

The City

The modern city has long been the object of affection, frustration, and fascination for artists. It is a complicated organism, defined as much by its inhabitants as by its architecture and infrastructure. Beyond the brick and mortar, a city also exists in the abstract—as a monument to the past, a record of the present, and a proposition for the future. Reflecting the ever-changing character of the urban environment, the artworks in this gallery are as varied and complex as cities themselves.

In 2004, the filmmaker Ernie Gehr revisited footage he had shot in the 1970s of downtown Manhattan, an area then in crisis. His *Essex Street Quartet* depicts uncommon views of a New York that, by the early 2000s, had all but disappeared. Georgia O’Keeffe’s seemingly abstract painting, made when the artist was ninety years old, actually pictures the Washington Monument. However, the shaky lines that define the obelisk seem to undermine its formidable might. The policeman in Kerry James Marshall’s painting, an ambiguous figure of authority, brings attention to the complex dynamic between race and law enforcement in this country. And with his fantastical large-scale projects, Claes Oldenburg exaggerates the absurdity of the real cityscape.

Thomas Schütte, Mario Merz

Thomas Schütte's practice includes drawing, printmaking, and architecture, but he is, first and foremost, a sculptor. Since the 1980s, the artist has questioned the iconography of power by exploring character types such as dictators and strongmen. *Krieger* (Warriors) is typical of his work from the present decade. The figures were initially conceived on a small scale, modeled from wax and wearing bottle caps as helmets, and were then enlarged to a monumental size, commensurate with that of public statuary.

Mario Merz's *Fall of the House of Usher* is a multi-part painting that includes a neon light and a stone. The work takes its title from a short story by Edgar Allan Poe in which the protagonist descends into insanity, increasingly unable to distinguish between reality and a medieval legend. Merz had begun his career as an Arte Povera artist, relying on "poor" materials to make his art. By the 1970s his formal and conceptual approaches had expanded to include a lush painterly vocabulary.

Philip Guston

“When the 1960s came along I was feeling split, schizophrenic,” Philip Guston recalled in 1977. “The war, what was happening in America, the brutality of the world. What kind of a man am I, sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything—and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue.” After nearly two decades spent painting abstractly, alongside artists such as Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, in 1968 Guston emphatically embraced figuration. His new paintings were scathing and satirical, often implicitly addressing current events. Although this new body of work received a cool reception, the critic Harold Rosenberg praised Guston as “the first to have risked a fully developed career on the possibility of engaging his art in the political reality. His current exhibition may have given the cue to the art of the 1970s.” Indeed, Guston’s switchover has served as an inspiration and a touchstone for generations of artists in the years since. He died unexpectedly in 1980, shortly before his sixty-seventh birthday.

Louise Bourgeois, Robert Gober

Articulated Lair (1986) inaugurates a group of works that Louise Bourgeois would eventually call “cells.” A self-contained sculptural environment, the work can be entered and experienced from within, where familiar, if antiquated, objects and structural elements come together with wholly invented forms. Since the 1940s Bourgeois had forged a singular visual language, inflected as much by Surrealism and abstraction as by personal experience. Although she received a degree of recognition early in her career, she seldom exhibited until late in her life. “My image remained my own,” Bourgeois explained, “and I am very grateful for that. I worked in peace for forty years.”

In Robert Gober’s work, familiar things are made strange. The prints in this gallery depict everyday objects and images, often forgettable when encountered in daily life. By isolating them from their original contexts and transforming them materially—a mass-produced newspaper becomes an intaglio print with hand-torn edges—Gober endows them with unexpected dignity.

David Hammons

In 1969, David Hammons made a series of prints using his body. By applying this direct pressure to his materials and alluding to contemporary political subject matter, particularly civil rights issues, he literally inserted himself into the discourse of the turbulent late 1960s. This gallery charts Hammons's artistic inquiries since that breakthrough moment, as he has continued to explore American identity in all of its complexity—its history, its representations, and its possibilities—from his perspective as a black artist living in New York.

Hammons has resisted a signature style in favor of consistent experimentation with a broad range of materials, most taken from or referring to the street. Empty bottles of Night Train (a cheap fortified wine) form the sculpture of the same name; *High Falutin'* is a basketball hoop made of a broken wooden frame, a rubber tire, and a disassembled candelabra; and the abstract painting in this room is largely obstructed by black vinyl. Included alongside the works by Hammons is a small collage by Dada pioneer Kurt Schwitters, whose collage and assemblage techniques prefigure those of Hammons.

Jasper Johns

Jasper Johns had his first exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1958, when he was twenty-seven years old. From that show, The Museum of Modern Art acquired three paintings, and Museum trustee Philip Johnson acquired the now-iconic *Flag*, which he gave to MoMA in 1973. Sixty years of prodigious art making followed. An artist of tremendous depth, Johns has produced a body of work as densely layered with materials—paint, wax encaustic, charcoal, and ink, among others—as with images. His personal and recognizable iconography recurs within a single series and even across decades, and his sources are varied: popular culture, everyday objects and images, and art historical and literary quotations. Since the beginning, the artist Marcel Duchamp was an inspiration to Johns, and in 1998 Johns gave Duchamp's *Female Fig Leaf*, on view in this gallery, as a gift to the Museum.

