

# NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

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Brooke Marine, "Tearing Down the Walls," *W Magazine*, September 17, 2021.

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At the Art Space 52 Walker, Ebony L. Haynes Questions the Status Quo

## Tearing Down the Walls

Under the aegis of David Zwirner, the curator Ebony L. Haynes is shaking up the gallery system as we know it.

by **Brooke Marine**  
09.17.21



Earlier this summer, the curator Ebony L. Haynes welcomed me at 52 Walker Street, in New York's TriBeCa neighborhood, and led me on a tour of a construction site. What was once the dimly lit after-work drinks spot M1-5 Lounge was in the midst of being transformed into a high-ceilinged, white-walled gallery. Where the bar had been, columns divided the sizable room. In the back, where there used to be a kitchen, were two niches, intimate nooks that Haynes hoped would inspire artists to engage with the physical space in new ways—perhaps for performances, readings, or other events.

Ebony L. Haynes at David Zwirner gallery in New York.

Louis Vuitton Men's jacket, pants, and shoes; her own jewelry.

Photographed by Lelanie Foster; styled by Allia Alliata di Montereale.

Hair and makeup by Amanda Wilson using Chanel; stylist's assistant: Amanda Pagan.

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The gallery, called 52 Walker and opening on October 28, is an experimental addition to the art world ecosystem, a kunsthalle-esque model characterized by long-running programs designed to promote critical and scholarly engagement. Spearheaded by Haynes, it is the latest brick-and-mortar outpost of the David Zwirner empire. Each exhibition, starting with “A Line,” featuring performance and choreography-based work by Kandis Williams, will run for three months and be paired with a comprehensive publication made in collaboration with the artist. Next on the lineup are Nikita Gale, known for kinetic installations; Nora Turato, whose work subverts the language of our media-saturated culture; Tiona Nekkia McClodden, an interdisciplinary artist who explores Black intersubjectivity; and Tau Lewis, who hand-sews assemblage sculptures out of found fabrics.



Kandis Williams, here in her New York studio with works in progress, will use choreography, performance, collage, and publishing to explore the language of movement in her 52 Walker debut.

Telfar top; Issey Miyake skirt; Bottega Veneta earrings and shoes; all other jewelry her own.

Photographed by Lelanie Foster; styled by Allia Alliata di Montereale.

Hair and makeup by Amanda Wilson using Chanel; stylist's assistant: Amanda Pagan.

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Unlike a conventional gallery, 52 Walker will not represent artists. “We’re collaborating with other galleries—it’s not just me siloing or siphoning off artists to do something for our cluster,” Haynes told me later that afternoon as we moved to a nearby café. “It’s really like, ‘Oh, you show with this gallery? Let’s be in a conversation. Here’s what I’m interested in.’ It’s providing a platform for a lot of different connections.” It’s clear, judging by the inflections in her voice and her animated gestures, and by how deeply and passionately she flexes her expertise, that Haynes is excited. Talking about the details of the programming at 52 Walker is an opportunity for the curator to nerd out on the material she knows best. And those who work with Haynes speak of her as someone who keeps her finger on the pulse of what’s important in a broad cultural field.

**“52 Walker is an example of forward thinking in an industry that is often rooted in looking back,” says Virgil Abloh.**

When 52 Walker, and Haynes’s appointment as a director at David Zwirner, was announced late last year, the project was presented in the press as a specifically Black endeavor. (A *New York Times* headline read, “A New Zwirner Gallery With an All-Black Staff.”) While it is no secret that there is a disproportionate number of art institutions owned and operated by white people in New York, the tokenizing aspect of the coverage didn’t paint the full picture of what’s interesting about Haynes’s approach. Her work as a curator challenges the art world’s traditional logic, elevating artists and art world professionals of marginalized identities without feeding into the theater of inclusivity that has dominated the cultural conversation since last summer. 52 Walker will include work from artists of varying ethnic backgrounds; Haynes sees no need to bill any aspect of the shows in accordance with the race of the artists. Haynes actually shared her idea for 52 Walker with Zwirner in January 2020—months before the pandemic began and the Black Lives Matter protests erupted.



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Tiona Nekkia McClodden, surrounded by finished and unfinished pieces in her Philadelphia studio, makes conceptual work that tackles questions surrounding memory, race, and gender.

Maharishi jacket from 180 the Store, New York; Banana Republic

T-shirt; Levi's jeans; her own jewelry and boots.

Photographed by Lelanie Foster; styled by Allia Alliata di Montereale.

“Ebony’s confidence is what won me over,” Zwirner told me on the phone a few weeks after I spoke to Haynes. “She’s really thoughtful, trying to get to the core of something, and not just what trends well on Instagram or what would sell quickly. Questions of race and gender will be addressed in the exhibitions; that goes without saying. But Ebony also has a fundamentally critical stance toward capitalist society and the mechanisms that drive it. That’s important, because it’s the system we operate in, but at the same time, we always have to ask questions around that system, which helps some and punishes others.”

Most major art institutions have yet to adequately tackle structural issues of racism and sexism. The interlocking systems that bolster and reward work created from the perspective of the white bourgeoisie have yet to be sufficiently shaken up, and while there’s been a demand for change in the art world for decades, the emergence of a gallery like 52 Walker makes it all the more clear that work created from diverse points of view deserves to be prioritized and supported on all levels. “There is something about this project that feels like a turn in the right direction,” Gale told me. “The thing I love about Ebony is that we’re doing Black stuff, but it’s not easily commodifiable, in this way that there’s so much value placed on images and figures of women, of queer people, of people of color. I feel really excited by the conversations that this first group of artists is having. It’s work that’s hard to pin down.”

