

# ***THE DEAD DON'T DIE***

Alvaro Barrington

Theresa Daddezio

Vaughn Davis Jr.

Olivia Drusin

Alteronce Gumbly

Ravi Jackson

Lumin Wakoa

Willa Wasserman

**ABATTOIR**

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Curated by Shawn Powell

The ever-present “death of painting” is constantly looming in the shadows of a painted image, more so in recent years for abstract painting. In the mid-2010s, a wave of reductive abstract painting labeled Zombie Formalism plagued the art world. Much of this work was comprised of made-to-order, systematic, repetitive, neutral, clone-like, and often gimmicky representations of past painterly movements. This assembly line regurgitation of artwork produced products that merely stood in for paintings often with a lack of an honest interest in investigating the subject with all its vulnerability—signs of the times.

Lumin Wako, *Scully*, 2020, Oil on linen over panel, 14 x 11 inches  
Image courtesy the artist



In his book *The Earth Dies Streaming*, A. S. Hamrah introduces a chapter on George A. Romero’s groundbreaking zombie trilogy of American cultural critique. While speaking about 21st-century zombie movies that mimic Romero’s works, he notes that “...a fixed set of roles is available for cosplaying a repeatable drama that already took place somewhere else...The new zombie films cannibalize Romero’s films in an attempt to remake them ideologically, so that we will stop looking for meaning in them and just accept the inevitable.” Philosopher Steven Shaviro speaks of zombies in popular cinema as continuing “to participate in human, social rituals and processes—but only just enough to drain them of their power and meaning...The zombies are devoid of personality, yet they continue

to allude to personal identity. They are driven by a sort of vestigial memory, but one that has become impersonal and indefinite, a vague solicitation to aimless movement.” These two quotes could just have easily been applied as criticism to much of the work of the Zombie Formalism movement: splatters of blood are replaced by splatters of paint, gray landscapes by flat gray monochrome paintings, recycled plot lines by recycled concepts, and a frenzy of living souls running to the mall to cash in.

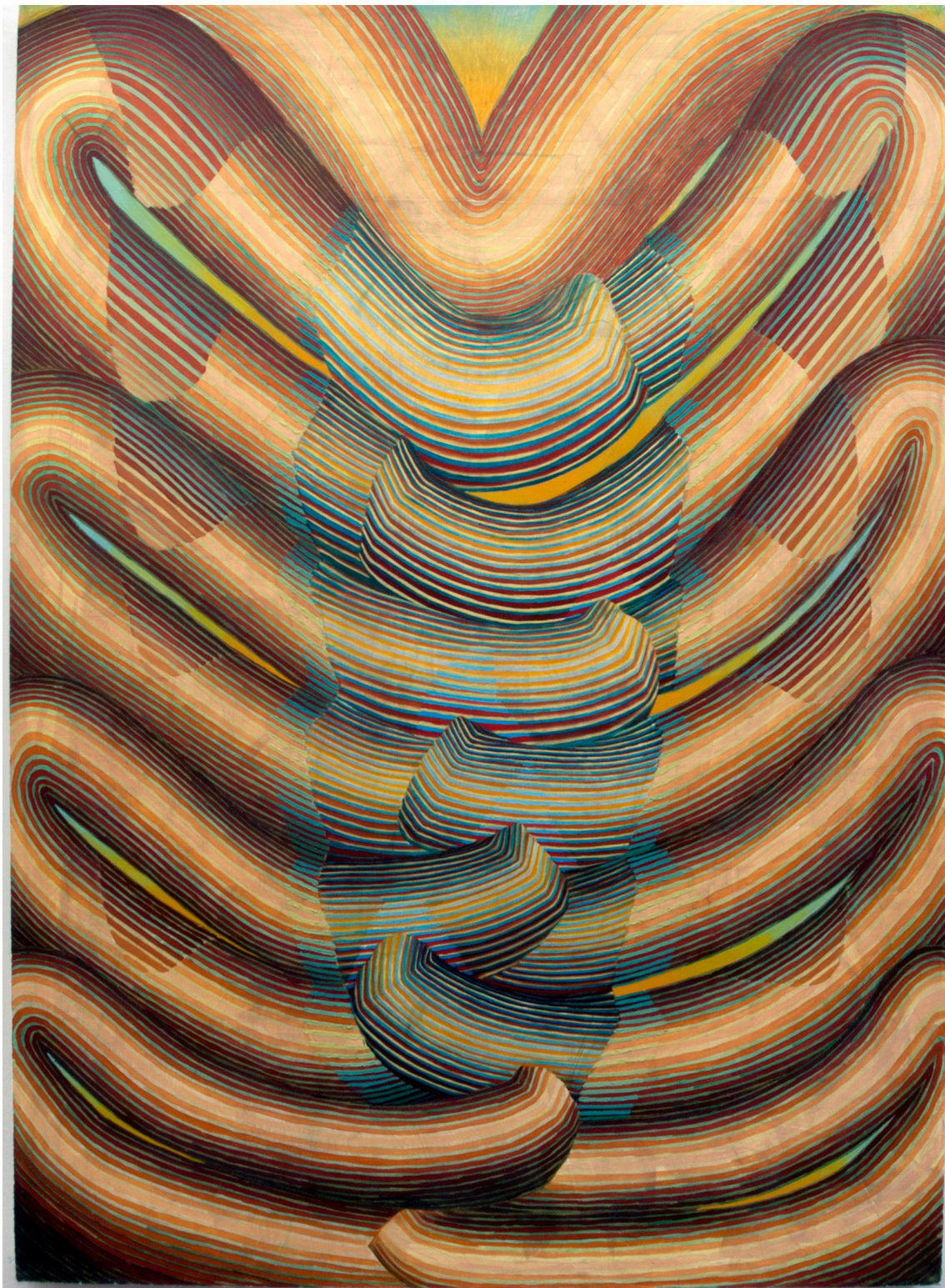
Of course, the artists in *The Dead Don't Die* are not impervious to the idea of recycling. However, these artists seem to understand that the Warholian approach has had many a half-life, and their mimetic relationship to art history and culture is less because they can (a capitalist and colonial notion of ownership or appropriation of a saleable brand) and more because they are curious and care about the subjects they pull from. Their recycling is conversational with the predecessor and does not attempt to devour them.

