

Catch a *Rising Star*

Five preeminent New York-based, Artadia Award-winning artists welcome us into their studios to chat about their practices, deep connections to New York City and favorite holiday traditions.

BY ALLISON BERG

JOE FYFE

mixed-media artist, joefyfe.com

In addition to being an artist, you are also a critic, writer and curator. How does having a critic's mind affect your creative process?

I only started writing criticism when I was in my 40s. By that time, what I was doing as an artist was digested enough that it had become nonverbal, such that writing about art didn't interfere. I am no longer a working critic. I still write catalogue essays and occasional features. But when I was an active critic, I discovered that it was improving my work, but I can't articulate why.

Did you choose New York or did New York choose you?

I was born on Staten Island, and when I was 13 we moved to a rural part of New Jersey. The previous year I had a paper route and would read about Warhol, the Kuchar brothers and the Velvet Underground and what was going on in the East Village across the bay. When we moved, I knew I would come back. What attracted me to NYC in the late '70s were two things: First, I could move here and become an artist. It had a very substantial painting culture. There were generations of painters living here. And if that didn't work out, I could just become a professional New Yorker—just participate in the life of the city. That is no longer possible.



Clockwise from left: Mixed-media artist Joe Fyfe; "Kiss the Sky" (2016) by Fyfe; painter Yevgeniya Baras; "Untitled" (2017) by Baras.

I never expected it to become suburbanized. It has priced out the weirdos. New York City used to be the place you would go to be around rebellious, die-hard creative people. NYC now functions for me as the mother ship, where I return to after traveling to Paris and Southeast Asia. I hope Africa will be next....

Favorite holiday song?

John Coltrane's live version of "My Favorite Things."

YEVGENIYA BARAS

painter, yevgeniyabaras.com

You are both an artist and a curator. As your work evolves and unfolds, do you ever catch yourself attaching curatorial

prescriptions or language to help others understand your work?

I started curating because I was looking at other people's work to learn more. I am still curating, but it's more the season of my own practice. I'm always curious and always looking out. Right now, as I prepare for my upcoming solo exhibitions, I am brewing in the juices of my own practice. It is a season of much more looking in.

Did you choose New York or did New York choose you?

I was born in a large city, and have always lived in crowded places with public transportation. When your formative years are spent in an urban environment, you are wired this way. I



PHOTOS BY RICK WENNER (FYFE, BARAS); COURTESY OF NATHALIE KARG GALLERY AND THE ARTIST ("KISS THE SKY")



Interdisciplinary artist Autumn Knight. Right, from top: Mixed-media artist Margaret Lee; "This is How You Call It" (2017) by Lee.



PHOTO BY RICK WENNER (KNIGHT); BY MARGARET LEE (LEE); COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK HANLEY GALLERY ("THIS IS HOW YOU CALL IT")

initially immigrated to Philadelphia yet always had friends in New York and was regularly spending time in the city. After graduate school, I chose to move here. I didn't know what that entailed but couldn't imagine living anywhere else. We chose each other, really.

Favorite holiday song?

Nina Simone's [music], for the holidays and always.

AUTUMN KNIGHT

interdisciplinary artist, autumnjoiknight.com

Your works have been described as "intense," "disarming" and "disciplinary promiscuity." Are you exploring and processing your own concerns or is it more about challenging others to deal with theirs?

When I'm engaging audiences directly, I tend to think more about unearthing and tending to the concerns that are present in the room, uncovered in the reaction to these "intense" and "disarming" and hopefully hilarious moments. I certainly do make a bit

of room for at least recognition of everyone's "stuff" within the space of the performance.

Did you choose New York or did New York choose you?

Let's say New York chose me. I lived here before and then left. The city called me back. It provides a wonderful mixture of anonymity, anxiety and antics that is very useful when making observations about the human condition. I am also very grateful when I find the silence and sparseness in the city that belie the stereotype. In those moments, I'm in touch with the city's interiority, its subconscious. This connection is very much a part of my practice.

Favorite holiday song?

A couple years ago, I had the idea to carol in my neighborhood with a group of friends singing a medley of hip-hop and R&B songs. People in our very black Houston neighborhood were surprised and excited to sing along to music they recognized. Besides this nontraditional medley, I'd say the Temptations' Christmas album is kind of classic.

MARGARET LEE

mixed-media artist, margaret-lee.com

You are known for questioning traditional structures of power, desire and identity. How do you use art to decontextualize historically accepted notions?

I find it helpful to use familiar and known signs and symbols within

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...CONTINUED sanctioned and validated mediums. Slight and covert subversions are often easier to sneak into the rigid power structures. It is only after gaining a foothold that the subtext and deeper meaning is able to emerge. My work, though seemingly simple and well-behaved, is meant to reflect issues regarding systemic inequality rather than reflecting the viewer's own values back to them.

Did you choose New York or did New York choose you?

My parents emigrated from South Korea and first established our family and their business in the Bronx. So, I guess I would say my parents chose New York for me.

Favorite holiday tradition?

I'm working on establishing a tradition of going to the movies and eating Chinese food on Christmas day. My parents used to take me to the tree at Rockefeller Center every year, so I still like to pay a visit. I most definitely stay in NYC for the holiday. There is no better place to be.

SUMMER WHEAT

painter and sculptor, summerwheat.com

There is a lot of tension in your paintings. We might see beauty with grotesqueness, organization with chaos, or sadness with hope. Do these

themes draw upon inward self-searches or observations of outward life?

The images within the paintings are all informed by my drawings that I create outside the studio. It is an intimate process finding lines and bringing them together to form imagery. In that regard, the images are from an inward space. I'm working on my sketchbooks all the time, looking for images for paintings. I feel an authority over the drawings that I don't have with paintings because I'm larger than the piece of paper. When I get to the paintings in the studio, I already know what they are.

Did you choose New York or did New York choose you?

I visited in 2001 and walked around Chelsea seeing several shows. I remember thinking at that time that I want to live in New York and want to be in conversation with the artists working here. I didn't feel I would be able to make the work I wanted to make anywhere else or have it be understood.

Favorite holiday tradition?

My grandmother was an artist but didn't make paintings or anything outside the home. She would have monochromatic-themed Christmases. It was serious, over the top and beautiful. I make table settings with sculptural centerpieces and sculptures for family and friends to take as gifts. ■

Below: Painter and sculptor Summer Wheat. Bottom: "Strawberry Sun" (2015/16) by Wheat.



PHOTO BY JEFF BROWN (WHEAT); IMAGE BY ETIENNE FROSSARD ('STRAWBERRY SUN')