

ENCOUNTERS



Vadis Turner



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July 31 – November 27, 2022

The Encounters series of exhibitions is organized by Peter J. Baldaia, Director of Curatorial Affairs, to highlight outstanding regional contemporary art.

Lead Sponsor:

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cover: *The Witch*, 2019
bedsheets, charred wood, acrylic, resin, mixed media
26 x 24 x 16 inches
Collection of Andrea and Scott Zieher

left: *Copper Window*, 2021
mineral wool, resin, copper, acrylic
27 x 24 x 5 inches



Malleable Grid, 2020
leather, thread, burnt wood, resin
102 x 54 x 2 inches

Countering Expectations: Vadis Turner's Brave New World

Peter J. Baldaia

Vadis Turner makes arresting mixed media works from an array of unusual materials sourced from in and around the home, countering their traditional associations and intended functions by synthesizing them into bold new forms. Her recent large-scale, grid-based, fabric-centric pieces move on and off the wall, embracing contradictions of structure and logic at the same time they conjure new possibilities for meaning and thought. Turner's art truly resists categorization, occupying a brave new world between painting, sculpture and craft, yet remaining firmly outside of them all.

The artist's initial foray into mixed media began with delicate garments fashioned out of wax paper from her mother's kitchen, which led to a fuller exploration of the possibilities of working with gender-based materials. Later, returning to her roots as an abstract painter, she created several series of voluminously layered "textile paintings" comprised of "brushstrokes" of accumulated strips of recycled fabrics. Back then, Turner lived and worked in New York, but she has recently returned to her hometown of Nashville, where she continues to hone and distill her unique artistic vision.

I recently had the opportunity to visit the artist in her light-filled studio, located on the lower level of her family home in Gallatin, Tennessee. Within this sprawling mid-century modern time capsule overlooking Old Hickory Lake, we spent a pleasant spring afternoon reviewing and discussing works for the current exhibition.

Peter Baldaia: I remember first encountering your work at Zeitgeist Gallery in Nashville in 2018. I was particularly impressed by a large red monolithic piece that was very striking in the space. I don't think I'd ever seen anything quite like it before.

Vadis Turner: That piece, *Red Gate*, was the signature work in the show, which I titled *Bedfellows* since I was primarily working with braided bedsheets. I love materials that have a human fingerprint, and bedsheets are particularly interesting because they're used during hours of dormancy. I've been incorporating retired curtains into the most recent work. *Drawn Curtain* and *Weighted Window* were the two anchor pieces featured in my last show in Nashville, titled *Window Treatments*. These works are largely comprised of vintage bedroom curtains from my grandparents' house, which was built back in the 1960s and is where my studio is now located. As you can see, very little of the home's original décor has changed, so I'm still surrounded by their belongings. The bedroom curtains were deteriorated, but once I treated them with resin and added gravel, copper leaf, and acrylic paint, they took on a whole new life and form.

PB: In these newer pieces, the fabric retains a sense of pliability but feels rigid. Whereas in *Red Gate*, the material is stiffened by the way it's wrapped onto the armature, but it's soft to the touch. So, now you're negating the softness.

VT: I love that you picked up on that, because I always strive for the materials that I use in my work to betray their intended functions. I want their behaviors

to be unpredictable and unruly, and do something on behalf of a new life. When I was making these pieces, I was wondering how can curtains suggest actual windows? In other words, how can they transition from being something that releases or opens up light, to becoming the thing itself – that membrane between the inside and the outside?

PB: They also feel gestural and active, suggesting movement.