Gerhard Richter, Rosemarie Trockel

Trained to paint in the state-sanctioned Socialist Realist style in Communist East Germany during the 1950s, Gerhard Richter developed a distrust of painting's ability to accurately represent the world. After immigrating to the West, this skepticism became the subject of his work. A visual polyglot, he is technically dexterous, as proficient in gestural abstraction as Photo-Realism; his career has been defined by stylistic variation. *Woods* was the first series of paintings Richter completed after his 2003 retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art. These dense and vibrant abstractions are built from and marked by his signature technique whereby paint is slathered and swiped using a rubber squeegee.

One generation younger than Richter, Rosemarie Trockel saw painting, dominant in Germany in the 1980s, as a medium to overcome. Her earliest "paintings," which were in fact woven textiles, functioned as a feminist retort to the male-centered, painting-centric art world. Over a period of nearly forty years, Trockel has produced works that encompass drawing, photography, and, primarily, sculpture. Half of *Copy Me* is a cast of a couch; the other half is its copy. Through the process of duplication and reduplication, Trockel betrays a deep-seated doubt of straightforward representation.

Martin Puryear

“I’ve always felt . . . like an outsider,” Martin Puryear has reflected. “I never felt like signing up and joining and being part of a coherent cadre of anything, ideologically, or esthetically, or attitudinally.” Exposed in the 1960s and ’70s to Minimalism, Conceptual art, Process art, and other prevailing postwar movements, Puryear has transformed these formative influences into sculpture distinctly his own.

Over the course of the past four decades, the artist has worked primarily with wood—a choice informed by his travels and wide-ranging exposure to the carving and craftsmanship of artists and artisans of Sierra Leone, Japan, and Scandinavia. Although perhaps best known for his quasi-abstract works that evoke humans, animals, and natural growths, he has also made a rich body of works on paper. Like the direct, physical carving of sculpture, his etchings and woodcuts involve the process of scratching or digging into metal or wood. His sculptures evoke things that already exist in the world. As Puryear has explained, “I was never interested in making cool, distilled, pure objects.”

Helen Levitt

Born in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, in 1913, Helen Levitt spent her entire life in New York, capturing the colorful array of its neighborhoods and inhabitants through the lens of her camera. Beginning in the 1930s, Levitt explored Manhattan by foot, often drawn to Spanish Harlem, the Lower East Side, and what is now Hell's Kitchen for their particularly lively street activity. Although she became well known in these years for her black-and-white photographs of daily life—many featuring children at play—by 1959 she had shifted tack, applying for a grant to photograph the same subjects in color. Over the course of the next three decades, she became a pioneer of color photography, recording the vibrant beauty of mundane moments and the urban theatricality of her lifelong home.

Rampant Abstraction

In the early twentieth century, artists began turning to abstraction as a vehicle for expression—whether by reducing an identifiable subject to its most basic forms or by inventing a new image from scratch. By the 1950s, abstraction was an established genre, exemplified in the United States by Abstract Expressionism. Artists took a more liberated approach to abstraction in the decades that followed, broadening it by incorporating figurative elements, sometimes with a sense of humor, and by emphasizing process and materials.

Alma Woodsey Thomas's painting maintains the all-over compositional structure famously deployed by Abstract Expressionists; its rhythmic, pulsing effect evokes the subject of the painting's title, *Fiery Sunset*. The figuration that was always latent in Willem de Kooning's work took on cool, crisp forms in the 1980s. Ken Price and Elizabeth Murray infused their abstract work with a comic vocabulary indebted to popular culture. And John Baldessari's *Six Colorful Inside Jobs* satirizes the limits of abstraction as the video's protagonist literally paints himself into a corner.

Agnes Martin

In New York in the late 1950s, Agnes Martin developed an abstract geometric language that would endure throughout her long career. Spurred by the unexpected death of her friend, painter Ad Reinhardt, in 1967, Martin decided she needed space to work away from the art world. She moved to Taos, New Mexico, where she found inspiration in the arid landscape and discovered Zen Buddhism. Both would inform her approach to painting for the rest of her life.

Martin's six-panel work *With My Back to the World* is an example of the artist's later achievements. The canvases' luminous fields, composed of delicately hued horizontal bands, evoke the colors of the desert, and its stillness. Despite their regularity, these paintings resist the rigidity of the grid and instead indulge in the subtle undulations of working freehand. In the last years of her life, Martin tirelessly explored the potential of abstraction to communicate on an emotional and spiritual register as well as a formal one.

Cy Twombly

In 1994, Cy Twombly's *Four Seasons* arrived in New York from Italy, its paint still wet, for the artist's retrospective exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art. The four seasons, a timeworn artistic subject, metaphorically equates the rhythms of nature with the phases of human life. Then sixty-six years old, Twombly chose *Autumn* to inaugurate the group. On a cream-colored ground, he concentrated knots of rich crimsons and burgundies, and he scratched into the surface the work's title in Italian. The subsequent paintings evoke just as vividly their stated time of year, moving from the blacks and grays of *Winter* to the hot reds and lemon yellows of *Summer*.

