

# The New York Times

## New Haven's Art Scene: Always Excellent, and Now Reopening

This city of 130,000 has always punched above its cultural weight. Now as its museums come back to life, visitors can see works by van Gogh, Rothko and Hirst anew.

By Brett Sokol

May 20, 2021

NEW HAVEN, Conn. — Call her mood one of anxious joy.

As the Yale Center for British Art prepares to reopen June 4, its director, Courtney J. Martin, said she is thrilled to finally flip the lights back on. Recalling that somber moment in March 2020 when the center joined art institutions across the country in abruptly closing, she said, “We left to an unknown — we didn’t know what we were going home to, we didn’t know when we would return.”

Seeing art in person may not have seemed vital then, but its absence has since become palpable. “I’m so excited to be able to offer that again,” Martin continued, “as a place just to go and *be* for the summer.”

Now, with infections waning and Connecticut’s vaccination rate one of the highest in the country, Yale is joining a second wave of institutions resuming public access, from the Smithsonian Institutions to the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

The Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven’s other cultural flagship, reopened last week. Both museums are putting strict limits on visitors, with free, timed tickets online, and mandatory masking with one-way traffic inside their buildings. They joined several of the city’s smaller independently run art spaces in embracing the new normal: showing ambitious exhibitions while maintaining virus-minded health measures.



Installation of “Love, Life, Death, and Desire,” which includes Damien Hirst’s works, at the Yale Center for British Art. Richard Caspole

If there was an upside to being closed for so long, Martin said, it was being able to rethink the Yale Center for British Art’s new shows, including “Love, Life, Death, and Desire,” which pairs London-based artist Damien Hirst’s 1991 breakout installation “In and Out of Love (Butterfly Paintings and Ashtrays)” with kindred works spanning the breadth of the center’s own collection — the largest vault of British art outside of Britain. The featured works stretch across four centuries, from Angelica Kauffman’s 1771 portrait “Rinaldo and Armida” to Christopher Le Brun’s vibrant 2015 abstraction, “Kingdom.”

Martin noted her desire to continue broadening the lens of the center to spotlight more women, particularly artists of color from the Commonwealth, and write back these key figures into British art history. Kauffman, for example, was the first woman to enter the Royal Academy in the 18th century. “She’s definitely an unrecognized figure — but unrecognized in our time, not in her time,” Martin said. “Art history lost her along the way.”

Sokol, Brett. “New Haven’s Art Scene: Always Excellent, and Now Reopening” *The New York Times*, 20 May 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/20/arts/design/new-haven-yale-art.html>

**albertz benda**

515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001  
tel 212.244.2579 | [www.albertzbenda.com](http://www.albertzbenda.com)

Turning to the modern era, she pointed out how Hirst's rock-star profile and tabloid headlines — embalmed sharks! diamond-encrusted skulls! — have often eclipsed the art itself. Much of the British reception of “In and Out of Love” heatedly focused on its use of actual butterflies embedded in a series of canvases, as well as an accompanying room full of live butterflies left to flutter around until they died. Three decades later, “people coming to Hirst for the first time will be able to see it for what it really was,” Martin said. “These are incredibly beautiful paintings that talk about the life cycle.”



The Yale University Art Gallery has put strict limits on visitors, with timed tickets and mandatory masking. Jessica Smolinski

Across the street, the Yale University Art Gallery's imposing exterior — joining neo-Gothic faux palaces with a Louis Kahn-designed wall of glass and steel — signals its heavyweight aspirations and the no less monumental permanent collection within. Don't be fooled by the word “gallery” — this is a museum in everything but name.

“You can see the big guns again,” laughed Stephanie Wiles, its director, referring to massive Abstract Expressionist canvases by Helen Frankenthaler and Mark Rothko, as well as no less dazzling contemporary creations by Jean-Michel Basquiat and El Anatsui. Antiquities are also receiving renewed attention: The entire African art collection has been rehung, and now features large-scale photographic projections of rock art, much of it dating back tens of thousands of years.

But leave time for the gallery's more intimately scaled rooms, which hold a slew of iconic Modernist works, including Vincent van Gogh's “The Night Café.” There's no substitute for beholding the real thing, Wiles insisted. “People stand in front of it all the time and talk about the surface, how it shocks them,” she said. “They can't believe how much impasto there is. ‘Look at the texture! Look at the grooves on the floor! Look at the circles around the light!’”



A visitor pondering van Gogh's "The Night Café" at the Yale University Art Gallery. "People stand in front of it all the time and talk about the surface," said Stephanie Wiles, the museum's director. Jessica Smolinski

While New Haven has long punched above its cultural weight for a city of 130,000 people, the sometimes cloistered environs of Yale can feel immensely distant from the rest of the local arts scene. Trying to bridge that gap is NXTHVN (pronounced Next Haven), a nonprofit artist incubator whose co-founders include the painter Titus Kaphar and the sculptor Jonathan Brand — both Yale M.F.A. graduates who chose to plant their career flags here. Works by seven artists-in-residence currently hang inside its rehabbed warehouse; opening Sunday is "Roots to Benevolence," a group show spotlighting works by high school students apprenticing with those artists.

Impressive talent can also be seen at the Kehler Liddell Gallery, which is particularly strong on homegrown photographers, and at the Fred Giampietro Gallery, which features notable Yale grads as well as outsider and folk artists. Another local mainstay, the nonprofit Artspace, is currently showing "W.E.B. DuBois, Georgia, and his Data Portraits," the famed scholar's sociological diagrams of Black America in the post-Reconstruction era. The results, which vividly deploy colorful swirls and sharply angular geometry in their accounting of 19th-century income and property ownership, are as eye-poppingly intriguing as their information is sobering. Taking inspiration from DuBois's fusion of data and design are accompanying neon light pieces by Theaster Gates and more conceptual sculptural translations by New Haven's own Dana Karwas. Another artsy take on daily life is on view at the New Haven Museum with "Factory," a deep historical dive into a nearby derelict warehouse which became an evolving work of art itself by the late '70s.

And when you're ready to sit down and absorb all you've seen, New Haven has plenty of appealing dining options, from the high-end, Iberian-tinged Olea to the countertop-served burgers at Louis' Lunch. This city is also ridiculously blessed with pizzerias. Frank Pepe Pizzeria Napoletana and Sally's Apizza regularly top national best-of lists, while newcomer Zeneli — which provocatively opened within yelling distance of the two longtime rivals — already has its own legion of devotees.

"Asking about pizza is a very dangerous question in New Haven. I'd almost prefer to talk about my political party," Martin said with a laugh. But she lost no time in turning fiercely partisan: "BAR pizza is my absolute favorite. I am a huge fan of their clam pizza. My husband would lay down on the floor for Modern Apizza. We're a divided household."

The one point of citywide agreement? Leave room for a stop at Arethusa Farm Dairy. With milk sourced from their own Connecticut farm, their ice cream is a genuine hunk of artistic beauty.