy Wong—my mum's name [...] It feels very meaningful to achieve some level of visibility from what my parents struggled through to get us [three kids] here... From abject poverty on my mother's side, I'm like bourgeoisie now. I have [my own] place. I go to a shrink. I went to art school."