



STUDIO VISIT

A Painter Whose Work Is Never Finished

Janiva Ellis questions pat solutions with her fractured spaces and artworks that feel as if they are under construction, including some that actually are.

Janiva Ellis in her studio in Lower Manhattan with paintings that may take a long time to complete. Ellis interweaves styles and references with internet-brained liquidity.

Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

By Travis Diehl

Travis Diehl reported from Cambridge, Mass., and New York
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The day before Janiva Ellis's exhibition opened in Cambridge, Mass., on Jan. 31, most of her paintings weren't done. Most of them still aren't. In fact, that's intentional: The 14 pieces gathered for "[Fear Corroded Ape,](#)" on view at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts through April 6, had been knocking around her studio in New York, unfinished for years, at least one since 2019.

She had continued to push and pull the pigments, scraping away with solvent and rags. She layered in mythological figures and biblical torments, fractal architecture and cavernous vaults in the desaturated hues of a Renaissance sketch. Faces piled on faces.

“Some of them are done,” she said. “Some of them are actually not done. Some of them are not done, but I’ll never work on them again.”

It’s hard to tell the difference. Ellis interweaves styles and references with internet-brained liquidity. Formally, her canvases are belabored yet raw, even the finished ones. “A lot of the lights in my paintings are just pulling the paint back so that the canvas can create the white,” she said, which suggests “an ethereal glow from within.”

The show’s premise came to her spontaneously, Ellis said. But as the idea developed, she realized, “I want to be vulnerable.” She liked that her works in progress would hang in the same building where Harvard painting students hone their craft. She thought such an exhibition might undermine art’s traditional emphasis on mastery.

Ellis, 37, had her first solo show in 2017. That exhibition, “[Lick Shot](#)” at 47 Canal gallery in Manhattan, began her career in earnest.

People buzzed about her torrential, fractured way of building cartoonish figures, and the simmering threat in her Day-Glo landscapes and interiors that recall the psychedelic satire of [Robert Colescott](#) or [Peter Saul](#).

Invitations to the 2018 New Museum Triennial and the 2019 Whitney Biennial quickly followed. Her hypercolor panorama “Uh Oh, Look Who Got Wet” was a Biennial highlight. The charged composition features a rubbery figure carrying another through a river under ominous cherry skies, while a reclining nude dissolves in the foreground.

“The ambiguity is one of the most important parts of the painting,” said Rujeko Hockley, a curator of the Biennial. “Is it a person holding a baby? The baby is kind of a cartoon. It’s real but not real.” Hockley praised Ellis’s knack for packing her images with foreboding and tension.

Stephanie Seidel, a curator of Ellis’s first institutional solo show, in 2021, at the ICA Miami, said that the painter, “in addressing sociopolitical questions, of course, surrounding Blackness and structural racism, remains an incredibly important voice.”

Ellis and I spoke in New York at Dimes, a restaurant near her Chinatown studio that gives the downtown micro-scene Dimes Square its name. Ellis, who has silver piercings and linework tattoos, is laid-back and incisive — and, when discussing her work, both circumspect and open.

Ellis was born in Oakland, Calif., and raised by her mother in Hawaii. “It’s really physical. It’s really energetically vibrating,” she said. Kauai, where she lived from age 10 to 16, “is primarily developed on the perimeter, and then the center is a canyon and a rainforest.” After graduating from the California College of the Arts in San Francisco in 2012, she spent time in Hawaii, New York and Los Angeles.

Ellis turns down most group shows, she told me. Sometimes the theme seems thin or exploitative. Or she might see interesting connections in a proposal but not what her work would contribute. That’s how she met Dan Byers, who originated her Carpenter show when he was the director there (he’s now a curator at the Williams College Museum of Art). He reached out in 2019 about an exhibition of figurative painting. Ellis responded with “a really thoughtful set of reasons why it wasn’t the right context” for her work, he said.

But they kept talking and doing studio visits. Their dialogue convinced Ellis that the Carpenter would be a supportive place to experiment, and exhibit raw ideas.

One untitled painting at the Carpenter is inspired by her grandfather John H. Beyer, an architect who has helped restore historic gems including Grand Central Terminal and the Clock Tower at 346 Broadway. He was studying at Harvard while the Carpenter, designed by Le Corbusier, was under construction. Ellis’s canvas, a labyrinthine jumble of pencil marks, sea foam washes and scratchy diagonals, hangs in a hallway within view of the Carpenter’s painting studios, rhyming with the building’s lines.

