

HAENA YOO

TREY ABDELLA

JESSICA MAGALLANES MARTINEZ

SAMANTHA JOY GROFF

SELMA SELMAN

ERIC OGLANDER

RACHEL JONES

TAÍNA CRUZ

TYRRELL TAPAHA

AMANDA BA

SIMON BENJAMIN

SONG LU

MANDLA

DAVID-JEREMIAH

STEPHANIE TEMMA HIER

PAIGE BEEBER

ROKSANA PIROUZMAND

PEDRO ZYLBERSZTAJN

MARIE HAZARD

ALIX VERNET

NEW TALENT

The editors of *Art in America* selected a global group of 20 exciting artists to watch. Read about all of them in the pages that follow.



Born:
1998
Birthplace:
New York
Currently Based:
New Haven,
Connecticut

TAÍNA CRUZ

Paintings of goblins and celebrities conjure a parallel realm.

► **Taina Cruz's studio is cluttered with books:** chunky catalogs devoted to Jacobly Satterwhite, Henry Taylor, R.B. Kitaj, Kerry James Marshall, and Emil Nolde; surveys of street art and the culture of New York's East Village; a novel by Zora Neale Hurston. There is one book that she tells me is most excited about: *Devil Land*, a 2011 play by Desi Moreno-Penson about the kidnapping of a Nuyorican preteen able to summon Taino Amerindian deities.

Cruz read the play as a teenager, and describes it as formative for her paintings, which often depict gender-ambiguous figures seemingly transported from other worlds to Manhattan streets. *Of Devil Land*, Cruz said, "I viscerally feel so much of a relation to it, even though nothing in it actually happened to me whatsoever." Her art is imbued with the play's sensibility: both mix gritty realism with a haunting spirituality.

Though her paintings may depict greenish figures or fingers reaching out from six feet under, Cruz refuted the idea that they are horrifying. She says instead that she represents life as she knows it, recalling a childhood memory of a zombielike old lady walking a

young dog on the Upper East Side. "It could have been scary," she said, "but it wasn't." Still, many of her works are grotesque. One 2023 painting depicts an unnaturally pale version of the model Tyra Banks, her features stretched until she appears alien. Another recent work, *Goblin Girl* (2021), shows a green-skinned creature, her face scrunched up in an indescribable expression—a silly grin, perhaps, or maybe something more menacing.

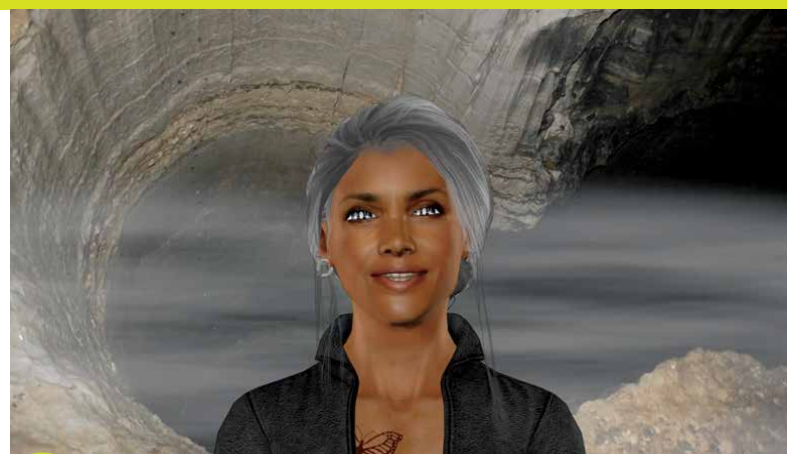
Alternate realms have fascinated Cruz for as long as she can remember. Her father, who is Puerto Rican, instilled in her a love of the Caribbean's rich tradition of magical realism; her mother, who is African American, drew her toward various rituals shared among Black communities of the American South. Her studio's overflowing shelves feature books on those subjects, from an academic survey of essays about queer Nuyoricans to a tome of Elizabeth Spire's poems about Southern sculptor William Edmondson. She refers to these while working in her space on the Yale University campus, where she is an MFA student, though already she is represented by the Berlin gallery Kraupa+Tuskany Zeitler.

Cruz studied computer science as a kid,

and is also fascinated by the digital world. She sometimes maps out her compositions using 3D modeling software, then translates them to canvas by hand, tweaking her scenes along the way. A few works have remained within the digital realm: her 2019 video, *How to Breathe Ecstasy*, purports to be a meditation exercise led by a CGI Halle Berry, whose computerized voice awkwardly intones instructions that barely make sense. But Cruz said she mainly considers digital technology a "second tool" for art, which largely looks unlike that video.

Though best known for her paintings, she has recently returned her focus to sculpture, the medium she studied as an undergraduate at the Maryland Institute College of Art. One recent creation took the form of a bare-bones animatronic dog that, when activated, seemed to clamber awkwardly forward. Cruz set this makeshift canine before an oversize tennis ball, as though her machine were chasing after it. When motionless, this ramshackle canine looked tame, but Cruz explained that when activated, the robot "could evoke a puppet or a spirit." She seemed to delight in the idea that it could come alive at all.

—Alex Greenberger



Taina Cruz: *How to Breathe Ecstasy*, 2019.



Midnight Moment, 2023.



Goblin Girl, 2023.



Stay a little longer, 2023.

Courtesy: Kraupa+Tuskany Zeitler, Berlin

Top Photo: Melissa Burrier/Photo; Bottom Left Photo: Jeff Hering; Courtesy: Kraupa+Tuskany Zeitler, Berlin (3)