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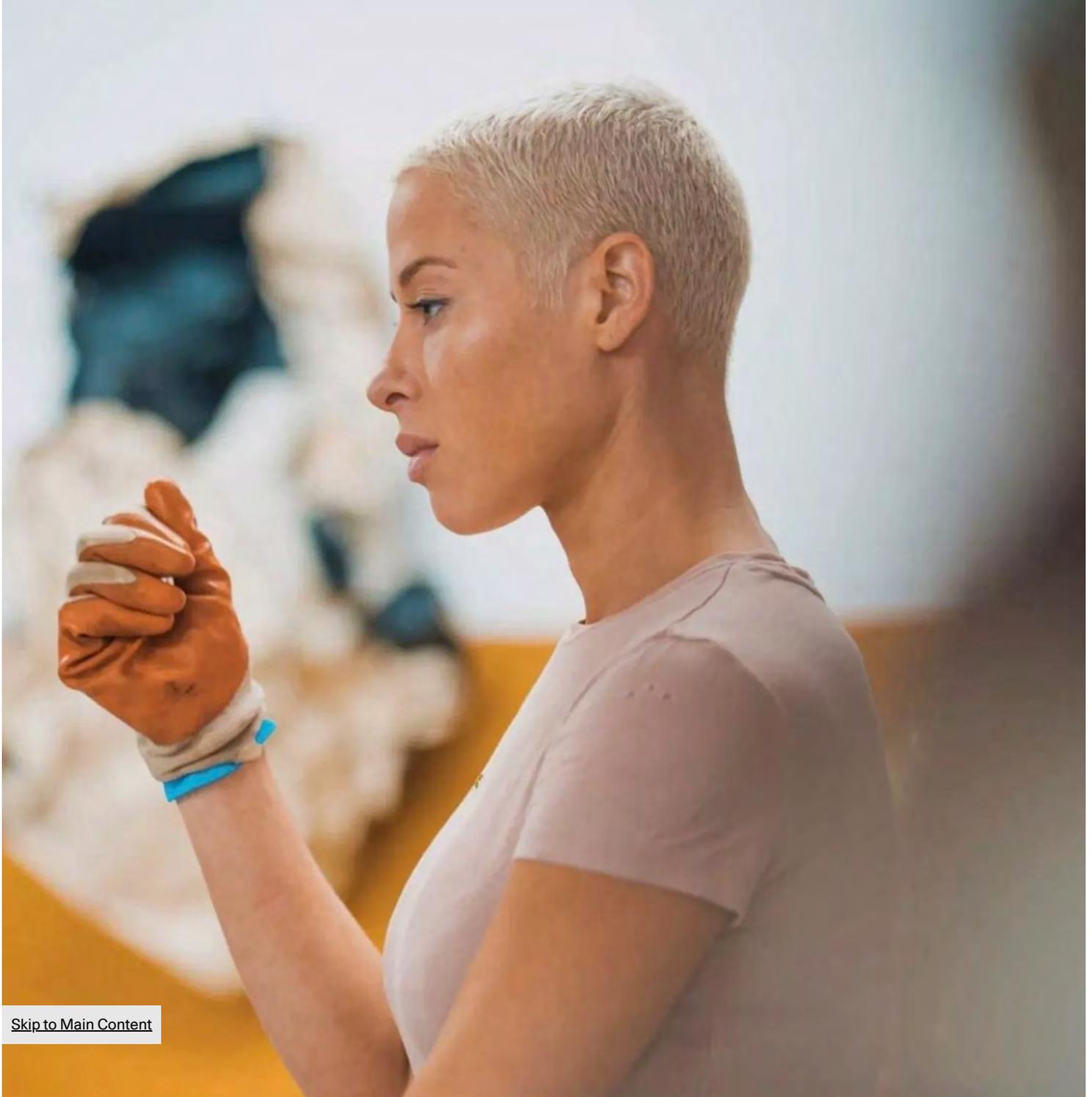
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Art

The Artsy Vanguard 2021: Kennedy Yanko

• Jacqui Germain Dec 1, 2021 8:00am   



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A decade ago, [Kennedy Yanko](#) was a performer at the Living Theatre, New York City's longest-running experimental theater company. She began most mornings by making breakfast for Judith Malina, the late, legendary director of the Living Theatre. Yanko, along with the company's half dozen other performers, lived in the theater space and took care of Malina together. One performer lived in the office. Someone else lived upstairs. Yanko lived out of the dressing room. After breakfast, she'd make her way to a nearby yoga studio, where she took classes and eventually began teaching. As expected, the day's centerpiece revolved around the theater itself—things like hours of rehearsal or building sets for an upcoming show.

“It was just really interesting to be a part of a commune like that, you know? It was a commune that was building art,” Yanko said, recalling her four-year stay at the Living Theatre. Originally from St. Louis, Missouri, Yanko moved to New York City in her early twenties after leaving San Francisco Art Institute, where she was part way through earning her degree in painting and art history. She credits the Living Theatre with being the place where her “artist” self emerged.

“It's just funny as a painter to find your ‘artist’ in a performance environment,” Yanko, now 33, explained. “It really led to me being able to, on a very physical and cellular level, understand that I'm emoting from within. That's really kind of how the sculptures are made. They're representative of my life experience, you know? They're how I've digested the world.”





