



Young at Art

Some of today's hottest new art world discoveries (like 100-year-old Carmen Herrera) were definitely not born yesterday. Linda Yablonsky reports. Portrait by Andreas Laszlo Konrath



Last fall in New York, one of the most talked about works at the Independent Projects art fair was a fountain of foaming soap bubbles. As mountains of suds rose and fell, the sculpture, *Cloud Canyons*, continually morphed into different shapes. It was fun to watch, and nervy enough to suggest the hand of a new artist with nothing to lose. Imagine the startled expressions on fairgoers' faces when they learned that it was by the Filipino-born David Medalla, 72, who made the sculpture in 1963 and had been absent from the New York scene for decades.

The art world's obsession with youth may be fading. With prices for even facile works by emerging talents accelerating at warp speed, collectors hunting for greater substance are turning to artists who are pushing 80, and counting. Many of these game-changers broke out in the 1960s and '70s and were driven by feminist, racial, and gender-identity politics to alter every existing medium and invent a few new ones. By experimenting with nascent technology and unconventional materials that included their own bodies, they opened the door for much of the video, performance, and digital art we have today.

But back then they didn't fit into any mainstream categories or prevailing styles. What's more, many had the bad luck to be women or minorities at a time when the market shunned almost everyone who wasn't white and male. Or, like Barbara T. Smith, 83, who anticipated the kind of endurance art that has lately been in vogue, they lived in provinces like California, which the East Coast establishment had a hard time accepting as a place for serious art. Fortunately, these undervalued artists are finding champions in people half their age—curators and dealers who learned about their work in school and can now give them the kind of prominence they never enjoyed.

The most striking example may be the painter Carmen Herrera, who turns 100 this month. Born in Cuba, where she studied architecture, she has lived and worked in New York for more than 60 years. Her circle included Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning, yet she was relegated to outlets for Latin American art. She emerged on the contemporary art scene only in 2009, when she was given an attention-getting solo exhibition in Birmingham, England. Another solo show followed at London's blue-chip Lisson Gallery, giving her commercial traction and a major presence at art fairs, where people are regularly stopped in their tracks by her radiant abstractions. One of these is presently hanging alongside paintings by Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella in



the exhibition inaugurating the Whitney Museum of American Art's new building in New York, and Herrera will have her own show there next year. "The more I saw of her work, the more groundbreaking it seemed," says Dana Miller, the show's 41-year-old curator. "Carmen was engaged with the same investigations as Stella, but she didn't get the same critical attention. The stories I've heard—gallerists told her they couldn't sell a woman's work!"

Art fairs have largely contributed to the resurgence of older artists by providing dealers a platform to present little-known works in an up-to-date context. "We used the opportunity of the fair to do some good for the artist and his legacy," says Adam Lindemann, the dealer and collector who brought Medalla's *Cloud Canyons* to the Independent Projects art fair. Leslie Tonkonow did the same last year at her booth at Art Basel Miami Beach, where densely rubbed graphite drawings on paper scrolls unspooled from the wall with a majesty that attracted gaggles of admirers. The works looked like the type of painting-and-sculpture hybrids popular now, but they were made in the 1970s by Michelle Stuart, an 82-year-old artist who signed with Tonkonow in 2010, after about a decade without representation. "Michelle was a huge influence on me when I was in school in the '70s," says Tonkonow, who has placed pieces by Stuart with museum curators. "They're people in their 30s and 40s who came of age professionally when Michelle wasn't that visible," she says. »

Opposite: Carmen Herrera in her New York studio, with works in progress. Above, from top: Lorraine O'Grady; 2014; O'Grady's Art is... (Troupe Front), 1983.