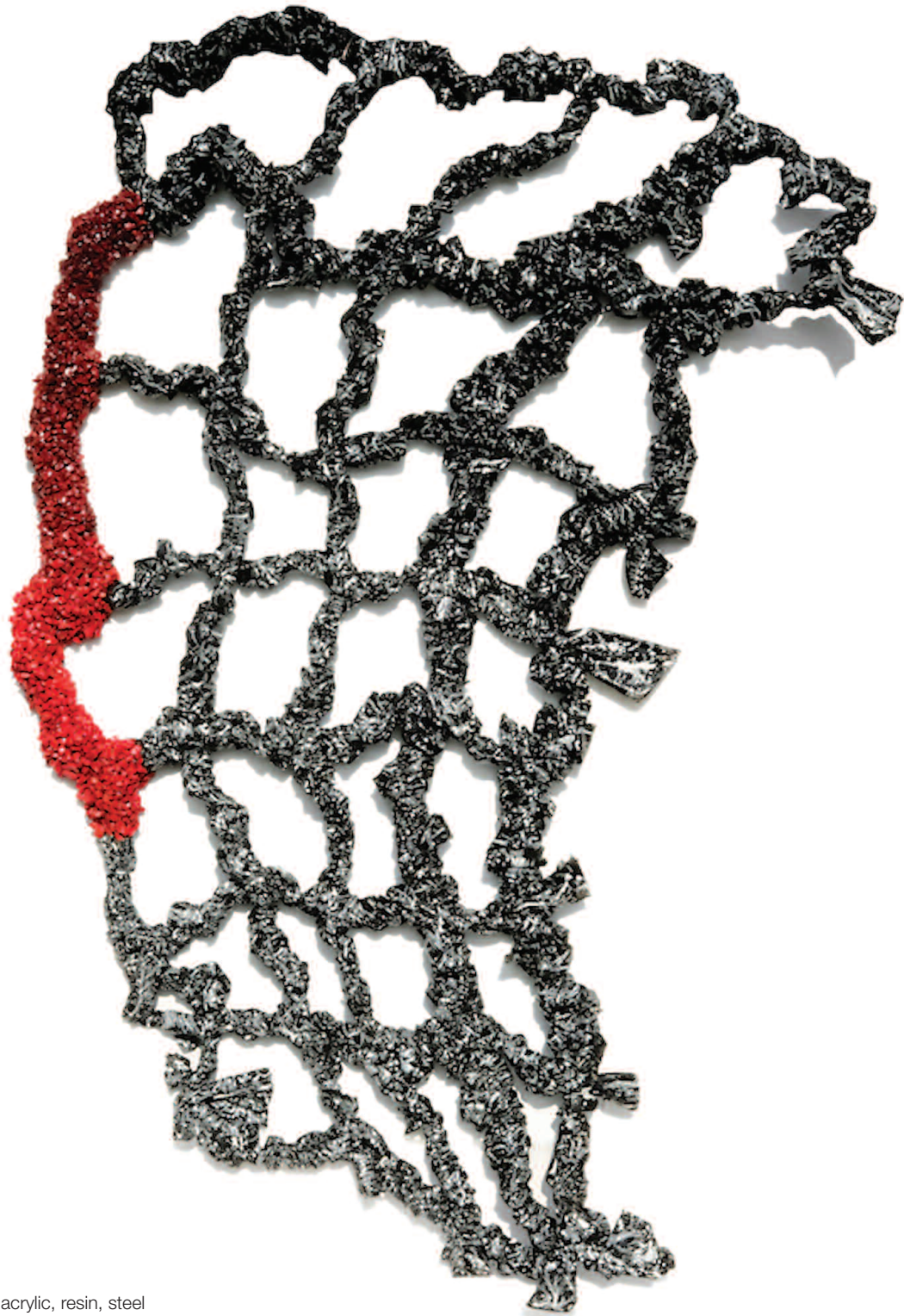
VT: Yes, they are very figure-like to me. *Drawn Curtain* feels as if it is being lured sideways, and *Weighted Window* dragged downward. In a way, I feel the pandemic reinforced the importance of the domestic materials that I work with, because as everyone was relegated to the home, it became your entire world, offering confinement and comfort. So, to keep these materials activated and turn them into new things, like windows, when we couldn't go anywhere, I found really interesting.

PB: It's obvious that the grid is an important element in your work. Talk to me about that.

VT: I've been engaged with the grid for many years, but these days I'm increasingly focused on its expressive possibilities rather than emphasizing its role as structure. The expectation of a grid is for it to articulate a system of vertical and horizontal lines, and I'm more interested in what happens when the lines become soft, or begin to wobble and maybe flop over, or become free-standing. I want to explore if it can still be considered a grid in those states.

