

REVIEW | WHITEHOT MAGAZINE

WALLFLOWERS: Avantika Bawa, Namwon Choi, Zerek Kempf, and Shanna Zentner

By CLARE GEMIMA April 21, 2024

Challenging the architectural volumes of their gallery is part and parcel for the team behind Greene House, a 19 century built ground floor space, located in a beautiful brownstone in Fort Greene. Currently accommodating four artist's works that activate and intervene with its walls, *WALLFLOWERS* appropriately adopts the gallery team's ethos, and presents as a group show that battles with the rigidity and flexibility of the building's capacities.

Including works by Zerek Kempf, Avantika Bawa, Shanna Zentner, and Namwon Choi, *WALLFLOWERS* blasts an eclectic mix of material techniques, showcasing every artist's unique sensibility and physical approach to the gallery wall, in this case, their allotted, initial blank canvas. Shapes are applied directly, and in some instances accommodate sculptural paintings, while other works are more muralistic, and purposely engage with site specific characteristics like Greene House's charming original finishings. More challenging work, in particular a time-based sound installation, activates the gallery well beyond its visible parameters, co-operating and instrumentalizing the entirety of the show instead. Whether hung, directly applied, or radiating throughout, Kempf, Bawa, Zentner and Choi have all created works that utilize Greene House's supporting walls, with absolutely no shortage of individualistic quirk.



Zerek Kempf. *A sound you can live with*, 2021. 1-8 smoke detectors. Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of Greene House Gallery.



Shanna Zentner. *Mandorla*, 2024. Water-based vinyl paint. 96 x 96 in. Photo courtesy of Greene House Gallery

A pastel pink and light mauve alien abduction plasters totally across one gallery wall, and sets the stage for Shanna Zentner's three part vinyl painted mural, *Mandorla*, 2024. Dead center, a large buttermilk oval surrounds an unidentifiable foreign object in the midst of an inter-galactic visitation, one that appears more than welcomed by a celestial couple. In jest and joy, two gray figures, who both sport halos and lamb-ear textured wings, transfix in a celebratory hand-to-hand and foot-to-foot arrangement, and dancingly beckon the spacecraft's gift – a glistening third eye. Positioned vertically, this recognisable symbol spiritualizes Zentner's exploration into the work's title, 'mandorla', an almond-shaped aureole of light that surrounds holy figures in religious art, said to signify a 'Divine Glory', or heaven on earth.'

With an additional translation of 'almond' in Italian, Zentner's own *Mandorla* becomes less serious and more sensual, and playfully alludes to alternative ovular shapes with a divinity of their own, perhaps most obviously, a scrumptious vulval, or clitoral type of nut. Zentner's climactic extra-terrestrial affair also supports two smaller works, *Initiation*, 2024, and *To Bend*, 2022, both painted with acrylic and oil on canvas. Breasts, tears, and bronze-gold goblet claws repeat

throughout as glorified droplets, rendered in richly opaque, multi-colored pigments. Approaching her canvas, Zentner lightly stencil cuts contours of swords and dancing figures, in turn exposing a variety of her painting's underlayers. Patterns like *Initiation's* beetroot shaded swirls, and designs like *To Bend's* electrically colored and frantic illustrations embolden a deeper psychological reading that teeters into the realm of tarot mythology and other modes of spirituality, and invites viewers to intimately contemplate the painting's own innard. As layers interweave and interject with one another, the playful dynamic between background and foreground transcends into a matter of magic, and highlights Zentner's eccentric approach to the anatomy of her canvas as an object. The artist's interior and exterior investigations into cosmological ideas are realized as mural paintings that brim with galactic and seductive narratives. Filled with both commonplace and bizarrely foreign iconography, *Mandorla*, *Initiation*, and *To Bend* overflow and splurge with hypnotizing apprehension.



Avantika Bawa. *A Pink Dot*, 2024. Pigment and medium on wall. 55 in. diameter. Namwon Choi. *Blue Sphere 1*, 2024. Acrylic and gouache on wood. 5 in. diameter. Photo courtesy of Greene House Gallery.

Another interpretation of the 'third eye' gestures through *A Pink Dot*, Avantika Bawa's striking, large scale orb. Flatly and directly applied to the wall, this bold dot boasts a graphic buoyancy, appearing floaty yet fixed in its suspendedness. Temporarily stamped, bouncy yet still, Bawa's optical illusions mix referential ideas, - an oversized sale sticker (that every artist enjoys the sight of), for example, with more

contemplative and less delusional, even sacred concepts. With a tantalizing allure that engulf those that stand before it, *A Pink Dot* evokes the elegance of an oversized Bindi, an age-old adornment worn on the forehead in Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh religions, that symbolizes the 'ajna' chakra, (or third eye), that nestles between one's eyebrows. Aligning with the painting's energetic and powerful wall presence, the Sanskrit meaning behind 'ajna' conveys the essence of 'command' and 'perception', and is said to represent a spiritual channel that aids access into inner wisdom, and a refining of mental clarity.