Twombly often found his subject matter in classical sources, from Homer's *Iliad* to the Greek myth about Leda and the swan, and he tackled it with his distinct visual language: sometimes rough and graffiti-like, at other times lush and indulgent, and always direct. Like many modernists, Twombly did not so much seek to sever his ties to the past as to make it relevant to a contemporary audience.

The Sixties Generation: Color, Form, Pop

The work in this room follows the generation of the 1960s into the 1980s and beyond. These artists belonged to the same milieu, exhibiting their work together in group exhibitions and visiting each other's studios. With the passage of time, they became increasingly more entrenched in their personal styles.

Andy Warhol, whose work thrived on community and conviviality, turned to a younger generation for inspiration in the 1980s, forming relationships that left their mark on his work. Roy Lichtenstein had appropriated comic book imagery in his early paintings, which he executed with hand-painted Ben-Day dots, a reference to automated printing. Years later, he applied this mode of mark-making to a broad range of subject matter. Ed Ruscha, for whom photography had been a point of departure, became more engaged with cinema, introducing into his work telltale characteristics of vintage Hollywood films. Frank Stella, whose earliest paintings were stark and minimal, embraced maximal exuberance.

Gego

Sphere, the earliest work in this gallery, dates from 1959. Made when Gego was forty-seven years old, it nonetheless marks the first chapter of her thirty-year career. Born in Germany, she immigrated to Venezuela in 1939 at the start of World War II. After more than a decade working as an architect, she eventually turned her efforts to sculpture, drawing, and printmaking. Her first exhibition took place in Caracas in 1958. In the years that followed, Gego investigated sculptural volume and the expansive possibilities of line in two and three dimensions. In the 1970s, her work became increasingly attenuated and astonishingly complex. By the 1980s, the straight lines prevalent throughout previous decades had begun to bend and twist into dense knots. Rather than being situated on the ground or on a pedestal, the majority of Gego's sculptures are hung suspended from the ceiling, where they respond to movements of the air. They are often described as drawings in space; Gego's works on paper, by contrast, translate the capricious mobility of her three-dimensional pieces into fixed marks on the page.

The Sixties Generation: Materials and Processes

The artists in this gallery came of age in the late 1960s, when considerations of how a work was made and how it behaved in the world became as important as its formal characteristics. A generation later, many of these same preoccupations continued to guide these artists' productions. The practices of some remained largely unchanged. Others, meanwhile, began to introduce layers of narrative that occasionally included hints of mysticism, mythology, and apocalyptic visions.

On Kawara began making his date paintings in 1966 and worked on the series over the span of decades. The cumulative effect of his deadpan and literal pursuit speaks to the enormity of time and its ceaseless passage. The vastness of the cosmos is evoked by Lee Bontecou's hanging sculpture, which took nearly twenty years working in isolation to create. The end of the world is described in haunting detail in Robert Morris's monumental charcoal drawing from the 1980s picturing a nuclear apocalypse. This work marks a radical departure from his Minimalist sculptures of the 1960s. Melvin Edwards's Lynch Fragment series looks back on this country's past. He deploys abstraction symbolically as a reminder of the history of slavery in the United States.

Vija Celmins

Since the late 1960s, Vija Celmins has created intricate paintings and works on paper whose compositions are dominated by expansive, often unusual views of nature, among them horizonless oceans, desert floors, and star-pocked skies. These works are based on photographic images—some taken by Celmins and others culled from newspapers or books—and subjected to a labor-intensive process that approaches replication. The works in this gallery are mezzotints, made using a tonal etching technique that produces velvety gradations from deep black to stark white and involves meticulous attention to minute details. Celmins characterized these works as “re-descriptions” that explore the relationship between memory, perception, and images. “My intention is to make a fat, full form,” Celmins has explained. “Between the tangible, flat canvas and the volume of all those things like memory, and actual three-dimensional space, and how we experience the world, is where the chance to build the form comes. . . . And I expect a lot from that space.”

Joan Jonas

Since the 1970s, Joan Jonas has pioneered an art of video and performance, often exploring the possibilities of their combination. Her works, she explained, are “always to do with space. Three-dimensional space. To me that’s what performance is too. The video itself is a three-dimensional space, and you have to go into it.” As if turning the medium of video inside out, Jonas expanded these spatial investigations in the 1990s with her earliest multimedia installations—room-filling works that combine video, drawing, sculpture, and audio components.

Reanimation, which the artist began in 2010 in collaboration with the composer and jazz musician Jason Moran, exists as both a performance and an installation. Its interwoven elements draw on the nonlinear qualities of Japanese Noh theater and on Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness’s 1968 novel *Under the Glacier*, in which a young man is sent to investigate paranormal activity surrounding a glacier. Jonas shot much of the video footage in the Arctic Circle. The resulting images of snowy mountains, streams, and animals constitute a meditation on the evolution and uncertain fate of our ecosystem and its relation to human activity. At one moment, over the sounds of Moran’s piano playing and the voice of Sami singer Ánde Somby, we hear Jonas, quoting Laxness, reflect, “Time is the one thing we can all agree to call supernatural.”