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The New York Times

Body Slams, Curated:
Pro Wrestling Enters
Its Museum Era

The over-the-top spectacle has been slicing into the art world, with gallery shows, performances and a forthcoming major exhibition.



By **Melena Ryzik** Visuals by **Marcus Maddox**
Nov. 18, 2025

Raid entered stomping. But it wasn’t until Laveau Contraire pulled off one of his tentacles that he flipped (literally). Because in a wrestling match between an anthropomorphic giant bug and an influencer-spoofing drag queen, anything goes.

With gold sequins glinting and fringe swishing on her thong leotard, Contraire beat Raid with his own body part — and then turned it on the referee. Raid — a bulging-eyed, scraggly-toothed creature in a singlet, driven to enact revenge for makeup testing and other critter-disrespecting ills — retaliated by slamming her into the ropes. Before long on one recent Tuesday, they were pummeling each other in a 16 x 16 foot ring set up at Pioneer Works, the art space in Brooklyn, as a crowd of 500 cheered.

This is the over-the-top vision of [Choke Hole](#), the queer and drag artist troupe that originated in New Orleans, whose multimedia, high-camp métier is a sharp satire of American culture expressed through W.W.E.-style wrestling.



Laveau Contraire, an influencer-spoofing drag queen, faced off against Raid, an anthropomorphic giant bug, during a recent bout at Pioneer Works.

“It’s an almost stealth way to get people to appreciate art and politics and drag and athletics, all these things that it is,” said Ellery Neon, one of the group’s founders.

Decades beyond the household names of the 1980s (Hulk Hogan, André the Giant) and early 2000s (the Rock, John Cena), pro wrestling remains hugely popular ([and profitable](#)). It can still mint stars, marketed as “sports entertainment,” even as it’s dismissed by nonbelievers as commercial fluff.

As a medium, professional wrestling has lately been slicing into the art world, with gallery shows, performances and a forthcoming major museum exhibit. Curators, artists and newfound fans are re-evaluating and embracing it as a genre that’s rich in aesthetic symbolism, cultural history and complex narratives — especially in [an era of kayfabe](#), the term of art for pro-wrestling’s unique mix of inauthentic authenticity.



Jamie Hayter is held against the ropes by her opponent, Billie Starkz, during a match at 52 Walker, a downtown performance space.



Darby Allin, in signature half-skull face paint, prepares for a bout; a golden throne at 52 Walker, which has hosted a wrestling-themed exhibit and series of matches.

“I would really love to see people place it in the category of performance art,” said Ebony L. Haynes, the global head of curatorial projects at David Zwirner, the sprawling gallery. In October, Haynes curated a [wrestling-themed exhibit](#) and series of matches at 52 Walker, Zwirner’s affiliated downtown performance space.

With some pro wrestlers from the lineup of [All Elite Wrestling \(A.E.W.\)](#), the smaller alternative to the behemoth W.W.E. (World Wrestling Entertainment), and punk bands as openers, the scene one Friday night was high-art hardcore. During his winning tag-team match, Darby Allin, in signature half-skull face paint, scaled one of 52 Walker’s exposed metal columns, his spinal tattoos glistening like an exoskeleton, then leaped and landed on one of his rivals, Timothy Thatcher, 10 feet below. Afterward, Allin left his mark by spitting a mouthful of blood on a gallery wall.

Zwirner, the mega-dealer, conceived of the show as a tribute to his friend and exhibiting artist [Raymond Pettibon](#), a longtime wrestling aficionado. He came away a fan. “It blew my mind,” Zwirner said of the matches. “I will never look at wrestling the same way.”





Members of the audience line up for wrestling bouts at 52 Walker.

The athleticism wowed him — the wrestler, Jamie Hayter, flipped her opponent, Billie Starkz, out of the ring, then yanked her back in by her purple pigtails — and so did the chanting interactions between the grapplers and the crowd. “What I didn’t realize is, it’s very scripted, not just onstage, but also the audience knows what’s expected of it,” Zwirner said.