Creating temporary on-site work is a common method for Bawa who draws, paints, and gathers industrial products like brick, plywood, and concrete in her studio to construct and compose unique and delightfully imposing installations. Several of Bawa's previously made wall works, like *Dot Dot Dot* from her *Pinkest Pink* series shown at the National Indo American Museum in Illinois in 2021, also presented disruptive and minimalist shapes that interacted with the gallery's interior architecture, as well as the building's concrete outdoor facade. Controversially, the 'Pinkest Pink' pigment was created in response to Anish Kapoor's purchase of the exclusive rights to Vantablack, known to be the "blackest of black pigments", by the British artist Stuart Semple in 2016, who made it possible for purchase by any and every artist, except, quite humorously Anish Kapoor himself. Bawa's consistent use of the pigment across her work showcases her ability to intertwine personal curiosities with the status and socio-politically charged histories of her chosen materials.



Namwon Choi. *New Worlds (Untitled-1)*, 2023. Acrylic and gouache on panels. 14 x 14 x 4 in. Photo courtesy of Greene House Gallery.

A flesh-colored rectangle lays the foundation for Namwon Choi's *New Worlds*, 2023, a sculptural painting shaped like an exclamation point, politeful in its subtle arrest. Against a surrounding bright yellow border, a moody-blue chromatic landscape depicts three vanishing points from different car rides, with winding roads that follow movements in seemingly ambiguous directions. Using acrylic and gouache strokes, hyper realistic and detailed versions of gravel, grass, road markings and shrubbery map out Choi's journey along the I-16 highway in Georgia. Drawn from photographs originally taken on her phone during frequent drives between Savannah and Marietta, in which she takes to see her children, these compositions offer snap-shot insights into a potentially poignant and emotionally charged reality, one that viewers cannot reflect upon, nor pre-empt in a moment of transition. Often overlooked as mere routes of travel, Choi gravitates towards the understated beauty of familiar spaces like the highway, finding in them an appropriate metaphor for navigating banal, triggering, significant and insignificant moments experienced throughout her life. In *New Worlds*, Choi has encapsulated the essence of existing in transience, and transforms a mindless moment into an image that evokes reprieves of mindfulness. Situating viewers right there in the

driver's seat, it is unclear if taking the wheel would be a desirable, or deeply uncomfortable proposition.

In *Blue Sphere*, Choi's second work in *WALLFLOWERS*, two miniature globes, painted in atmospheric sky blues and cloudy whites, hang in a neighborly stagger. With various points of the Earth's movement painted in ultra-small scale, it is impossible for viewers to see the entirety of the work's surface without orbiting it. Characteristic of Choi's interest in the 'in-betweens' found within cultural identity and 'space', both spheres, although hung in close proximity to each other, seem ironically, a whole world apart. Choi's microscopic representation of magnitudinal concepts – examining the world-at-large, as well as the nature of being a parent – embed a high level of introspectiveness and self-control in both of her works in the show. Challenging viewers through her composition's use of scale and perspective, Choi's *Blue Sphere* and *New Worlds* express nuanced interpretations of seismic and existential occurrences, and seduce viewers into the betwixt nature of the artist's very own life, from almost every angle.



Zerek Kempf. *The Dukes*, 2018. Cast aluminum. 14 x 4 x 3 in. Edition 1 of 2. Photo courtesy of Greene House Gallery.

A faceless silver hawk occupies a corner nook next to Namwon's somber scenery – cake tin textured, sweet and shy. Zerek Kempf's *The Dukes* reminisces the often ethically obscure use of real or faux-taxidermied animals by big-time notable artists, such as Cai Guo-Qiang's grotesque *Heritage* installation from 2013, made with 99 replicas of animals including tigers, giraffes, and zebras, or Damien Hirst's ridiculously contentious fascination with real tiger sharks. By using cast aluminum, Kempf mocks and pokes kitschy fun at similarly cringey moments throughout contemporary art's history, and crafts his found-object-slash-creature, with a genuine and careful hand-craftedness instead. Less obviously, Kempf's second work could also be said to reference birds by way of its diagonal installation. Hanging in an arrangement similar to that of the iconic English Stoke-on-Trent flying pottery birds, which originated in 1938 with the production of variously sized wall-mounted Mallard ducks, 8 smoke alarms at various stages of their battery life beep at a depreciating frequency in *A sound you can live with*, 2021. Although Kempf's detectors seem rather disguised, perhaps by way of the object's necessity in any given household, viewers are reminded of the work's presence through a similarly ubiquitous detection, an annoying, sensorially unbearable, sirening sound. Through high and low syncopating tones, that at times pause with relieving moments of complete silence, *A sound you can live with* performs as a decaying choral octet, left to its own dying devices.

WALLFLOWERS, featuring *Avantika Bawa*, *Namwon Choi*, *Zerek Kempf*, and *Shanna Zentner*, and curated by *Craig Drennen*, is on view at *Greene House Gallery* through *April 27, 2024*. **WM**

Clare Gemima contributes art criticism to *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Contemporary HUM*, and other international art journals with a particular focus on immigrant painters and sculptors who have moved their practice to New York. She is currently a visual artist mentee in the New York Foundation of Art's 2023 Immigrant mentorship program.