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*"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"
JULY 2022*

Out in Philly—Four Museums and Nine Shows in Eight Hours

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Installation view of Soutine / de Kooning: Conversations in Paint at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia.

All photos by Paul Laster.

By PAUL LASTER, August 2021

Philadelphia, celebrated as the City of Brotherly Love, has an equal admiration for marvelous museums with amazing art. From the Barnes Foundation (<https://barnesfoundation.org/>)’s rich collection of modernist masters and the traveling exhibition “Soutine / de Kooning: Conversations in Paint” to the Fabric Workshop and Museum’s fascinating “Elisabeth Kley: Minutes of Sand” and “Hard/Cover” shows, there have been plenty of reasons to visit the city this summer.

Venturing down to Philly on the train from New York on a Saturday morning, independent curator Renée Riccardo and I headed straight to the Barnes, where we revisited some of our favorite works in the foundation’s fascinating collection, which includes 181 Renoirs, 69 Cézannes (with one of the five, highly coveted canvases of

MENU
The Gard Players), 59 Matisse, 46 Picassos and 16 Modiglianis, and then we caught the engaging exhibition pairing paintings by Lithuanian artist Chaïm Soutine and Dutch-American abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning.

Organized by the Barnes Foundation and the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, the faceoff featured 42 energetic paintings that oscillated between the figurative and the abstract and surveyed significant moments in the history of both artists' prolific careers. The British art critic David Sylvester first drew parallels between the expressive, formless paintings of the two artists in 1959. When Sylvester and De Kooning met shortly thereafter, the artist agreed with the critic's comparison of their distorted figures and twisting landscapes, which were passionately produced through a dynamic buildup of fluid, gestural brushstrokes on densely painted canvases.

The sensational show mixed the contorted self-portraits and seated subjects of Soutine with De Kooning's early, wild paintings of women with tormented grins and the latter's Long Island landscapes with the former's melting mountainous villages. The frenzied figurative nature of their turbulent art dissolved into arousing abstract action before our delighted eyes. From room to room, from women and sides of beef to water and hillsides, this "Conversation in Paint" communicated a compelling comparison—like the coupling of De Kooning's gestural canvases with John Chamberlain's contorted car-part sculptures did in an exhibition at New York's Mnuchin Gallery in 2016—that needed to be studied, savored and shared.

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Clarity Haynes in Taking Space: Contemporary Women Artists and the Politics of Scale at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia

The marriage of figuration and abstraction continued in the exhibition “Taking Space: Contemporary Women Artists and the Politics of Scale” at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (<https://www.pafa.org/>). Featuring works that explored issues of space, scale, size and repetition by more than 50 contemporary women artists, the

show derived its title from the discouraging words “You took the space from a good man,” which were spoken in the early 1970s to Deborah Willis by a male art professor, who resented her presence in the art program.

Highlights in “Taking Space” included Alyson Shotz’s woven metal sculpture suspended from the ceiling, Viola Frey’s life-size ceramic sculpture of a grandmother communing with a giant vase, Ellen Harvey’s video installation mirroring PAFA’s historic landmark building with a transformative replica that referenced it from within it, Alice Neel’s portrait of a nude pregnant woman boldly reclining on a sofa, and whimsically painted wood assemblages by Louise Nevelson.



Installation view of Motion: 150 years of Women's Artistic Networks at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia

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The second of three exhibitions celebrating women artists in honor of the 100th anniversary of the passing of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, “Women in Motion: 150 years of Women's Artistic Networks at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts” further commemorated PAFA’s commitment to women artists since its first annual exhibition in 1811. Highlighting 80 works from the collection by more than 50 women artists, it featured a bevy of striking works in a variety of media, including a Georgia O’Keeffe painting of a flowering coxcomb, a Beatrice Wood canvas of a haunting cat and Florine Stettheimer’s painting of a stylish picnic atop a hill.

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Marisa Merz at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

Heading next to the Philadelphia Museum of Art (<https://philamuseum.org/>), we caught a strong selection of sculptures and drawings by the pioneering Italian artist Marisa Merz, an overview of the city’s vibrant art scene through the works of 25 artists in “New Grit: Art & Philly Now” and an engaging exhibition of avant-garde sculptures, installations and performance art pieces by Black American artist Senga Nengudi.

MENU The only female artist affiliated with the Arte Povera movement, which consisted of a group of artists who utilized every day "poor" materials in the making of art, Merz employed organic forms and craft techniques to explore the relationship between art and life. The show featured a lead fountain and musical instrument, as well as an assortment of female heads by the artist, who was the winner of the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale in 2013.