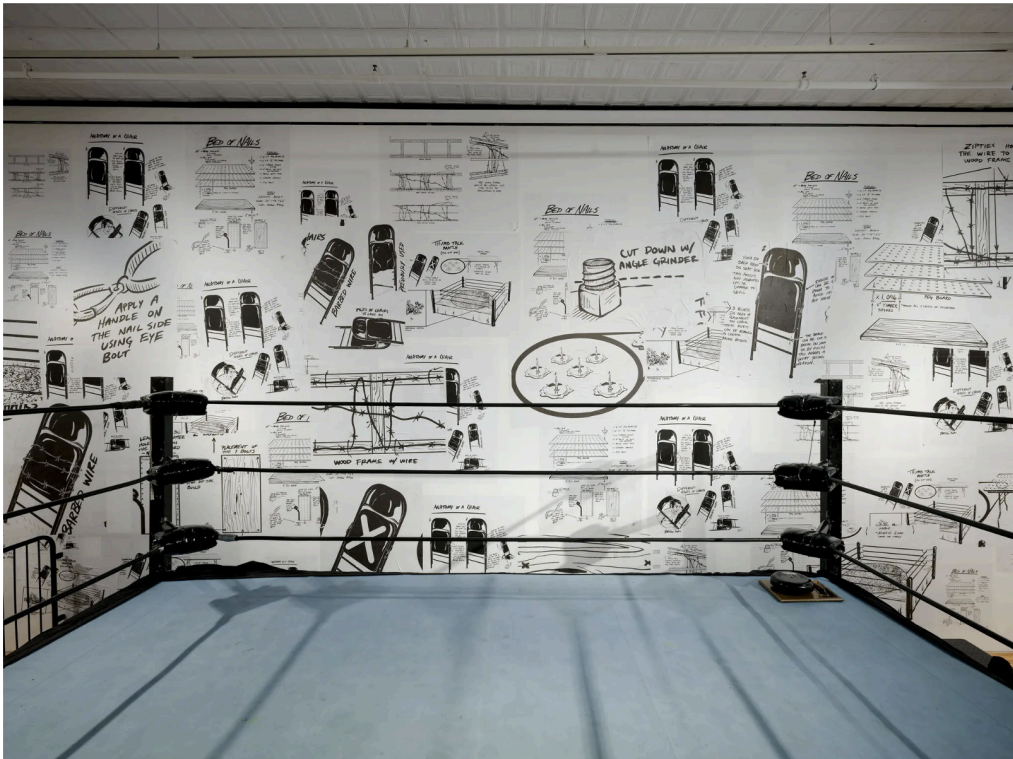
“The violence is theater,” he added. “It’s really kind of a beautiful atmosphere.”

An 11-year veteran of the pro circuit, Allin likened the competitions to Broadway in emotional range and physical stamina. “No performance is the same,” he said. “So, essentially, you have to, like, create a new piece of art every single week.”

At the exhibit, “52W Hardway,” that Friday, Pettibon — hailed as “The Great Raymondo” — presided from a golden throne, his face hidden behind a lucha libre mask. With roots in California punk, he’s retained an outsider’s streak even as his work [became highly collectible](#). Beyond the ring, the gallery’s walls were lined with his drawings of bodies in brawls, a subject he has been depicting since at least the ’80s.



Raymond Pettibon, an artist and longtime wrestling aficionado, presided recently at the "52W Hardway" exhibit.



The artwork of Charlie Ramone, an artist and wrestling props master, at 52 Walker. The gallery is also lined with Pettibon's drawings of bodies in brawls, a subject he has been depicting for decades. via 52 Walker, New York

“Wrestling’s influence on art practice goes back to Greco-Roman times, or earlier,” Pettibon said in an email. Nowadays, it should have more crossover, he thought: “To quote Russell Westbrook,” the N.B.A. star, “Why not?”

Fandoms, in sports and beyond, share “a common (but lively, contentious) language,” he said, and pointed to a 1950s [Roland Barthes essay](#) to explain wrestling’s enduring appeal. Barthes was all for the spectacle, comparing it to “ancient theater” and commedia dell’arte, and contending that wrestling portrays “a purely moral concept: that of justice.”