After the prices and profits of works by many Zombie Formalist darlings plummeted in secondary markets, abstraction understandably gave way to a new interest, the popularization of figuration. Additionally, recent American political turmoil and the continuation of centuries-long social injustices have created a whirlwind of uncertainty, and it seems that the more easily readable, explainable imagery that representational art can offer, has afforded us some semblance of comfort, bringing rise in the past several years, to a rich cohort of figuration and pseudo surrealist representation. When the world seems to be collapsing around you, it is hard to stare at an empty square and hope that it has all the answers, or at least any new answers to increasingly complex problems.

Taking its name from the Ohio-born filmmaker Jim Jarmusch's recent zombie movie *The Dead Don't Die*, this exhibition brings together works of eight artists investigating abstract painting through a variety of approaches, breathing new life into the genre. Although Zombie Formalism seemed like the death knell for non-objective painting, there is a contingent of young artists reanimating this practice yet again through refreshing and innovative methods. Abstract painting just won't die. Despite the fact that abstraction lost its autonomy long ago (at the very least it is now always referential to itself), the artists included in this exhibition wholeheartedly utilize shape, line, mark, process, color, materials, composition, et. al. to express the personal, something that contemporary abstraction has sought to dispel as too sentimental, too romantic, or too uncool. Maybe that is exactly what abstraction can again borrow from figuration and representation: an honest depiction of something, something more complicated and rewarding than the privileged inside joke that abstraction has often become.

Additionally, the works presented here demand to be seen in person to fully realize their visceral subtleties, something that cannot be translated via a small screen or PDF price list. In recent years, viewing works in a gallery has frequently





Theresa Daddezio, 2019, *Sunburn Squeeze*, oil on canvas, 48 x 30 inches.  
Image Courtesy the artist and DC Moore Gallery