The painting, itself left under construction, is emblematic of the exhibition, and of the way Ellis assembles space in her recent works. The paintings imply both ruin and potential, like the strangely decayed pastoral cottage in “Impressions in Spring,” which she said isn’t and won’t be finished; or the

gothic arches above a Minotaur in “Whimsy.” (“That one’s done,” she said. “Someone bought it. I guess I’m legally not allowed to touch it.”)

There’s one unfinished painting in Ellis’s studio that she isn’t ready to show. It’s a larger-than-life portrait of Surya Bonaly, a Black figure skater [known for explosive back flips](#).

“She was my hero when I was a kid,” Ellis said. “She was clearly a really good skater, but her talent was used against her.” Her signature move wasn’t considered valid in competition.

Ellis made the Bonaly painting for her 2021 exhibition at the ICA Miami in a studio she had set up in Miami shortly before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. Then she decided not to show it, wary of how her work might be tokenized. She recalled noticing that her debut in 2017 coincided with several exhibitions by Black women. The trend intensified in 2020 after George Floyd’s murder and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Rizvana Bradley, an art historian who will join Ellis in [a public conversation](#) in early April, told me that art discourse often “couples identity and resistance when it comes to discussing work made by Black artists.” In other words, galleries and curators see exhibiting work by people of color as a form of social justice in itself. But Ellis’s complex, atmospheric paintings “strain against fixing any kind of subject in place,” she said, challenging narrow reads of the work as simply about the artist’s identity.

Ellis’s ICA Miami show was a turning point, both stylistically and in terms of her attitude toward institutions. It left her feeling trapped and flattened.

The show explored angst — an emotional register that, she observes, almost always has a white face. She painted crucifixion scenes, indulged in metal and grunge vibes, and tried on abstract expressionist swaths. The electric strokes of her previous canvases tumbled into the sepia hues of rubble and rust.

Ellis described feeling pressure from the ICA to explain her work, especially in terms of race. “There was very little faith in the audience,” she told me.

“There was language around framing the show that was like: This is about the paradox of being a Black woman.”

When I mentioned a jagged little painting at the Carpenter titled “Rat Hands,” Ellis lit up. “That one I made in Miami,” she said. “I was feeling frustrated. And I was like, what if this whole show is just paintings of rats?” She didn’t go through with it, or include the painting. But she did title the show “Rats.”

Inevitably, Ellis said, she paints with the perspective of a Black woman in America, but her work is “not about Black identity as something that can be quantified or qualified. That’s not the subject any more than paint or music or existentialism.” Ellis said one of her central questions is bigger: “How do we not subjugate ourselves as human beings?”

At the Carpenter, the painting “Gay Orpheus,” with its brash title and swirls of thorns, pokes fun at reductive labels. Tropes from Greek mythology reappear in her paintings, Ellis said, for their “cheesiness,” but also their “undying relevance.” Maybe the reference in her painting is also to “Black Orpheus,” an art house film from 1959. Or maybe that’s the sort of interpretive leap she is satirizing. Maybe it’s both.

A shelf at the Carpenter displays a handful of books by Black writers that resonate with Ellis’s show — Fred Moten, [Hortense J. Spillers](#). Another paperback sticks out: a glaring red edition of “Atlas Shrugged,” Ayn Rand’s tale of white male genius and inflexible selfishness.

Ellis said she listened to Rand’s novel while painting the work for “StackedPlot,” her show at 47 Canal last fall. (One of those paintings, “20-24,” is also at the Carpenter.) The ruthless individualism Rand promoted, the opposite of the communalism Ellis values in art, nightlife and music, has found traction with alt right political figures. The painter said she feels secure enough to explore ideas she disagrees with. These influences add tones of menace to her work’s mix.

“Fear Corroded Ape,” the Carpenter show’s title, is snipped from a monologue in “Atlas Shrugged.” It has the cubist quality of Ellis’s paintings, shifting between angles and viewpoints, at once poetic and commanding.

That's where Ellis is right now. "I'm feeling, like, optimistic and sensual, and I want to reflect that," she said. "Maybe just try it. Try it out. Figure it out. And then explode the things I've learned."