If Yanko's completed sculptures are the relics left after digesting, the wonder and richness of her practice lies equally in the *way* she chews—on things she's reading, other projects, persistent ideas, memories. The sculptures Yanko is best known for are made by combining chunks of metal with swatches of paint skins—a medium of her own accidental, experimental creation that looks just as it sounds. The works are large and abstract, appearing as bent and folded arrangements. The combination of metal and paint skin shifts our understanding of each medium's malleability. Suddenly, a supple material appears fixed, a rigid material offers its flexibility.

"Three Generations," Yanko's recent solo show at Salon 94, provides snapshots of the evolution of her process with each work. *Recoil* (2017), a work made entirely of metal, could represent her early interactions with metal as a medium.

"I wasn't even planning on using metal in my work; I just wanted to move my hands in a different way," Yanko said, explaining that she had started an apprenticeship at a nearby iron-working factory to get through a tough winter in New York. "I was touching that material all the time and understanding it. And then when I went to Fountainhead [Art Residency] in Miami, and that was a really important moment for me because that's when I started using scrap metal specifically and not sheet metal."



Kennedy Yanko



Kennedy Yanko



Now that metal is a recognizable feature of her work, spending hours hunting through scrap yards for the right kind of steel in the ideal color has become part of Yanko's process. She'll extend the tones and shades she finds there into the paint skins later. Color is Yanko's priority in those cluttered yards, an awareness she attributes to her father, a painter she described as a "true, true, true colorist" with "an incredible eye for color." Once the perfect piece is secured, she sets about using machinery to contort and twist the metal. After so many years watching the material crumple, describing it as "soft" became a natural eventuality.

"Especially with material perception, it's about how you approach it," Yanko said. "I'm approaching scrap metal at the yard and I'm using these huge machines to manipulate them. So I'm watching them kind of break like a twig. Even in my experience watching this material that's so forceful and strong—it's just how you approach it, you know?"

Regeneration (2021), a sculpture with a slim sheath of cream paint skin folded around an angular, earthy-grey chunk of metal, could be understood as representative of the kind of pieces Yanko is known for today. Meanwhile, *Prototype* (2018) is an earlier iteration. The sculpture offers mere glimpses of cream paint skins, perhaps marking their emergence in her work. Yanko dates the creation of her paint skins to one her first shows back in 2009 called "Wu-Wei."



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interesting things just in the way that it would interact with itself. It was when that show opened that I realized that I wanted to take paint off the canvas,” she explained. “I started making paint skins a year later. I was pouring paint and making skins by themselves, hanging them from the ceiling and the wall making installations with them. And then I started working with rubber and the paint, and I had a whole new process after that.”

As she refined her practice, Yanko worked her way into whatever galleries would let her show, often exhibiting alongside graffiti artists. Meeting independent curator Larry Ossei-Mensah connected her to a new network of peers, collectors, and opportunities. Multidisciplinary artist [Derrick Adams](#) included Yanko at Jenkins Johnson Projects’s exhibition “Hidden in Plain Sight” in 2017. Visual artist [Mickalene Thomas](#) included her in “The Aesthetics of Matter” at VOLTA New York the very next year, and Yanko’s career has continued to flourish and diversify since then. In the past three years, in addition to the Salon 94 show, she’s had solo exhibitions at Tilton Gallery, Marco Poggiali Gallery, Vielmetter Los Angeles, Kavi Gupta, and Denny Dimin Gallery.

Yanko recently completed the prestigious residency program at the Rubell Museum in Miami. When she went into the experience, she had no idea what she was going to make. Months later, Yanko had created her largest and most challenging works to date.





“I saw tornadoes coming down from the ceiling in my mind, that was just a vision that I had,” Yanko laughed. “I found a shipping container on the first day of scouting for metal and I had more space than I’ve ever had in my life. I had a whole room that I did skins in and I used over a hundred gallons of paint for the skins.” Those works are now on view in her solo show at the Rubell Museum.

Being constantly open to the possibility of whatever arises can feel like too little control for some artists, but Yanko doesn’t believe it’s possible to master any material. The visual trick of her sculptures, then, is less of an illusion and more so evidence of the possibilities of abstraction. The years she spent at the Living Theatre were full of activity and creation, but she didn’t spend as much time painting as she would’ve liked. Still, she thought about her own art practice constantly, and all that reflecting cultivated a degree of patience that Yanko still appreciates and carries with her today. Now, when she uses the word “responsive” to describe her relationship to the materials, Yanko is homing in on a kind of rigorous allowance that lets the artist balance a sense of fluidity and intention.

“The way that the skin and the metal have a reciprocity with each other, the way that they interact and interlock—there’s a form of infinity there,” Yanko said. “And they can’t really live without each other either, you know? The way that they are dependent on each other is, I think, really representative of my process, too—how I’m dependent on whatever materials are presented in front of me.”

The Artsy Vanguard 2021

The Artsy Vanguard is our annual feature recognizing the most promising artists working today. This fourth edition of The Artsy Vanguard is a triumphant new chapter, as we present an in-person exhibition in Miami featuring the 20 artists’ works, including many available to collect on Artsy. Curated by Erin Jenoa Gilbert, sponsored by MNTN, and generously supported by Mana Public Arts, the show is located at 555 NW 24th Street, Miami, and is open to the public from December 2nd through 5th, 12–6 p.m.

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