



# The Bubble Pops

Once-insulated DC institutions explode with cutting-edge works, signaling ours is a contemporary art city after all. | By Tiffany Jow |



**HEADLINERS** Clockwise from top left: "Gardner Cowles," 1977, by Andy Warhol (courtesy of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts) and "Untitled," 1985, by Andy Warhol and Keith Haring (Private Collection), are hanging at the National Gallery's *Warhol: Headlines* show until January; work by performance artist Maria Jose Arjona, pictured in one of her installations, is at the (e)merge art fair.

This fall, no fewer than five of Washington's premier art spaces will hang ambitious exhibitions of modernist works. Breaking the mold? More like cementing a new tradition.

For nearly 30 years, Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and the nonprofit Washington Project for the Arts stood as the lone venerable venues for cutting-edge contemporary art in Washington. As the new millennium approached, a growing crop of galleries, such as Transformer and Conner Contemporary, joined them, enlivening DC's cultural landscape. In 2009, the local modern art movement got a further boost when famed international art collector Mera Rubell toured some DC studios—after a bit of controversy, that is. "There's nothing to fight for here," Rubell told *The Washington Post* in December 2009. "There's not enough contemporary art being shown."

Rubell felt that even with its abundance of talent, the city's infrastructure for contemporary artists was isolating. Her comments sparked a Districtwide debate across blogs, Facebook posts and endless panel discussions designed to address the concerns of the community's emerging artists. Almost every museum and art organization across town began laying plans to up its game. Rubell, herself, fell in love with what was here and decided to plant roots. Now, you might say, DC has gone contempo crazy.

The creative planets align this fall when major

Warhol exhibitions get mounted at the National Gallery of Art and the Hirshhorn Museum; Rubell's own *30 Americans* goes up at the Corcoran; the debut of a much-buzzed-about contemporary art fair hits town; and an edgy film series cross-pollinates with DC's major art institutions. "It's obvious. We all know it," says Conner Contemporary Art co-owner and Washington gallery pioneer Leigh Conner. "Our time is now."

Clearly, perceptions of Washington as an establishment town with conservative tastes are yielding to the city's expanding population of young BYTs hungry for cultural adventure that includes contemporary art. "It seems as if DC has reached a critical mass in a sense," says Sarah Newman, the Corcoran's curator of contemporary art. "Once enough people interested in art come together, they form a dynamic community that draws even more people in. Washington has always been an international city, but it's embracing that role now more than ever."

This autumn's lineup starts with a nod to Pop Art's icons, but in distinct, provocative ways. For instance: Andy Warhol. He may be the most famous postwar American artist, but District institutions are now seizing new opportunities to explore his legacy.

First off is the National Gallery of Art. Best known for deploying its deep curatorial talent to mine a traditional canon, the museum is now mounting CONTINUED...



LEGACY BRAND *30 Americans*, at the Corcoran this fall, features preeminent African-American artists of the last three decades. Top from left: “Bird On Money,” 1981, Jean-Michel Basquiat and “One Day and Back Then (Standing),” 2007, Xaviera Simmons. Above: “SoundSuit,” 2008, Nick Cave.

“That so many museums are mounting contemporary work is a testament to the strength and need to engage,” says famed art collector Mera Rubell, whose Capitol Skyline Hotel will play host to a new art fair known as (e)merge.

...CONTINUED *Warhol: Headlines*. It’s the first exhibition to thoroughly explore works the pop-art scion created around news headlines. Under the expert eye of show creator and curator Molly Donovan, Warhol-lovers will get to lay eyes on a treasure trove of never-before-seen pieces. Accompanying the event is a bespoke NGA film series that will screen Warhol films, including *Soap Opera* and *Lupe*.

Timed to capitalize on the modern art fervor generally, and Warhol fever specifically, the Hirshhorn presents *Andy Warhol: Shadows*, the artist’s 102-canvas painting. Hung edge-to-edge as Warhol intended, the installation’s near-450-foot length has prevented it from ever being shown in its entirety—until now, thanks to the museum’s unique curvilinear shape. The context uncovers new aspects of the work, emphasizing Warhol’s interest in creating for the national platform the Hirshhorn provides. That two legacy institutions, in a town believed to lean toward the traditional, are mounting unique perspectives on the artist won’t be lost on the international art world.