Red Gate, 2018
braided bedsheets, dye, acrylic,
resin, wood, mixed media
118 x 120 x 10 inches





Drawn Curtain, 2021
curtains, gravel, copper leaf, acrylic, resin, steel
124 x 96 x 6 inches



Weighted Window, 2021
curtains, gravel, copper leaf, acrylic, resin, steel
132 x 90 x 5 inches

Window Figure: Circe, 2021

curtains, copper, gravel, resin, acrylic, steel,
sound component composed by Emery Dobyns
92 x 64 x 45 inches



I've been engaged with the grid for many years, but these days I'm increasingly focused on its expressive possibilities rather than emphasizing its role as structure.

PB: Give me some examples.

VT: The piece titled **Malleable Grid** is a good example. It may have been the first time that I unconsciously made a grid that also seemed like a figure. It's very figurative to me.

PB: It's clearly a grid, but in its sagging state it's also an anti-grid.

VT: Exactly; it's flaccid, and it's made with leather so it's like this gridded skin. In a related piece, I layered a loose grid of leather over a grid comprised of cement. I love the contrast between hard and soft in this work, and how the skin element creates a decorative scalloped effect.

The two most recent works, **Window Figure: Circe** and **Window Figure: Scylla**, have essentially become freestanding grids – they've left the wall to become fully three-dimensional sculptures.

PB: What's the significance of their subtitles, which are characters from Greek mythology?

VT: In the course of making this body of work, I listened to many of the *Greeking Out* podcasts with my sons as I drove them to their various activities. **Weighted Window** and **Drawn Curtain** began to

feel like sirens to me – to resonate with the idea of a perilous landscape punctuated by rock-bound women singing seductive songs that lured sailors to their deaths. Scylla and Circe surfaced as important subjects for me. According to late classical writers, Scylla was once a beautiful nymph loved by the sea-god Glaucus, but her jealous rival, the witch Circe, employed magic to transform her into a horrific sea monster. All of these works are made from curtains with the addition of resin, paint, and gravel applied to a steel armature. **Scylla** was a particularly difficult piece for me.

PB: How so?

VT: I finished **Circe** several weeks before the deadline for my show, and since I always work right to the end, I thought I should make a companion piece that would become **Scylla**. However, I couldn't resolve it as easily as I thought – which is fitting because the subject is such an ornery character. And so, it's hard for me to appreciate the work objectively. But I also embrace that difficulty.

PB: Do you create maquettes for pieces like these, to establish their basic forms?

VT: All the works begin with rough drawings – I give myself full permission to make really bad reference sketches.



Rose Window, 2021
curtains, bedding, ribbon, steel, thread, resin,
acrylic, mixed media, sound component
composed by Emery Dobyns
84 x 80 x 18 inches

Whether a material has a personal association for me or comes from a thrift store, I feel it's all charged with distilled life that gives it a particular voice.

I knew **Scylla** was going to be grid-based, but how does a grid become an enraged figure? After several sketches, I made a tiny maquette from wire. There's a welder a couple of miles away that I work with. I leave a maquette in his mailbox, and he enlarges it to the dimensions I specify. So, then I have the armature. But because it's a creative journey, it never ends up where it begins – the work always bites back on your ideas. I remember that I laid this piece down at one point, and suddenly I saw the grid starting to misbehave, and sizzle.

PB: So, there's that unexpected moment when the work begins to suggest to you what to do?

VT: Yes! And that's the best part of it because things change along the way as you become more engaged. When I stood the piece back up, I felt it looming above me in an almost menacing way, like a cobra about to strike.

PB: You later added an audio component to one of these pieces.

VT: Yes, there is sound that accompanies **Circe**, as well as the piece titled **Rose Window**. The sound for **Circe** is a witchy, campfire-like crackling that activates when you approach the work. The sound for **Rose Window** is more of a slow hiss –

I love the idea that the artwork hisses at the viewer! This particular piece is made out of my tween bedding – an ugly floral and ruffled set from the 1980s. There's storage for miles in this house, and when I found this set packed away here, I knew I had to use it. The ruffled elements are clearly visible in the piece, as well as the red ribbons throughout, which to me suggest blooms, or flames, or even red fingernails.

