FINANCIAL TIMES

Greater New York at MoMA PS1 presents a city in constant flux

The five-yearly survey of NYC artists celebrates the creative churn of an international metropolis

Ariella Budick
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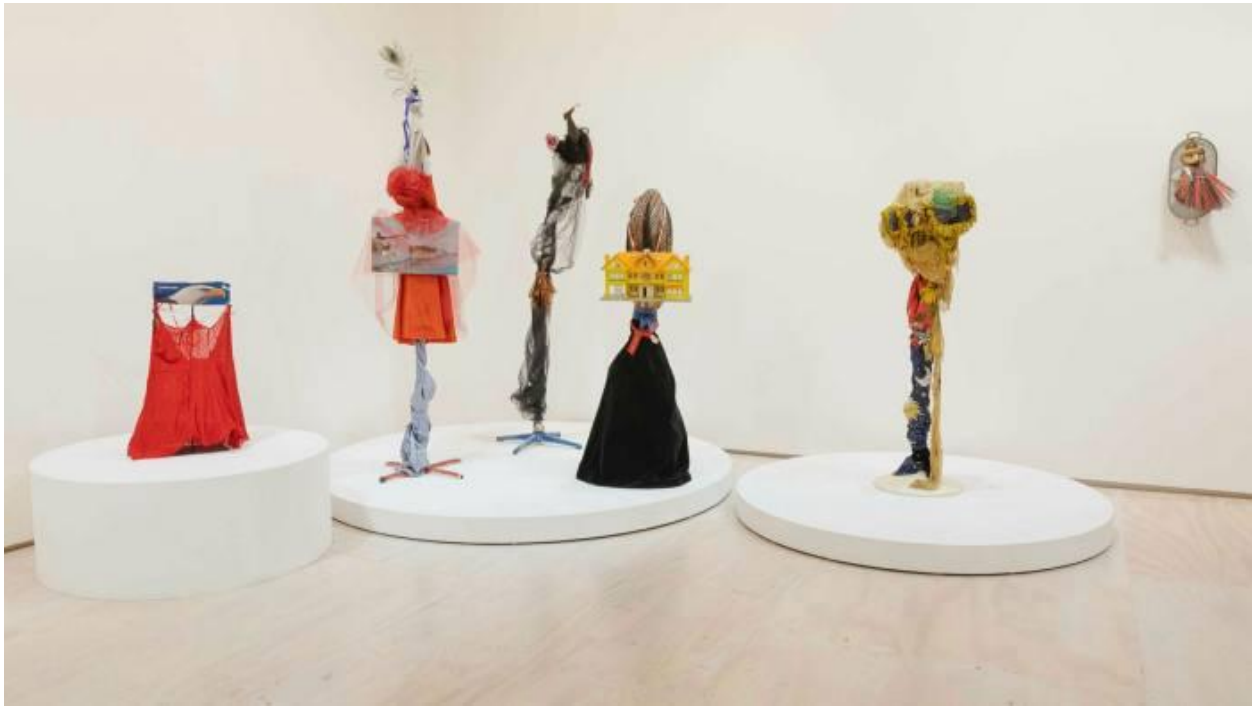
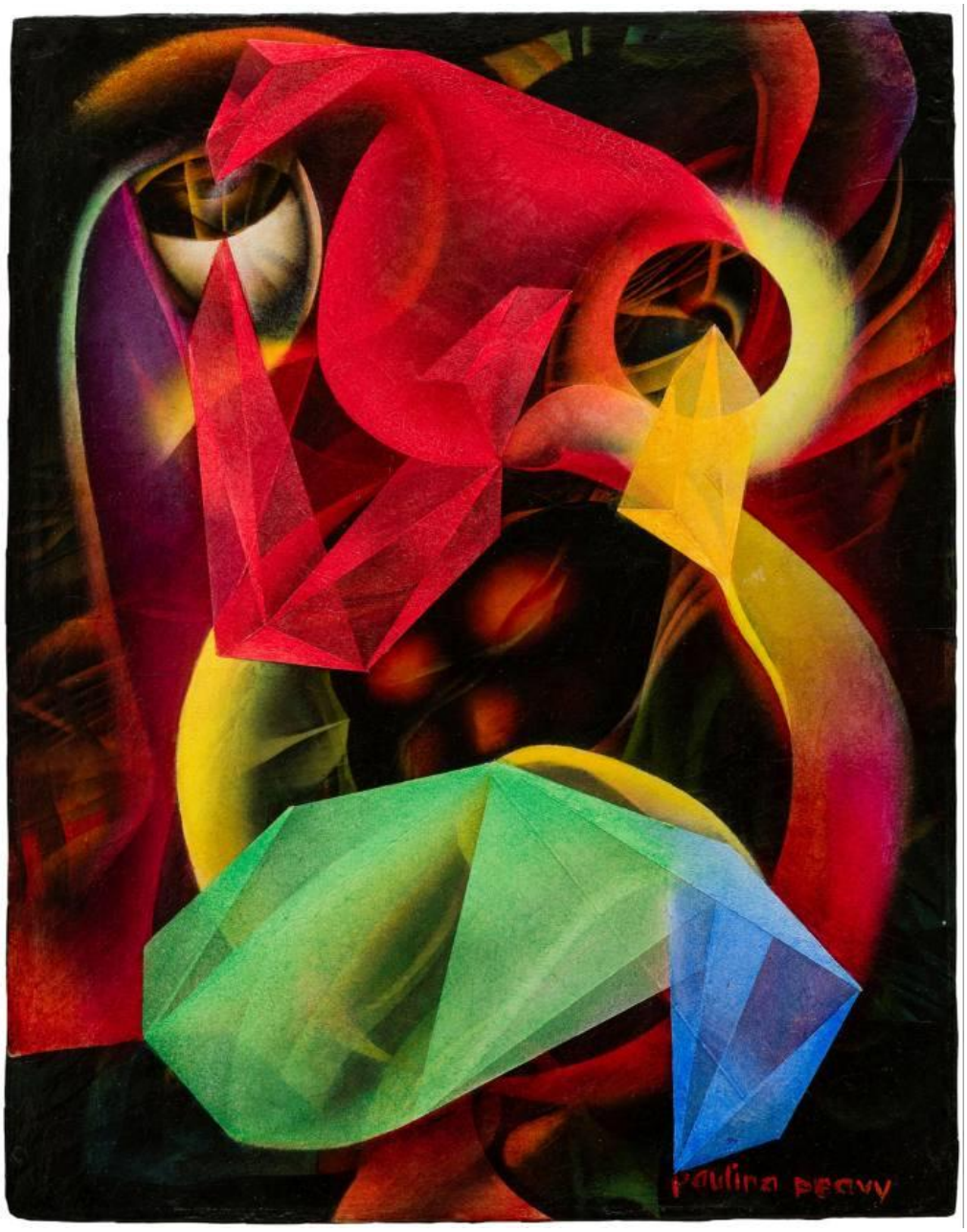


