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The Best Art Shows of 2021 Were in Galleries



Rachel Eulena Williams, *Pierce by Sunbeams*, 2020,
Silkscreen, acrylic, dye on canvas, and cotton rope, 42 x 42
inches

This fall a mood of elation was palpable in certain quarters of Manhattan, namely those neighborhoods dense with commercial art galleries. People giddily commented on the unusually high quality of the gallery scene as if art dealers had recommitted themselves to their calling and were bent on making up for the deprivations of lockdown. Several men had impressive shows — [Philip Guston](#), [Beauford Delaney](#) (through Dec. 23), [David Salle](#) and [Alvaro Barrington](#) come to mind. But what moved me most was the high frequency of outstanding solo presentations of art by women — more than I could possibly mention here, even if I had been able to see them all. The shows touched on all phases of artistic development — early, middle, late — and the cumulative message concerned longevity: women have always been here, dedicating their lives to art.

(Read our reviews of [Philip Guston](#), [Beauford Delaney](#), [David Salle](#) and [Alvaro Barrington](#).)

1. Some Impressive Beginnings: Rachel Eulena Williams, Garrett Bradley, Cathy Lebowitz, Nicole Storm

The very beginning of the year brought signs that excellent debuts might be in the offing. Canada introduced [Rachel Eulena Williams's](#) colorful, irregular wall pieces, which combined discarded pieces of paper and plastic, using string, into collages unhinged and set free (among their predecessors: the shaped paintings of Elizabeth Murray, the attenuated sand and fabric sculptures of Senga Nengudi and the cut-tin constructions of the outsider artist [David Butler](#)). At the Museum of Modern Art, in a collaboration with the Studio Museum, the filmmaker [Garrett Bradley](#) presented "America," two intersecting screens hanging in the middle of a gallery, onto and through which she projected combinations of found and made footage, forming a majestic reimagining of African American culture and history. Another standout, and something of a sleeper, was the debut of [Cathy Lebowitz at Skoto Gallery](#). The artist, for two decades [an editor at Art in America](#), had previously kept her marvelous drawings to herself. Executed in colored pencil, they are modest, completely riveting and highly unstable. Their surfaces are filled with interlocking shapes and textures that reflect the influence of Gorky and, oddly, Morandi. They refuse to coalesce into legibility, continually hinting at different possibilities: abstraction, overgrown garden, messy studio, a naturalist's curio cabinet.

White Columns started the fall by introducing [Nicole Storm](#), another talent nurtured at the [Creative Growth Art Center](#) in Oakland, Calif. (along with [Judith Scott and Dan Miller](#)). Storm's drawings and collages feature fluorescent color and many varieties of automatic drawing in black ink. At White Columns, she orchestrated a vibrant installation, lining a small gallery with her efforts, often painting over the gaps of white wall between them. Finally, new paintings by the Somalia-born artist [Uman at Fierman](#), alive with color and mystical beings, leapt so far beyond her first show there as to feel like a debut.