Over the years, artists have bounded onto the mats, including Shaun Leonardo, who is known for his paintings [and performance](#) dissecting sports and violence, and who developed a luchador alter-ego in the 2000s; and the pioneering cross-disciplinary feminist [Rosalyn Drexler](#), who wrote about a book about her experiences as a pro on the women’s circuit in the ’50s. (It inspired the 1980 movie [“Below the Belt.”](#))

Wrestling’s traditional machismo is punctured in the [flamboyant exóticos](#) of lucha libre (Mexican masked fighting) and the robust women’s league in Japan. (Sukeban, a [fashion-influenced](#) Japanese female wrestling group, will make a repeat appearance at Miami Art Week this year.) Gender performance has always been exaggerated in pro wrestling, in ways that are ripe — and hilarious — to explore.



Performers during and before their wrestling matches at Pioneer Works.

“Honey, they’ve already got makeup on, they’ve got short shorts, gold capes, long hair,” said Neon, of Choke Hole. “Throw in some fake boobs and a couple more accouterments, and you’ve got drag.”

Enacting what Neon called “this incredibly hammy American pastime” as queer artists, Choke Hole’s personae amp up the raunch (without sacrificing some of the puns). “I put the diva in deviant,” Neon’s character, Gorlëënyah, a green, three-nosed alien with an expansive bouffant, proclaimed at the show this month.

Beyond gender, the art world’s receptivity to wrestlers may have something to do with the social currency of kayfabe, said Katherine Pill, a senior curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, in Florida, which in 2027 will present [“House Show,”](#) a 5,000-plus-square-foot exhibition examining professional wrestling. Kayfabe — a term whose murky origins may be pig Latin (the “e” is silent) — entered [the Merriam-Webster dictionary](#) in 2023; it describes wrestling’s fierce devotion to illusion as reality. It’s competitive truthiness, and it’s pervasive. (It’s also slippery when it becomes satire, as Choke Hole discovered in real time at a match with an ICE agent character.)



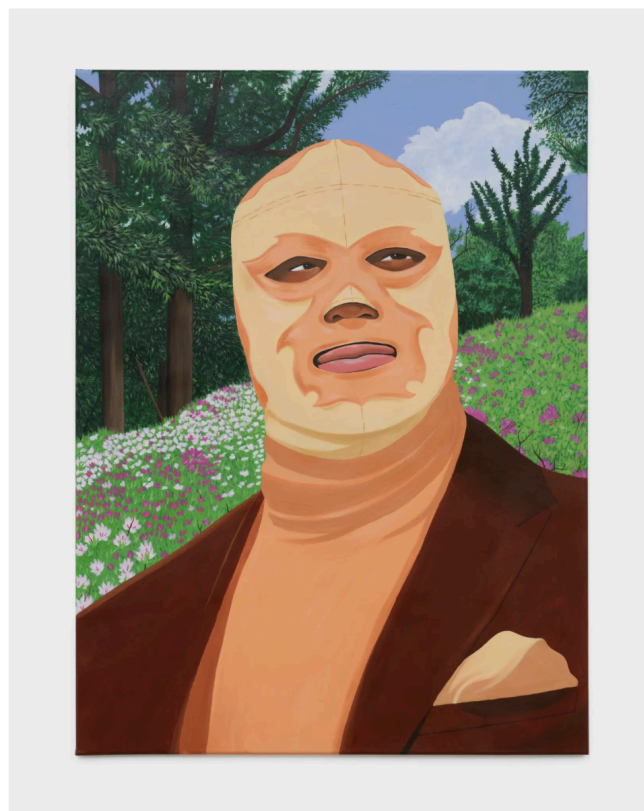
Ellery Neon, one of Choke Hole's founders, and Laveau Contraire prepare for their matches at Pioneer Works.

“The thing is, it’s not fake, it’s choreographed,” said Pill. “And it’s a really complicated choreography. Even though you’re fighting one another, you’re also essentially taking care for the other person, right? Because no one wants to truly get hurt.”

The dual life of these professional bruisers is the subject of paintings by the artist and A.E.W. wrestler Lee Moriarty, in which beefy figures in luchador masks bird watch and build snowmen amid feathery pastel landscapes. His first public showing, at the 2024 Nada Art Fair in Miami, sold out, with the Pérez Art Museum acquiring a work for its permanent collection. [A solo exhibition](#) at the influential Night Gallery in Los Angeles followed this fall.