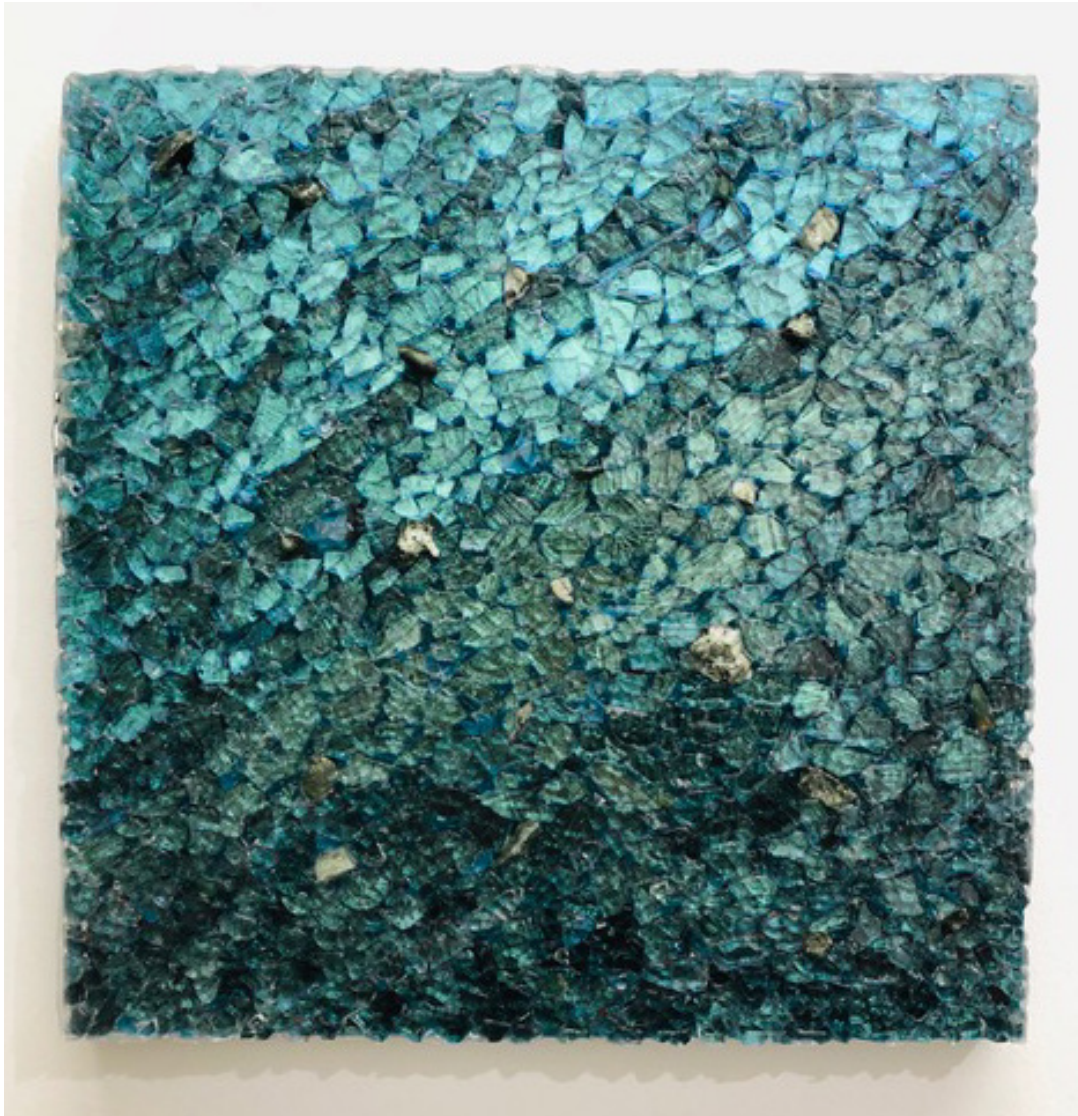


been thoroughly disappointing, as many works often look great on screen, but not so much IRL. This is challenging in the time of Covid, but experiencing the work of these particular artists in a safe space with a small number of adventurous observers may just be the perfect context for these complicated and reflection-inducing surfaces, all of which are alternately palpable or ephemeral when experienced in situ.

The artists included in this exhibition are alike in their interest in materials, a sense of touch, intuition, the meandering mark, novel approaches, and refreshing personal interpretations of the function and history of abstract painting, a history, for the most part, that has excluded them.