Installation view of work by 'down-to-the sidewalk visionary' Curtis Cuffie © MoMA PS1. Photo: Noel Woodford

Greater New York, MoMA PS1's quinquennial survey of artists living and labouring in Gotham, is back after a year's postponement, and it's a stimulating balm. Earlier editions have attached themselves to breathless trends, following the pipeline that pumped young talents from Yale's MFA program to Chelsea's blue-chip galleries. This time the curators, led by Ruba Katrib, used the pandemic pause to reflect on what makes New York so New York-y. The latest iteration treats the city's artistic tradition like a long-simmering sauce that is constantly replenished, altered, shaken and tweaked, without ever losing its distinctive flavour.

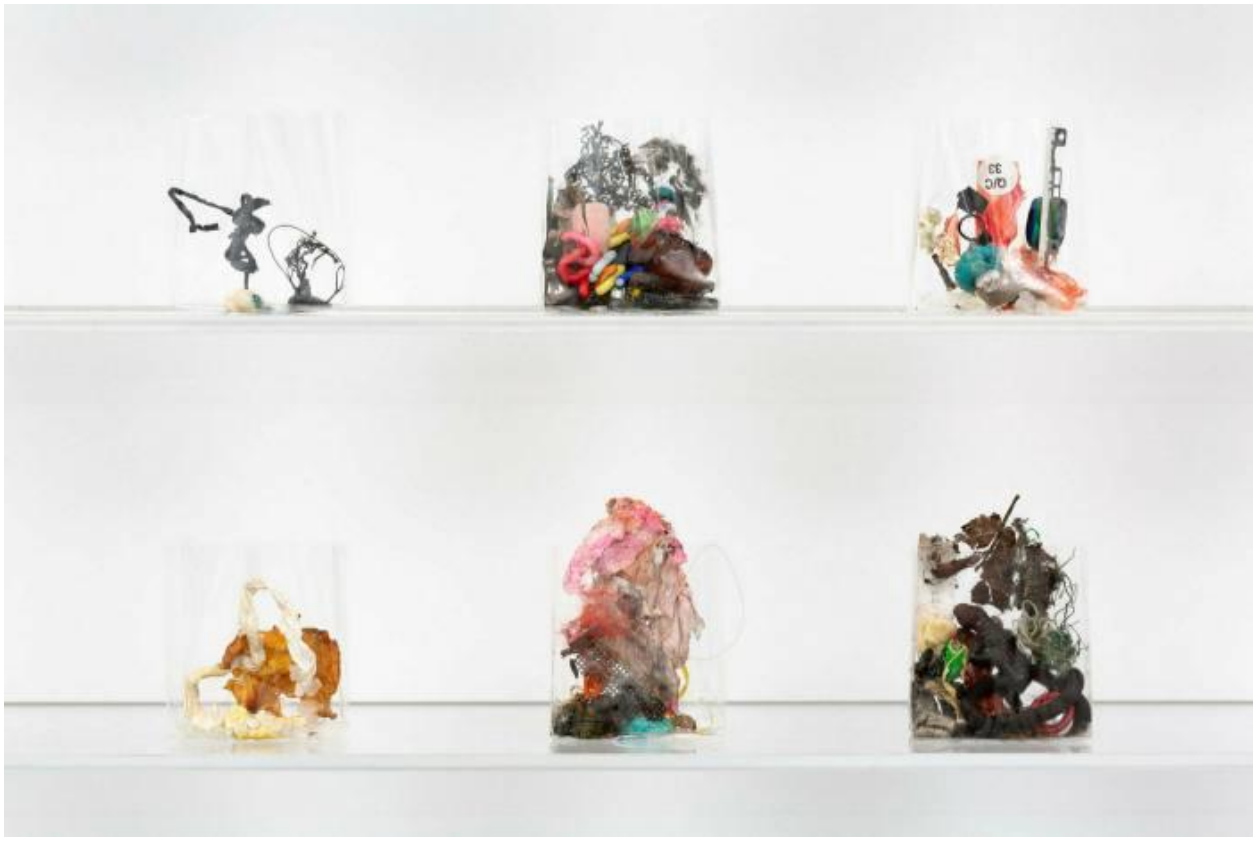
Katrib's team reaches back to some pretty decrepit decades, including the East Village in the 1990s, where creativity sprouted from the wreckage wrought by crack. They also pick through the recent past for artists who got stampeded or knocked aside. Some were eccentric, deceased, unconnected, unhoused or caught in the grip of a fervent obsession. Many had something important to say yet somehow missed their moment.



Untitled work by Paulina Peavey © Courtesy Andrew Edlin Gallery and the Estate of Paulina Peavy

Take Paulina Peavy, whose life spanned practically the entire 20th century, from 1901 to 1999. PS1 gives us four paintings that she nursed and revised over many decades. In one untitled oil, bright, faceted forms resembling architectural models orbit a pair of pleading hands, linked by flames, tendrils and a circling ribbon of blue. Like Hilma af Klint and Agnes Pelton, Peavy was an overlooked female mystic who channelled spiritual wisdom into bold abstractions. Her back-story is at least as rich as her work: in 1932, some heady combination of divorce, the Depression and living in California surely contributed to her life-changing encounter with a “wondrous ovoid-shaped UFO” named Lacamo. This entity taught that humanity would interbreed with aliens, a belief that Peavy eventually imported to New York.

Curtis Cuffie was a more down-to-the sidewalk visionary who scavenged car parts, cast-off furniture, peacock feathers and the odd dollhouse, orated at high volume while he put them together, and died in 2002 at age 47. Cuffie was a fixture on the streets of the East Village, which is where he found his raw materials. The luminary David Hammons admired his wispy, whimsical sculptures and tried to get him admitted to the global art club. “When curators would come from Europe, I would always take them to see Curtis’s work or introduce them to Curtis, just to frighten them,” Hammons later said.