Moriarty spent two years in a community college graphic design program, and was otherwise self-taught. “I never painted with the intention of it selling,” he said. He briefly wrestled in Mexico, and his acrylics are a reflection of his own hobbies and temperament. “Outside of the ring, I’m a very calm, introverted person,” he said.

Moriarty’s entree into the art world was shepherded by Adam Abdalla, who curated his Night Gallery showing. Abdalla, who runs a New York PR firm focused on arts and culture (Night Gallery and Pérez Art Museum have both been clients), is a wrestling die-hard — he was trading videotapes of bouts as a 12-year-old in Brooklyn — and has become the de facto art/wrestling kingpin and clearinghouse. In 2020, he founded the journal Orange Crush, whose three issues brought a glossy magazine aesthetic and cerebral essays to the normally downscale world of wrestling publications.



In paintings by the A.E.W. wrestler Lee Moriarty, beefy figures in luchador masks bird watch and build snowmen amid feathery pastel landscapes. Lee Moriarty via Night Gallery and Orange Crush; Photo by Ed Mumford

The journal, which he said is currently on pause, ignited enough interest for him to champion artists like Moriarty and [Thekla the Toxic Spider](#) (Thekla Kaischauri), an Austrian-by-way-of-Japan A.E.W. star with an M.F.A., whose canvases apply Viennese Expressionism to the cage match.

“There’s always this tension between the high and low that brings new audiences to the arts,” Abdalla said. He now owns a wrestling league in New Jersey and is one of the curators of the exhibit coming to the St. Petersburg museum, where Kaischauri’s work was recently added to the permanent collection.

Choke Hole, which started as an underground party in 2018, is outside his orbit. Their two-night gig in Brooklyn — the artist Raúl de Nieves invited them to be part of [his exhibition](#) at Pioneer Works — followed performances at temples of high art, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and MoMA PS 1. Last year, they also appeared at a Times Square Arts installation of [a giant exploding hot dog](#).

With de Nieves's soaring, ersatz stained glass windows as a backdrop, they filled a makeshift dressing room with body paint, wigs, and kneepads. The cast included Visqueen, a pink-clad sex robot with a machine gun for a leg; Jassy, a greedy capitalist doyenne susceptible to nipple tweaks; and one unusually buff baby. Over a D.J.'s thumping beats, they somersaulted around the ring, and pounded the mat with elbow drops and airplane spins.



The audience thrilled to the wrestlers somersaulting around the ring and performing airplane spins.

The fan favorite Candy Pain entered with a headstand off the top rope. Props like a four-foot long cigarette and an oversized syringe of facial filler were employed as weapons. The audience jeered the villains, clapped along and often roared in laughter.

Choke Hole's universe comes complete with a story line about intergalactic gentrifiers, and even an invented sponsor, Squelsh ("the energy drink that calms you down"). But the inclusion of an ICE agent character, introduced as a former Amazon employee who had just lost his job to A.I., was too much for some spectators. As the match concluded — he was handily vanquished by Candy Pain — an audience member rushed onto the stage and protested loudly that ICE raids were not funny.

As the audience absorbed the idea that this wasn't meant to be part of the show, the referee broke character. The protester was right, he said; ICE was deeply serious. The atmosphere was heavy. Take a breath, he suggested. "We're living in a time right now where sometimes parody and comedy is going to get us through," he said. "If it sparks something in you, take that and move something with it." The crowd cheered.





Fan favorite Candy Pain vanquished a character dressed as an ICE agent before the evening ended in a melee.

Choke Hole cut the bit from its subsequent performance and posted a [statement of apology](#). The group donated its profits from the run, \$3,542, to the organization NYC Ice Watch. The artists were beside themselves with regret, Neon said, and realized why, in their invented world, this moment caused so much turmoil. “It was too real,” he said.

Back at Pioneer Works, in the staged confines of the ropes, the raucous energy of the night eventually resumed, ending in a melee of nearly a dozen costumed wrestlers tussling, sometimes lasciviously, on the mat. The show was called “Armageddon” — “reporting live from the rubble of America,” a faux newscaster announced. Raid was, of course, the only one left standing.