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Tau Lewis, who was born in Toronto and is now based in Brooklyn, engages in the practice of "slow art" with her hand-sewn, sculptural portraits made from found and recycled materials. Loewe shirt, pants, and boots.

Photographed by Lelanie Foster; styled by Laura Jackson.  
Hair and makeup by Amanda Wilson using Milk Makeup.

Haynes, a private person who is reticent to discuss any aspect of her personal life, speaks firmly yet inconspicuously, as if she is consciously trying not to draw too much attention away from the art. Born in Toronto, she studied at the University of Toronto and at Ontario College of Art & Design University, and first got her footing in New York with a job at Foxy Production, a contemporary gallery. By the time she was appointed director at Shoot the Lobster, a lo-fi downtown gallery, she had become known for her dynamic, experimental programming. She concurrently became a director at Martos Gallery, another downtown space.

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During the pandemic, Haynes's need to question the standard art world modus operandi felt more urgent than ever: "I recognized the need for a shift. Galleries were closing, and people were losing their jobs. It felt a bit dark to go back into the machine without at least trying to do something different." Zwirner agreed. "During the pandemic, we all had more stress, on one level, but also more headspace to think about how we were working," he said. "It really appealed to me to come out of this with something that nobody's really done before."



The Los Angeles-based artist Nikita Gale, here in a studio, creates installations that interrogate politicized spaces, popular culture, music, and economic systems.

Bottega Veneta jacket; Homme Plissé Issey Miyake T-shirt and pants; G.H. Bass & Co. shoes; her own jewelry.

Photographed by Texas Isaiah; styled by Rebecca Ramsey.

Hair and makeup by Ashley Humphreys for Celestine Agency; photo assistant: Lex Kennedy.

That's appealing for the artists, as well. Turato, who lives and works in Amsterdam, notes that 52 Walker's kunsthalle-inspired model feels familiar to her. "Collaborating with Ebony resembles working with galleries in Europe," the artist told me. "I'm not saying that Europe is better, but what I've felt in American identity politics and the art world is that it rarely trickles down." McClodden, for her part, appreciates the sense of freedom that 52 Walker will offer. "This is a place where I can be as wild as possible, without the responsibility of trying to please a gallery, and also not trying to fall within some of the very conservative limitations of a museum show," she told me. "I don't have to worry about a lot of the things that start to make you edit yourself." That doesn't mean that Haynes isn't making sure the gallery will be a financial success. "I love artists making money," she says. "There's nothing better than telling an artist their show's sold out."



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**“It’s not just slowing down the shows, it’s slowing down the pace inside the gallery,” Haynes promised.**

Virgil Abloh, the founder and chief creative director of Off-White and the men’s artistic director at Louis Vuitton, is an old friend of Haynes’s. The two met through a mutual friend years ago, and since then, he says, they have “echoed each other across canons and ideologies, and our joint commitment to elevating Black culture and voices into the mainstream.” Abloh told me that he sees 52 Walker as a reconfiguration of the status quo, “bridging the gap” between contemporary Black identity and an art market that historically has worked “in void” of that. “52 Walker is an example of forward thinking in an industry that is often rooted in looking back,” he said. “Ebony understands the nuance of hip-hop and contemporary Black expression—things that in 30 years are going to prove to be beyond important to understanding art today.”

One way the team at 52 Walker intends to spark discourse is through its publishing arm, Clarion. To coincide with their shows, artists will produce a book that captures the process and the critical thought that they would like to present in dialogue with their own work—something one might expect from a museum. “Hopefully, the artists will take some liberties to play around,” Haynes said. The monographs are a vehicle for helping hotshot young artists archive their work, and could prove especially beneficial to older artists who aren’t necessarily that famous. “It’s harder for Black artists to get solo museum shows at a certain career age,” McClodden told me. “And it’s even harder to have proper documentation.”

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The Amsterdam-based Croatian artist Nora Turato paints text-based, larger-than-life wall murals by hand and gives spoken word performances. Photographed by S\*an D. Henry-Smith.  
Hair and makeup by David Koppelaar for House of Orange using Chanel.

Choosing TriBeCa, a neighborhood that has recently seen an influx of galleries, including Theta, Chart, and Bortolami, also felt like a throwback to the old days, when more arts spaces were located downtown. (Zwirner's first gallery, Haynes and Zwirner both pointed out, was located very near 52 Walker, on Greene Street, in SoHo.) "David felt a connection to this neighborhood because he started here," Haynes said, leaning back in the booth we shared at the café. She also hopes the slower pace of 52 Walker's operations will encourage visitors to ease into the art on display.

For Haynes, it's something of a return to analog, and the old days of moseying into a gallery without feeling uncomfortably rushed. "It's not just slowing down the shows, it's slowing down the pace inside," she promised. "I'm very paper-heavy, file folder-heavy. We're not doing art fairs. I don't foresee us having online viewing rooms. Everyone has business cards and print postcards for shows. I don't know how long QR codes will exist, but I'm hoping they won't be in our gallery. I really want you to come in and get a laminated floor plan of the work, and have benches where you can sit. If you can't make it in to see the show, maybe you miss that one, and that's okay. You'll catch the next one."