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In a recent review of his work on *Vogue.com*, the artist Alteronce Gumby is quoted saying, “I look at these paintings as spaceships to take me to another planet, another solar system, another galaxy, to somewhere away from planet Earth...I want to go to a place to live without the baggage of cultural identity. It is trying to use color and abstraction—and the history of light and space—to take me there.” And take us there he does. Using colorful gemstones and painted glass shards that Gumby applies to the canvas by hand, his vibrant, mosaic-like paintings could be closeups of Impressionist canvases, a Mark Bradford detail, or the night sky in one of James Abbott McNeill Whistler’s Nocturnes. His use of color is transcendent. As much as his work carries us off to alternate places, its sharp fragmented surfaces keep us in the here and now. His act of labor and the bloodshed of working with razor-sharp substances reminds us of the cost of commodity and our feet remain firmly planted on this earth.



Alteronce Gumby, *Green Haze*, 2020, acrylic and glass on panel, 12 x 12 inches  
Image courtesy the artist

Lumin Wako's small, intimate paintings are comprised of tessellating brushstrokes that have a similar density to Gumby's broken glass. Leaving behind the traditional practice of working on an easel or wall, Wako completes her oil paintings as they lay in her lap. Making a work in this manner, cradling it between legs and hands, seems to undermine the notion of a painting being an item and instead is treated more like a companion, at least during the act of making. As elusive as her imagery is, the paintings themselves are specific. In her four small canvases there are hundreds of brushstrokes and not one of them feels out of place. It is no surprise that she uses memory and her own poetry to guide her work. Wako's buildup of surface is like the cadence found in the sum of the lines of a poem. You can't understand the first sentence until you have read the last.



Willa Wasserman, 2020, *View*, oil and silverpoint on linen, 9 x 11 inches  
Image courtesy the artist

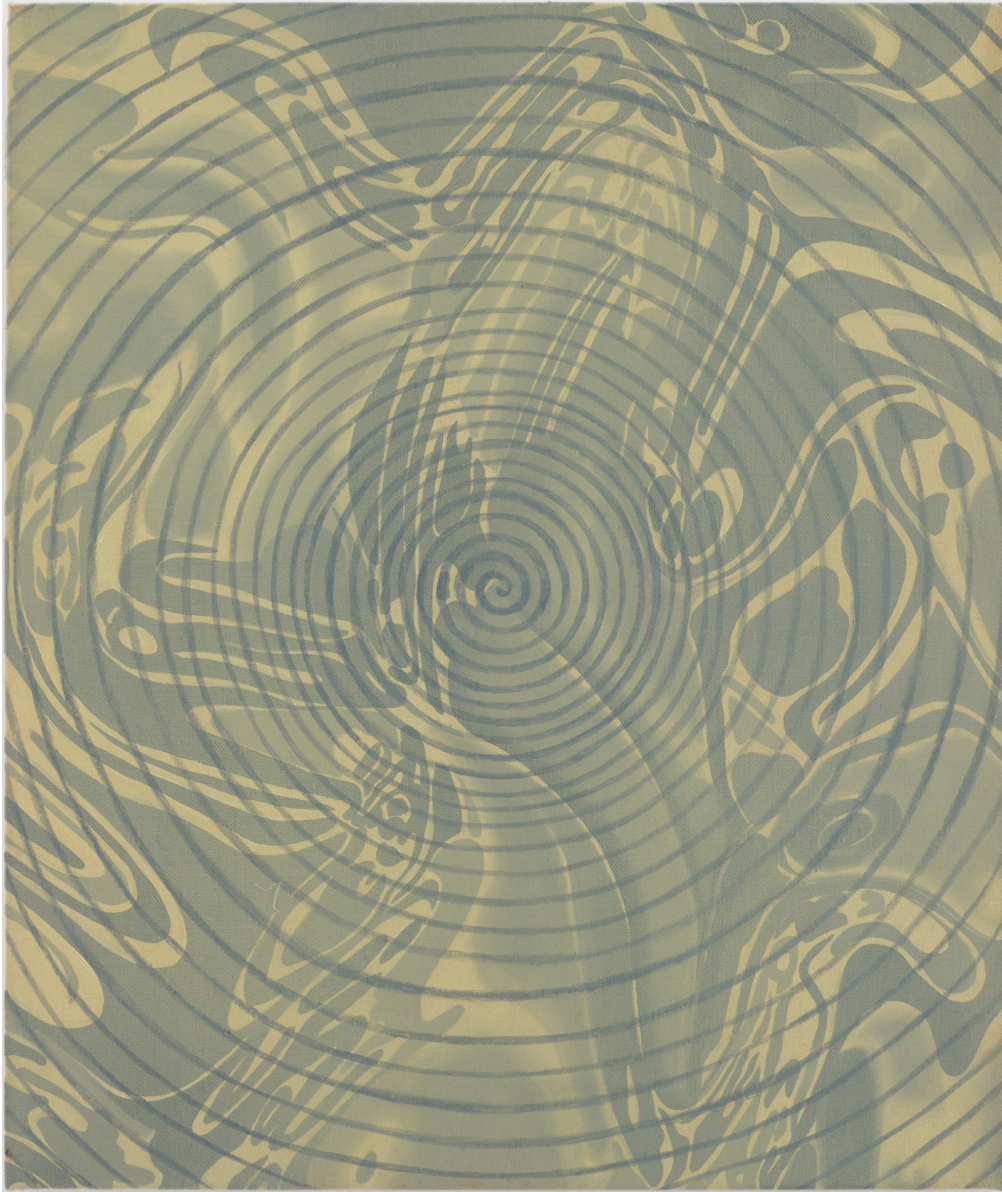
If Wako's and Gumby's work are about building up a painting's surface through an additive process, Willa Wasserman's paintings seem to make almost everything disappear. Working on small linen canvases, she utilizes the age-old techniques of silverpoint and metalpoint, employing a traditional process in an untraditional fashion with the help of bulky brass or steel wool in lieu of a more controllable fine-point tool. Wasserman's dispersed and haunting images grapple with the ghosts of painting, all the while giving us something to look at that is obscured or erased precisely enough to push against the preconceived notions of all things fully nameable. Are the paintings sincere? Are they ironic? They are ironically sincere.





