

## A Behind-the-Scenes Look at How the Art World's Most Coveted Residency Chooses Its Artists—and Who's Up Next

This December, the Rubell Museum of Art will unveil the work created by three sought-after artists during its pandemic-era residency.

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Mera and Don Rubell in front of Kerstin Brätsch's artwork *When You See Me Again It Won't Be Me* (from BroadwaybratschCorporate Abstraction series), 2010. Photo by Chi Lam. Image courtesy of the Rubell Museum.

When the art world descends on Miami Beach for Art Basel later this year, three artists are poised to be the toast of the week: Kennedy Yanko, Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe, and Genesis Tramaine.

Their paintings and sculptures, created during artist-in-residence stints at the Rubell Museum, will be on display at the sprawling facility in Miami's Allapattah neighborhood.

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Known as major tastemakers in contemporary art, Don and Mera Rubell have a track record for catapulting emerging artists to curatorial and commercial stardom. Their past picks include Sterling Ruby, Oscar Murillo, and Lucy Dodd. In 2019, when the museum relocated to Allapattah from Wynwood, the coveted spot was held by a then little-known Ghanaian painter named Amoako Boafo. Within months, his auction prices were approaching \$1 million and have been raging ever since.

This year's flock of artists, who are all Black and in their 30s, are arriving more established than their predecessors. They are represented by respected galleries, have had sold-out shows and, in some cases, dizzying auction results. The way their careers have been managed reveals the inner workings of a fashionable and highly speculative segment of the market.

Tramaine was chosen in the summer of 2020, but the works she created during the six-week residency have remained under wraps since then. Quaiocoe and Yanko completed their stays in spring 2021. Although the world has been somewhat shut down all the while, each artist's market has been heating up.

"The emerging happened faster than ever during the pandemic," Mera Rubell said.

Tramaine, whose current show "Worship Works" at Almine Rech gallery in Aspen is already sold out, created a group of portraits inspired by the Biblical birthright narrative of Jacob and Esau. Yanko, the first resident sculptor, made large-scale pieces using scrap metal and acrylic paint skins. Quaiocoe explored the theme of twins, considered human miracles in his native Ghana.

"It was life-affirming that art will be made during this dark period," Rubell said. "It felt like a sanctuary for all of us."



Genesis Tramaine, Mother of Suns of Thunder (2019). Courtesy of Almine Rech.

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The new relationships were particularly meaningful because the globetrotting Rubells couldn't travel during the pandemic. They stayed put in Miami, closing the museum to the public for four months of lockdown but keeping the staff working on conservation and inventory. In July, the public returned and residencies resumed soon thereafter.

Tramaine, 38, whose mother is a devout gospel singer, began "at the height of the pandemic," Rubell said, and her spirituality guided them. "We never had an artist so religious. We engaged for six weeks in conversations about the Bible, morality, what it means to be human and to resist temptations? What it means to be Christian while also being a gay woman."

Although Florida was considered a "hot" state at the time, with COVID-19 cases rising, Tramaine didn't hesitate to hop on a plane. "I wasn't nervous," she said this week. "I was prepared to do the job. It was what I prayed for. Which means that God is already in the room."

The New York-based artist titled her presentation at the Rubells "Sanctuary" because the residency felt like a safe space. She was provided with a prayer room along with the studio.

In the past, the Rubells kept their artists-in-residence a secret for as long as possible because it would immediately spark interest from other collectors. Their debuts on the eve of Art Basel Miami Beach drew swarms of VIPs and became the annual destination, sponsored in recent years by U.S. Trust. This year, the word got out early.

"It's impossible to keep secrets today," Rubell said. "Information travels so quickly it's hard to surprise anyone."