The Corcoran, for its part, will host one of the first stops on the tour for *30 Americans*, which launched at the Rubell Family Collection in Miami. The show is here, in large part, because of Rubell’s deep interest in seeing Washington’s contemporary community raise its voice and be heard. And at this go-round, the exhibition is reconfigured to emphasize connections and themes

between works. A major survey of the most important African-American artists of the past three decades, the show explores race, sex and identity through the work of Washingtonian Iona Rozeal Brown, Noah Davis, the late Jean-Michel Basquiat and others. A radical and challenging display, Newman, the curator, expects it to resonate with Washingtonians. “These artists confront the idea of how identity is formed in relation to race, history, sexuality, politics and contemporary culture,” she says. “Those are issues DC deals with on a local, national and international level all the time.”

Not content to only bring repurposed content to Washington, Rubell has also lent her trendy Capitol Skyline Hotel as host for the debut of the (e)merge art fair, a weeklong exhibition featuring a global cast of up-and-coming artists. The space offers two platforms: one for galleries and nonprofit spaces, and another for unrepresented artists chosen from a vetting committee that includes Rubell, the fairy godmother of the District’s art scene. *The Art Newspaper* signed on to publish a daily for the fair, which cofounders Conner, Jamie Smith and Helen Allen (former director of Pulse art fairs) say only adds to the buzz. “That so many museums are mounting contemporary work is a testament to the strength and need to engage,” says Rubell. “(e)merge is the final component to bring it all together.” CONTINUED...

**SEEN IN NY** Multimedia curator Adrian Loving mined 1970s and '80s art reels to assemble *The Downtown Scene NY* film series showing around DC in September and October. Clockwise from right: Downtown NY scenester Klaus Nomi, center, at the Mudd Club, in *Downtown Calling*, a film by Shan Nicholson (2009); "Untitled," 1982, Keith Haring, in *The Universe of Keith Haring*, Arthouse Films (2008); Jean-Michel Basquiat: *The Radiant Child*, Arthouse Films (2010).



...CONTINUED Multimedia curator Adrian Loving also spotlights the District's changing passion for contemporary art in his upcoming *The Downtown Scene NY* film series. Screenings will take place at The Phillips Collection, the Corcoran and the National Gallery, as will post-film Q&As with featured directors and artists. The four-week series chronicles New York's artistic scene in the 1970s and 1980s through the work of Keith Haring, Basquiat and others who battled drugs and poverty to create iconic works using the barest materials. "These are ongoing developmental topics that reference New York's successes and failures, but are relevant to what's going on in DC's artistic scene right now," Loving explains. "Washington's arts community has tapped into nontraditional ways to present its own creative fruits. We no longer need to run to New York as artists—we have all we need right here."

Loving—among others—credits the political and artistic transformations of the last few years for the newfound openness of Washington's traditionally buttoned-up institutions. He believes DC's museums have actively cultivated new audiences, which has brought fresh energy and young supporters into their realms.

District creatives profess confidence in the capital's staying power as a player in the modern-art scene. "We will certainly be developing the next generation of arts patrons and collectors," Conner says. "Because of major art institutions in DC supporting the growth of contemporary culture, the current developments are highly sustainable." Rubell agrees that the District will become a contemporary powerhouse. "We live in a world where ideas and creativity are a strength indicator of our time," she says. "Art is part of that dynamic, and DC is still under-the-radar as an arts hub—but the secret is getting out." ■

## Current Affairs

DC continues to emerge as a creative hub for contemporary artistic output. While you can easily cram your fall calendar with modern art outings, take a peek at a few of our favorites:

### THE DOWNTOWN SCENE NY

Sept. 15-Oct. 9, times and locations vary, [downtownscene-film.com](http://downtownscene-film.com)

### (E)MERGE ART FAIR

Sept. 22-25 at the Capitol Skyline Hotel, [emergeartfair.com](http://emergeartfair.com)

### ANDY WARHOL: SHADOWS

Sept. 25-Jan. 15, at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, [hirshhorn.si.edu](http://hirshhorn.si.edu)

### WARHOL: HEADLINES

Sept. 25-Jan. 2, at the National Gallery of Art, [nga.gov](http://nga.gov)

### 30 AMERICANS

Oct. 1-Feb. 12, at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, [corcoran.org](http://corcoran.org)