Alvaro Barrington, 1953-2018, 2018, Oil on Burlap Paper in custom frame, 14 x 11 inches  
Image courtesy Alvaro Barrington studio





Olivia Drusin, *Wave Pool (Echo)*, 2020, oil on canvas, 19 x 16 inches.  
Image courtesy the artist, photo: Shark Senesac



Vaughn Davis, *Untitled (Reversible Canvas Series)*, 2021, acrylic and dye on canvas, 69.5 x 42 inches. Image courtesy the artist



While we are on the subject of what might be absent, Vaughn Davis Jr.'s large paintings provide gateways and gashes of negative space in his unstretched, unpredictably shaped canvases. Although torn, ripped, stained, and slashed these paintings do not feel violent or destructive. Instead, they read like acts of resilience. Like a surgeon Davis implements precision, dissecting and distressing his canvases and blurring the lines between sculpture and painting. Like all things that have lived, his canvases show the wear and tear of gravity, decision making, happenstance, circumstance, fragility, and growth.

Ravi Jackson, *Untitled*, 2020, acrylic, paper, hardware, inkjet print on panel, 32 x 38 inches. Image courtesy the artist



Ravi Jackson's shaped and stacked works also feel sculptural, expanding towards the observer. His paintings read as largely unplanned, with parts and pieces added at will and paint applied as if testing a household wall for a prospective paint color. In one painting, planks of wood are hinged to the surface and grommeted paper hang on the structure like a door and a curtain respectively, both painted with swaths of color. His use of familiar everyday materials is reminiscent of the domestic, constructed space. A drawing sits in the center of one painting with notes handwritten in sloppy cursive. The simple drawing of a "two-sided banana" as the text indicates, could refer to an object that either exists in the kitchen or hidden away in a bedroom drawer, but the loaded imagery of the presumed fruit takes us elsewhere too. Jackson's work sits somewhere between the known space of buildings and the unknown space of abstract mark making. Another painting reads somewhat like a prison window, although it is mostly a surface full of wide, expressive brushstrokes.

The centrality of this window and bars in the painting brings to mind the abstract paintings of Peter Halley. Only there is one difference: Jackson's cell feels lived in, used, and not as fun, a different investigation of the sensation of color.