Sarah Goodman contributed reporting.

Video camera operator: Jensen Gore.

Vincler, John. "If Antifa Was a Painter: Critic John Vincler on the Mischievous Genius of Nicole Eisenman." *Cultured Magazine* (November 5, 2025) [ill.] [online]

CULTURED

If Antifa Was a Painter: Critic John Vincler on the Mischievous Genius of Nicole Eisenman

In "STY" at 52 Walker, Nicole Eisenman presents new paintings and hybrid video-sculptures, spoofing the art-world machine through sharp parody and historical allusion.

WORDS

John Vincler

November 5, 2025



Installation view of Nicole Eisenman's "STY," 2025. Image courtesy of 52 Walker, New York.

Nicole Eisenman

52 Walker | 52 Walker Street

Through January 10, 2026

A man in a brown shirt, in the center of Nicole Eisenman's painting *The Auction*, 2025, raises his hand to place a bid. Or maybe he is Sieg Heiling. Under scrutiny, the picture dissolves into multiple or layered scenarios. The auctioneer seems to be wearing the robe of a judge, the electronic chart above him displays currency exchange rates, and where the ceiling should be is a moody moonlit night sky instead. The painting on offer in the middle of the scene is a milky white expanse pocked with impasto blobs in earth tones, arranged in clusters like Hannah Wilke's bite-sized gum sculptures. (A similar, smaller painting waits in the wings at left.) The assembled characters in the surrounding crowd are rendered in a variety of styles, from the realism of the possible-Nazi to the post-Cubist, post-Guston caricature in the foreground on the right who's also attempting to win the lot. *The Auction* could be the composite, collaborative work of half a dozen different painters, but in its ambition and tightly managed balance of coherence and ambiguity, it can only be the work of Nicole Eisenman.

As I considered this picture, I moved to examine a scrap of paper pinned to the wall 10 feet or so to the right, where I found—as if anticipating my train of thought—a color printout of Martin Kippenberger's 1984 geometric abstraction *For the Life of Me, I Can't See Any Swastikas*. In the German artist's composition of layered rectangles, Eisenman—whose family fled Nazi persecution in the 1930s—seems to find precedent for her own reflection on modernism's fascist haunting as well as the aesthetics of its contemporary resurgence.



Installation view of Nicole Eisenman's "STY," 2025. Image courtesy of 52 Walker.

“STY” is the New York-based artist’s first hometown solo exhibition following her three-decade spanning institutional survey that originated in Munich, before traveling to the Whitechapel Gallery in London and concluding at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2024. For this show, 52 Walker has been transformed into a single room, divided off from the entryway and front desks, and lined with Homasote board, which is commonly used in art studios to facilitate the ease of installation and deinstallation of artworks. Curator Ebony L. Haynes gets the scale potentially right here, providing both a concentrated show, as well as a hint of insight into the artist’s working process by creating an atmosphere that seems to welcome the viewer into the private space of the artist, an effect emphasized by the inclusion of reference ephemera (such as the Kippenberger) sourced from Eisenman’s Brooklyn studio.

Despite its title, “STY” conjures a tidy intimacy. But there is a pig present. In a second crowd-scene painting, *Archangel (The Visitors)*, 2024, a swine-headed cartoon soldier floats above a lively group gathered for an art opening. They converse among modernist, abstract sculptures on plinths. In an attic space above, stacks of canvas are stored, their surfaces otherwise out of view. In the foreground at right, a self-portrait of the artist appears to pick the pocket of a balding man in a tweed suit who is distractedly engrossed in sculptural details. The compositional setting collapses historical moments, mashing together the present with the First International Dada Fair, held in Berlin in 1920, where a pig-faced papier-mâché effigy of a German soldier was hung from the ceiling causing a scandal.