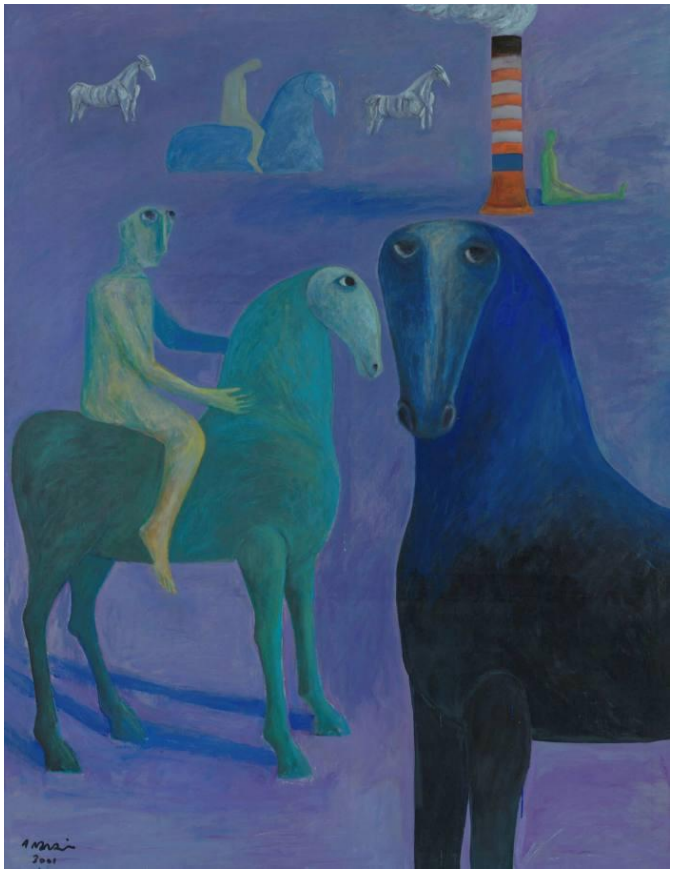
Yuji Agematsu’s ‘October 07, 2021 – April 18, 2022’ © Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. Photo: Stephen Faught

New York is an infinite resource for artists with a treasure-hunt sensibility. The mere act of bending down and picking stuff up gives their work a local stamp. Yuji Agematsu moved from Japan in 1980 and turned litter gathering into a daily discipline. Every evening, he decants the day’s miniature finds into the cellophane wrapper that he’s separated from a pack of cigarettes. A lost earring, foil candy wrappers, a bead, a chicken bone, wads of blue, green and pink gum, an elegantly twisted length of wire — every 24 hours, this loot makes its way into a separate tiny vitrine. A breathtaking suite of these elegant arrangements — 366 of them, the entire record of 2020 — parades along two walls like the score to a massive urban symphony. “I see each object as a notation in terms of music,” Agematsu says. “Each has its own sound and rhythm.”

Country people keep time by the seasonal cycle of bird calls and the regular habits of trees; New Yorkers learn the rhythms of traffic and the routines of neighbours they have never met. Rosemary Mayer, who died in 2014, left a minute accounting of her days translated into colour. A poignant series of drawings from the summer of 2001 looks at first like pages from a homemade calendar, alight with brilliant colours. These grids resolve into sound-maps,

visualisations of the cacophony she heard from her studio in lower Manhattan. On Tuesday, August 21, between 2:00pm and 4:15pm, Mayer noted each “boom”, “bang”, “cough”, “crunch”, “laugh”, “pop”, “rasp”, “thud”, “squeak”, “siren” and “scrape”.

A text panel gives this sonic ledger a political cast: the clangour of construction, for instance, heralded gentrification which “created inhospitable conditions for many communities”. But Mayer’s seems like a more private urge, a way to honour the everyday. In 1975, she translated the diary of Italian Mannerist Jacopo da Pontormo and was affected by its mixture of sublime craft and mundane routine. “Thursday I did the arm and ate an omelette and fell asleep in my clothes,” reads one entry. The museum’s text panel doesn’t mention that the percussive soundtrack Mayer annotated in August, 2001, was an overture to the roar and blast that, a few weeks later, would silence all that jubilant clanking.



Egyptian painter Ahmed Morsi’s ‘Green Horse I’ (2001) © Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York

Greater New York opens just as the gates of the nation are. After 18 months of isolation the flow of arrivals from abroad is beginning again, and the exhibition makes clear how crucial that influx is. Artists from Nigeria, Argentina, Mexico, India, Iran, Egypt, France, Brazil, Uganda and many other countries have nudged New York a little closer to its cosmopolitan ideal.

One of them is Ahmed Morsi, a poet, critic and painter born in Alexandria, Egypt, who landed here in 1974. Sprinkled throughout the show, his large Surrealist canvases depict puzzled horses wandering the streets and subways like avatars of New Yorkers, all of us outsiders in our own metropolis. One of Morsi’s poems reads like a prophecy: “Death lives among the tenants,/roams

about wearing a mask/like the mask of others/ Who wait on subway platforms". His lines and images capture the human churn that feeds the city: we are bit players in each other's dramas, today's replacements for those who disappeared last week, essential yet interchangeable sources of that collective buzz.

To April 18, moma.org