While Jackson's work addresses ideas of place, Theresa Daddezio's work concerns itself with space. Highly sophisticated bands and curves of color in varying widths meander across the surface of her paintings. At times it seems like these works are portholes to infinite space, but instead they are trapped in a vast world of interconnected lines that spatially sit within the length of a half of an inch. This must be the view an atom has. The brain initially wants the works to identify as digital, but they don't. They are handmade paintings, as if woven, and created by someone with a hypersensitivity to color while also possessing the rare trait of patience, a necessity to mix and apply paint with such decisive and powerful influence.

Olivia Drusin's paintings also heighten the senses, although more minimal in nature than Daddezio's work, but equally mesmerizing. Her paintings

## *So, why won't the dead just die?*

call to mind the patterned and geometric work of Bridget Riley and Anni Albers, but if the artist's studio had run out of tape and was constructing motifs from memory without a strict design in mind. Both paintings dissolve the expected depth of the picture plane making atmospheric perspective the closest tangible thing to the audience and possibly the paintings' subject. Drusin's

wobbly motifs and winding concentric circle allow a wandering about the canvas and makes us wonder what the work would have to offer if we could touch the subtle faces of each canvas as if each painting were a braille.

Aptly, we end with the work of Alvaro Barrington. Each artwork's title references a date, 1953 and 1968, the latter is coincidentally the release date of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. His two small paintings, both body part-esque, one with fresh flesh tones hinged to the paper by a bloody-looking stripe of red paint. Philip Guston, one of Barrington's many stated influences, seems to be close by. In the other work, a long serpentine piece of hair-like yarn moves through the right side of the painting, again hinged to the paper with a red stroke of paint as if it almost grew from there. Barrington's work feels accumulated, as opposed to placed. His paintings attempt to bring order to chaos. The beautiful and immediate layers of paint are contrasted by coarse and uneven edges inherent in the burlap paper surfaces. The paintings are further contained by handmade raw wooden frames that feel as if they were produced in a woodshop instead of by a commercial framer. These frames remain open without the constraints of glass, allowing his images to freely live and breathe all the while reaching out into our space to touch us.

So, why won't the dead just die? It is, perhaps, because painting itself has less to say about the world around it than the individuals who continue to make them. One thing is for sure, these eight artists are not sleepwalkers.

-Shawn Powell

**Shawn Powell** is an artist and Assistant Professor in painting at Kent State University. He has presented solo exhibitions at 106 Green, Brooklyn, NY; Chapter, New York, NY; and Webster University, St. Louis, MO; as well as a two-person exhibition at Abattoir Gallery, Cleveland, Ohio. He has been included in group exhibitions at The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, PA; Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo NY; La Esquina, Kansas City, MO; NADA New York, NY; among many others. His work has been featured online in Vanity Fair, Juxtapoz Magazine, Brooklyn Magazine, Bedford and Bowery, Cleveland Scene, Art F City, Hyperallergic and Forma as well as in print publications Bad Jacket, the CAN Journal, and ArtMaze Mag. He received his BFA in Painting and Art History from the Kansas City Art Institute and an MFA in Painting from Hunter College where he was presented with a Tony Smith Award Grant. Powell is a 2021 recipient of the Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award Grant. He and his wife Annie Wischmeyer own and operate the project space Gazebo Gallery in Kent Ohio.

**Alvaro Barrington**, who has a background in community activism and was involved with the Occupy movement, studied at Hunter College, New York, and The Slade School of Fine Art in London, where he has lectured since 2019. His first solo exhibition, which opened the same year he graduated, was curated by Klaus Biesenbach at MoMA PS1, Queens, in 2017. His work has since been shown in numerous solo and group shows, including A Taste of Chocolate at Thaddaeus Ropac, London (2018) and his ongoing Tt x AB collaboration with the painter Teresa Farrell. Barrington has also curated several exhibitions, including Artists I Steal From at Thaddaeus Ropac, London (2019).