Eisenman’s entire show is like an interactive stage set for contemplating the possibilities and limitations of art’s ability to address the crisis of the present. It dares to juxtapose our contemporary moment with prior historical eras, when authoritarianism, censorship, and fascism were on the rise. It implicates the whole art-world apparatus: the exchange of great sums of money in the auction house, as well as the gallery system of which 52 Walker is part. Eisenman parodies herself, not as a singular genius within that system, but instead—echoing Jean Genet—as a petty thief. (This isn’t entirely new for the artist: For her first appearance in the Whitney Biennial, in 1995, she painted a mural of the museum, depicting it after an explosion, with herself at the center of the ruins.) The theater of it all—and her work *is* an entertaining performance—distracts from the fact that the artist has taken real risks with her political stances, particularly for calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, which prompted backlash from collectors.



Image by Nicole Eisenman, 2025. Image courtesy of the artist and 52 Walker.

The most significant artists are often ones that make audiences and fellow artists say some version of “I didn’t know you could do that?” And, with the best artists, this reaction often corresponds to both technical proficiency and their approach to subject-matter and composition. Eisenman accompanies the five oil paintings and two works on paper (in addition to the reference images culled from the studio) with a set of three statues made from scagliola, a plaster material dating back to ancient Rome, which was revived in 16th-century Italy, especially in the decorative flourishes favored by the Medici family. The sculptures—collectively titled *There I Was, 2025*—are mounted on rock bases. Each holds a large flatscreen monitor that plays a video work: a virtuosic mashup of ancient technique and bleeding-edge tech. They form a lyrical send-up of the contemporary notion of *screen time*.

The promotional image for the show appears to graft a black-and-white picture of one of Eisenman’s sculptures onto an edited and pared-down archival photo of Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels entering the Degenerate Art Exhibition, staged in Munich in 1937. While noting Eisenman’s healthy willingness to parody the role of the artist, in sum, the force of “STY” sides with artistic freedom in the face of state repression, and is animated by a nuanced yet forceful antifascism.

But Eisenman herself might remind us that many trace the origin of the Roman salute (later adopted by the German Nazi Party) not to ancient Rome, but to the painter Jacques Louis David. His 1784 scene of young men taking up arms in *The Oath of the Horatii* was completed a decade before he would be jailed for participating in the French Revolution—and two decades before he would paint the *Coronation of Napoleon and Josephine*, 1804, on his way to become the Emperor’s great propagandist. It’s as if Eisenman cautions: Consider the enduring, ever-mutating symbolic content of art, as well as the stakes of the present moment—sure. But never fully trust a painter.

Malget, Morgan. "A Full Season of Art to See at Museums and Galleries Across the U.S.." *The New York Times* (October 14, 2025) [ill.] [print]

The New York Times

A Full Season of Art to See at Museums and Galleries Across the U.S.

The fall schedule includes a number of exhibitions that look at works from Italy and France and the cultural events that shaped them.



"Barbeque" (1982) by Eric Fischl is part of the exhibition "Eric Fischl: Stories Told" at the Phoenix Art Museum. Eric Fischl

By Morgan Malget

Oct. 14, 2025

This article is part of the [Fine Arts & Exhibits](#) special section on how creativity can inspire in challenging times.

Every fall, an abundance of museum exhibitions and gallery shows opens across the United States — and this season is no exception.

A number of those shows will transport audiences to France and Italy. In Seattle, visitors can dig into the ways in which Impressionists portrayed culinary culture in France in the late 19th century, and in Kansas City, Mo., a museum explores the hardships Parisians faced during World War I. A New York City show examines the rise of Italian Fascism through the lens of Futurism, and in Houston, an exhibition travels back to the first century to delve into Emperor Trajan's cultural impact on Rome.

For a connection closer to home, how about a gallery in Pittsburgh showcasing Frank Lloyd Wright's unrealized projects for the area, or an exhibition in Billings, Mont., that features local women who offer diverse perspectives through textile works? With a wide range of subjects and mediums, hopefully all museum lovers can explore their personal [Roman Empires](#) this fall. Here is a selection.

New York

NEW YORK CITY

[“Nicole Eisenman: STY”](#)

The New York artist Nicole Eisenman is known for her expressive paintings and sculptures that capture everyday life with humor and flair. Presented here are three new sculptures with video elements and a selection of her paintings, including new pieces and loans from public collections. These works aim to piece together a narrative and offer a glimpse into Eisenman's state of mind. Oct. 30 through Jan. 10; David Zwirner Gallery, 52 Walker, davidzwirner.com