Jonathan Lyndon Chase in New Grit: Art & Philly Now at the Philadelphia Museum of Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

Standout works in “New Grit: Art & Philly Now” included Jonathan Lyndon Chase’s representational paintings and sculptures involving food and the methods of making and consuming it, Odili Donald Odita’s colorful abstract mural that extended the length of a hallway, figurative ceramics and banners by Kukuli Velarde capturing Pre-

Columbian times and the aftermath of colonization, Judith Schaecter's symbolic stained glass works with Gothic narratives and Doug Bucci's elegant tabletop setting for an imaginary last supper.



Senga Nengudi at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

In another part of the museum “Senga Nengudi: Topologies” traced the arc of the pioneering artist’s career from the 1970s to today. The sprawling survey featured performance photos and videos; sculptures made from stuffed and stretched nylon stockings, discarded bedsprings and scraps of rubber; shiny black plastic drapes

suspended in a red-lit room; and videos of punch cards for jacquard weaving projected on window blinds. An avant-garde artist who's been exhibiting since the early-1970s but has been long under-recognized, Nengudi is finally getting the kudos that her imaginative work rightly deserves.



Installation view of Elisabeth Kley: Minutes of Sand at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia

Our final stop of the day was the Fabric Workshop and Museum (<https://fabricworkshopandmuseum.org/>), where the exhibition “Fabric As...” provided an introduction to some of the thoughtful ways that artists have interacted with materials in the workshop side of the institution, with all of the artworks on view coming from its permanent collection. Passing through the exhibition, the following gallery featured Elisabeth Kley’s colorful “Minutes of Sand” show, which juxtaposed giant graphic paintings and folding screens with boldly designed platforms and pedestals displaying shapely objects in a carnivalesque realm.

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Betty Woodman in Hard/Cover at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia

Offering installations and objects in another sort of setting, the group exhibition “Hard/Cover” presented past artists-in-residence, such as Louise Bourgeois and Viola Frey, alongside contemporary artists, including Jane Irish and Woody De Othello, who were invited to expand their practice with screen-printing in the institution’s workshop, through a compelling collaboration between the FWM and Philadelphia’s

Clay Studio. Combining inventive ceramics with tablecloths, wallpapers, draperies and floor tiles, the sprightly show exhibited a fascinating array of alternative ways for living with art—and it brought our day of viewing art in Philly to a pleasant end. **WM**



Alyson Shotz in Taking Space: Contemporary Women Artists and the Politics of Scale at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia



Viola Frey in Taking Space: Contemporary Women Artists and the Politics of Scale at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia

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Ellen Harvey in Taking Space: Contemporary Women Artists and the Politics of Scale at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia

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Alice Neel in Taking Space: Contemporary Women Artists and the Politics of Scale at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia

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Louise Nevelson in Taking Space: Contemporary Women Artists and the Politics of Scale at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia

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Mequitta Ahuja, Sylvia Sleigh and Dona Nelson in Taking Space: Contemporary Women Artists and the Politics of Scale at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia

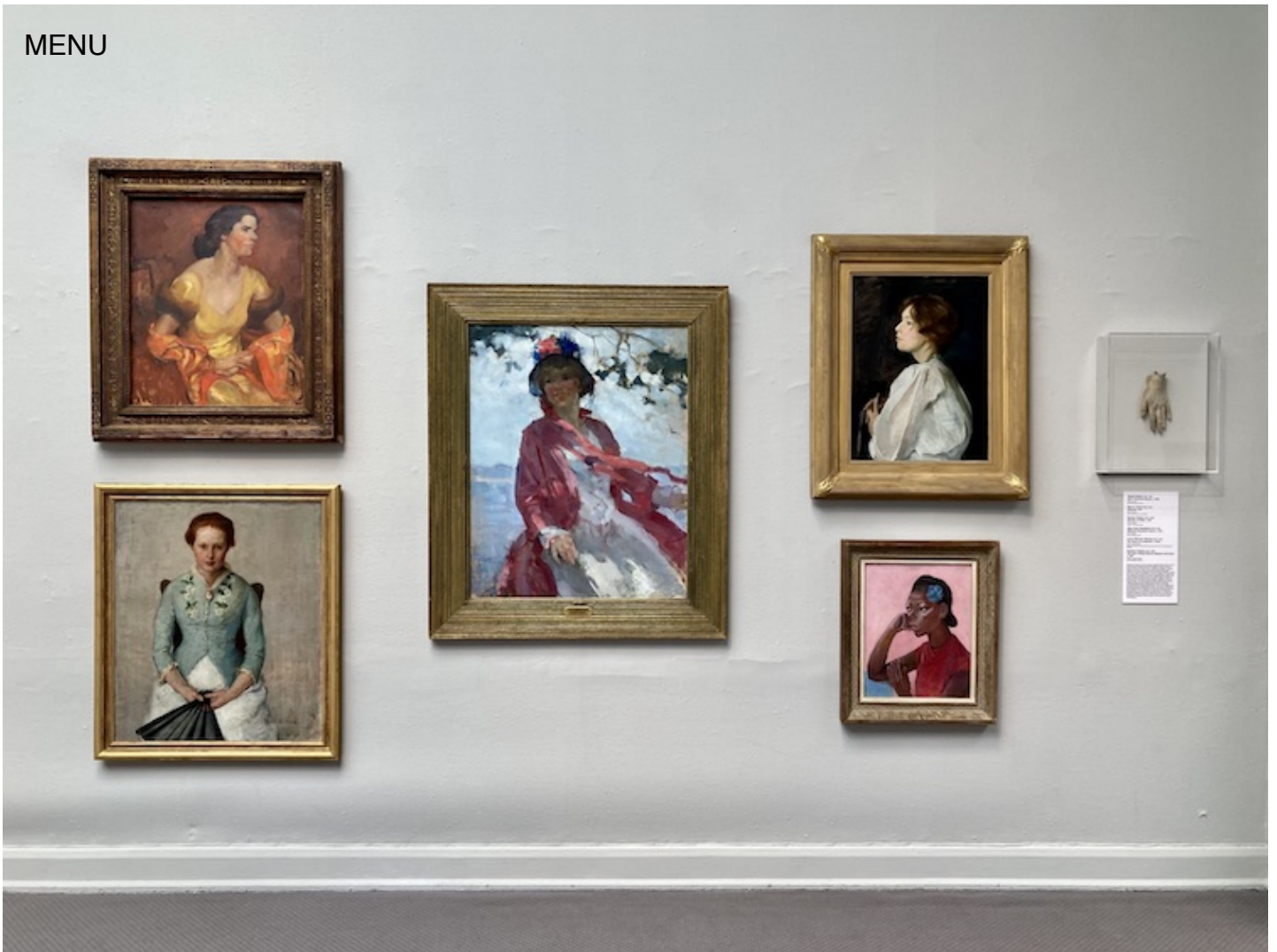
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Margaret Lesley Bush-Brown, *Self-Portrait*, 1856
Oil on canvas
18 1/2 x 24 1/2 in.
© 2011 The Art Institute of Chicago

Margaret Lesley Bush-Brown in Women in Motion: 150 years of Women's Artistic Networks at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia

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Installation view of Motion: 150 years of Women's Artistic Networks at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia

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Mary Cassatt in Women in Motion: 150 years of Women's Artistic Networks at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia

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Georgia O'Keeffe in Women in Motion: 150 years of Women's Artistic Networks at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia

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Installation view of Motion: 150 years of Women's Artistic Networks at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia

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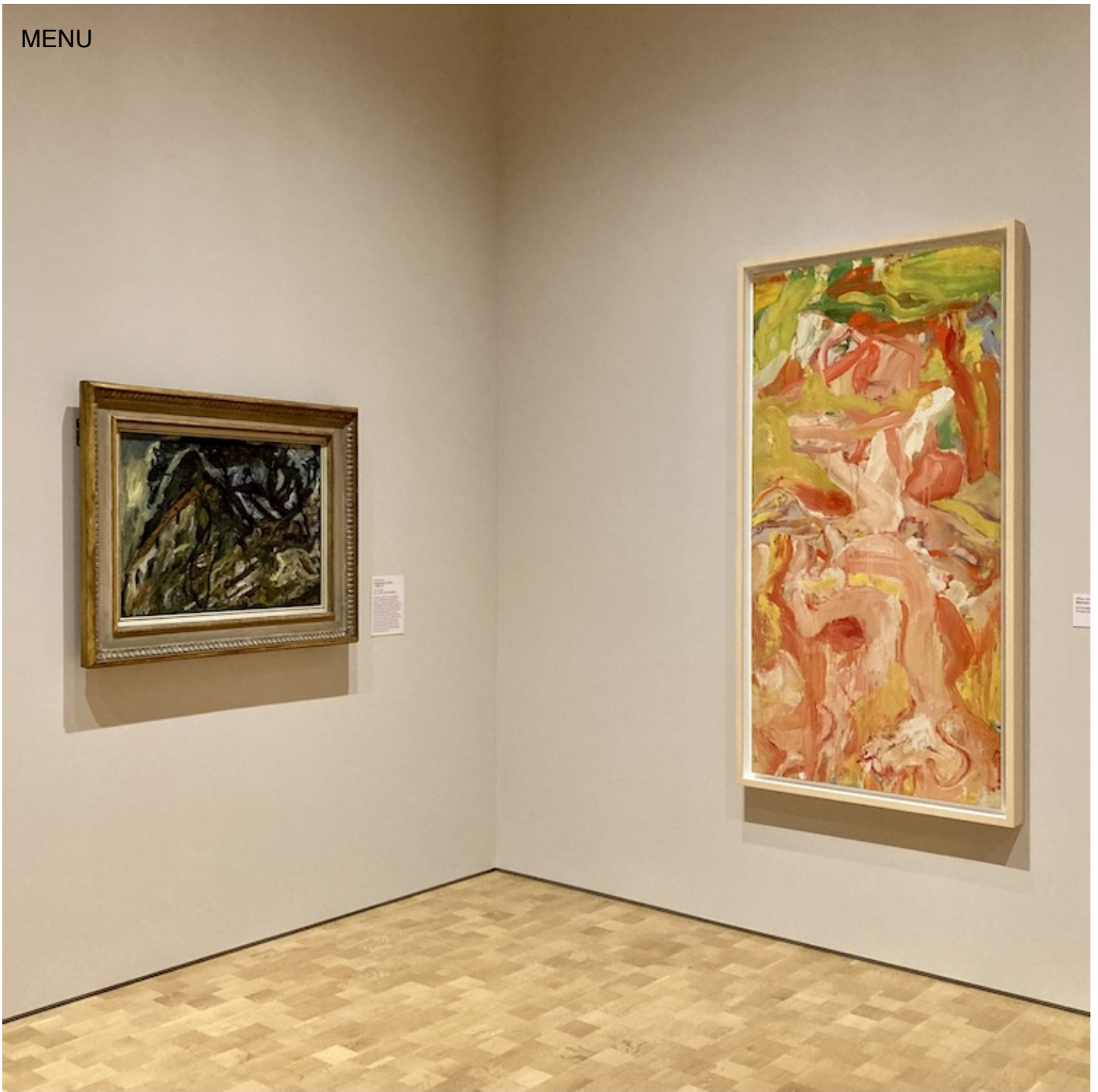
Beatrice Wood in Motion: 150 years of Women's Artistic Networks at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia

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Florine Stettheimer in Women in Motion: 150 years of Women's Artistic Networks at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia

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Installation view of Soutine / de Kooning: Conversations in Paint at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia

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Chaim Soutine in Soutine / de Kooning: Conversations in Paint at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia

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Willem de Kooning
 Queen of Hearts, 1943-46
 Oil and charcoal on fibercast
 Marlboro Museum and Sculpture
 Garden, Smithsonian Institution,
 Washington, DC. Gift of the Joseph H.
 Hirshhorn Foundation, 1992

This painting demonstrates de Kooning's
 keen attention to the human form, pale
 features, and bold color—interests he
 shared with Soutine. A significant work
 in de Kooning's artistic development,
 Queen of Hearts, with its exaggerated
 form and restless lines, looks forward
 to his famous Woman paintings of
 the 1950s.

Willem de Kooning painting in Soutine / de Kooning: Conversations in Paint at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia

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Chaim Soutine in Soutine / de Kooning: Conversations in Paint at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia

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Willem de Kooning
The Visit, 1965-67
Oil on canvas
Tate, London. Purchased in
the 1960s. In Kooning's
series figure in a group of
more fully explored in the
nature. With their forms, g
and colors, these paintings
contribute to the overall
language of color. Here, it
is barely discernible, subtle
the general composition. I
but surface has a quality
through photography show
de Kooning created the par
multiple times.

Willem de Kooning painting in Soutine / de Kooning: Conversations in Paint at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia

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Installation view of Soutine / de Kooning: Conversations in Paint at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia

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Willem de Kooning painting in Soutine / de Kooning: Conversations in Paint at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia

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Wilmer Wilson IV in New Grit: Art & Philly Now at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

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Odili Donald Odita in New Grit: Art & Philly Now at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

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Kukuli Velarde in New Grit: Art & Philly Now at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

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Judith Schaecter in New Grit: Art & Philly Now at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

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Doug Bucci in New Grit: Art & Philly Now at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

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Senga Nengudi at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

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Installation view of Senga Nengudi: Topologies at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

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Senga Nengudi at the Philadelphia Museum of Art



Installation view of Senga Nengudi: Topologies at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

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Marisa Merz
Merz
1961-2015
Marisa Merz
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Marisa Merz at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

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Marisa Merz at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

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Renée Green in Fabric As... at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia

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Installation view of Elisabeth Kley: Minutes of Sand at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia

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Viola Frey in Hard/Cover at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia



Woody Othello in Hard/Cover at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia

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Jane Irish in Hard/Cover at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia

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Paul Laster is a writer, editor, curator, artist and lecturer. He's a contributing editor at ArtAsiaPacific and Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art and writer for Time Out New York, Harper's Bazaar Arabia, Galerie Magazine, Sculpture, Art & Object, Cultured, Architectural Digest, Garage, Surface, Ocula, Observer, ArtPulse,

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Conceptual Fine Arts and Glasstire. He was the founding editor of Artkrush, started The Daily Beast’s art section, and was art editor of Russell Simmons’ OneWorld Magazine, as well as a curator at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, now MoMA PS1.

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