**Theresa Daddezio** is an artist and curator based in Brooklyn, NY. She received an MFA from Hunter College in Visual Art and BFA at Purchase College in Painting and Drawing. Her selected exhibitions include: "Altum Corpus" at DC Moore Gallery (NY,NY); "Carbona Sunrise," Transmitter (Brooklyn, NY); "A Mind of Their Own," Pentimenti (Philadelphia, PA); "Three," DC Moore (NYC); "Known: Unknown," New York Studio School (NYC), "Abstraction in the 21st Century," the University of Hawai'i at Manoa: "Rhythms, Rhymes, Repetitions,"

Studio Kura (Itoshima, Japan). Her Her work will be featured in issue #152 of New American Paintings, and has been featured in Art Maze, Hyperallergic, The Queens Ledger, Bushwick Daily, and The L Magazine. Her paintings were recently included in Phong Bui's Curator's Pick at Artfare, as well as featured in MAAKE Mag and Coastal Post. She participated in the Wassaic Residency Project in upstate NY.

**Vaughn Davis Jr.** lives and works in St. Louis, Missouri. Vaughn Davis Jr. received his BFA with Departmental Honors in Sculpture from Webster University in St. Louis. His work has been exhibited at Dragon Crab Turtle, Monaco Gallery, The Luminary in St. Louis MO, Gazebo Gallery, Kent, OH; among others. He has had solo exhibitions at Philip Slein Gallery and the Center of Creative Arts both located in St. Louis. He recently had a solo exhibition at Romer Young Gallery, San Francisco CA.

**Olivia Drusin** graduated with a BFA from The Cooper Union School of Art in 2016, and has exhibited at various spaces around the North East. Most notably, she had a solo exhibition with SARDINE in Brooklyn, NY. Selected group exhibitions include Mattaewan Projects in Beacon, NY, Kustera Projects in Brooklyn, NY. Olivia lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

**Alteronce Gumby's** Alteronce Gumby (1985, Harrisburg, PA) received his BFA at Hunter College, New York, NY and his MFA from Yale University, where he was awarded the Robert Reed Memorial Scholarship. In 2017, he completed a year-long residency as the Harriet Hale Woolley scholar at the Fondation des Etats-Unis in Paris, France. He was granted the AAF/Seebacher Prize for Fine Arts as well as the Dumfries House Residency, Ayrshire, Scotland in 2015. Gumby currently has solo exhibitions at False Flag, and Charles Moffett galleries in New York. Addiitonal recent solo exhibitions include Long Gallery, New York, NY, the Fondation des Etats-Unis, Paris, France and Parrasch Heijnen Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.



**Ravi Jackson** was born in 1985 in Santa Barbara, CA, and lives and works in Los Angeles. He received a BA from Oberlin College and a BFA from Hunter College before receiving his MFA from UCLA in 2016. His work uses the language of abstract painting, as well as imagery and text from popular culture as a way to negotiate ideas about race, art, and sexuality.

**Lumin Wakoa** lives and works in New York. She received her MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. Wakoa was a recipient of the Dedalus Foundation MFA Grant in 2010 and a Fountainhead Fellow at Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010/11. In 2013 she was the recipient of a CUNY Adjunct Professional Development Grant. In 2018 she was a recipient of the Sharpe Walentas Foundation year-long Studio Program Fellowship. She recently has had solo and two person exhibitions at George Gallery, Deanna Evans Projects, Present Company, and Providence College. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at James Fuentes, Spring break Art Fair, Taymour Grahne Gallery, and Untitled Art Fair, among other venues.

**Willa Wasserman** received their MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, and BFA from Hunter College in New York. Wasserman's work has recently been exhibited at Downs & Ross, NY; Park View / Paul Soto, LA; Good Weather, Chicago, IL, Adams and Ollman, Portland, OR, Sargent's Daughter's, New York, NY, and The Gallery, LA. Their work has been reviewed in Contemporary Art Daily and Art in America and was featured in Art in America "Willa Wasserman's Art of Skepticism and Sentimentality" by Emily Watlington. In addition to their solo practice, Wasserman is also a part of the collaborative painting group En Plein Error alongside Jenny Gagalka and Beaux Mendes.

THE DEAD DON'T DIE

# ABATTOIR

Abattoir is a space for contemporary art in the historic Hildebrandt Building, a former meat processing plant in the resurgent Clark-Fulton neighborhood of Cleveland. Lisa Kurzner and Rose Burlingham present a program of regional, and national artists designed to elicit thought-provoking conversation and discussion.

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