PB: Does the fact that the bedding was yours as a girl provide more significance for you?

VT: Whether a material has a personal association for me or comes from a thrift store, I feel it's all charged with distilled life that gives it a particular voice.

We've been talking a lot about bedding and curtains, but in several other works I began looking to employ structural materials from the home. For instance, in **Red Findings** and **Copper Window**, I incorporate mineral wool, which is a green insulation product. It's sometimes referred to as spun stone or fire blanket. I think all of these names are very potent and poetic.

I always strive for the materials that I use in my work to betray their intended functions. I want their behaviors to be unpredictable and unruly, and do something on behalf of a new life.

PB: Broadly speaking, it's a material traditionally associated with a male activity like house construction. It seems as if you're playing around with notions of what constitutes feminine versus masculine through these materials.

VT: I like to acknowledge materials that are traditionally, for better or worse, associated with women and men, and see how I can turn them into something else. Mineral wool is used as a sound barrier and a heat deterrent, and normally installed behind a wall, so it's invisible. The same is true for the gravel and cement that I've also been using lately – they usually support or reinforce a structure in an unseen way. In my works, their positions are reversed.

PB: I think **Red Findings** is a very interesting piece, in that it's both soft and hard, with the web of braided bedsheets enveloping the rough chunks of mineral wool. There's a great yin and yang balance of opposites.

VT: Yes, and the way the soft grid caresses the usually hidden elements like a treasure is also telling.

PB: Let's talk about the vessels, which encompass all of these soft and hard domestic materials.

VT: I first started making them in 2018, using quilts and bedsheets. These materials are clearly apparent in works like **The Trophy**. It was such a freeing moment for me when I realized that a textile could become a vessel. The objects soon became unapologetically porous, as you can see in **The Witch**, for example. As I continued making them, I began to emphasize that they clearly aren't vessels in the conventional sense, and I started adding additional materials like burnt wood, cement, ribbon, and leather. In the most recent ones, **Dark Floral Vessel** and **Gravel Vessel**, I've incorporated driveway gravel and mineral wool as well.

PB: They're beautiful formally, and their presence is compelling and mysterious. The latest ones are clearly more distilled. When I look at the progression of your work over time, I see a definite distillation of form and materials in the latest pieces. There's an overall sense of "less is more".

VT: My soul is smiling because the word *distilled* is very important to me. I'm not apologizing for anything, but when I look

Red Findings, 2020

braided bedsheets, mineral wool, steel, mixed media
70 x 66 x 5 inches



Dark Floral Vessel, 2021
mineral wool, gravel, acrylic, resin
23 x 28 x 26 inches



Gravel Vessel, 2021
curtains, gravel, resin, thread, mixed media
26 x 20 x 17 inches



It was a major moment of awakening when I understood that the world was my oyster in terms of materials...

back into my practice, I think there was a real lack of editing early on. It's a struggle for many artists – it's easier to add more and more, and that often ends up diluting the content. These days, I'm focused on getting the work to say as much as possible with fewer essential elements. It's definitely harder, but that makes the creative process more stimulating. I'm striving to get to a place where I'm confident enough to stand by something that is simple, distilled, and well edited. But it takes time, and work, and a lot of thought to gain clarity about your intentions. I hope that by the time I'm 60 or 70, my artist statement is radically lean and concise.

PB: Talk to me about your early career. I understand you received your degrees from Boston University. What made you choose that school?

VT: Having grown up in Tennessee, I wanted to leave the region and go to college in the Northeast. That's not to say that I didn't have a great childhood and really nice parents, and I obviously think Nashville is a great place to live, since I eventually chose to return. Also, I wasn't interested in attending a small art school, because I wanted a full American university experience where I could take classes in other departments and develop friendships outside of the art realm. While Boston University might seem like a strange choice to study art because it's huge and you're somewhat anonymous, it worked well for me, and I absolutely loved being there.

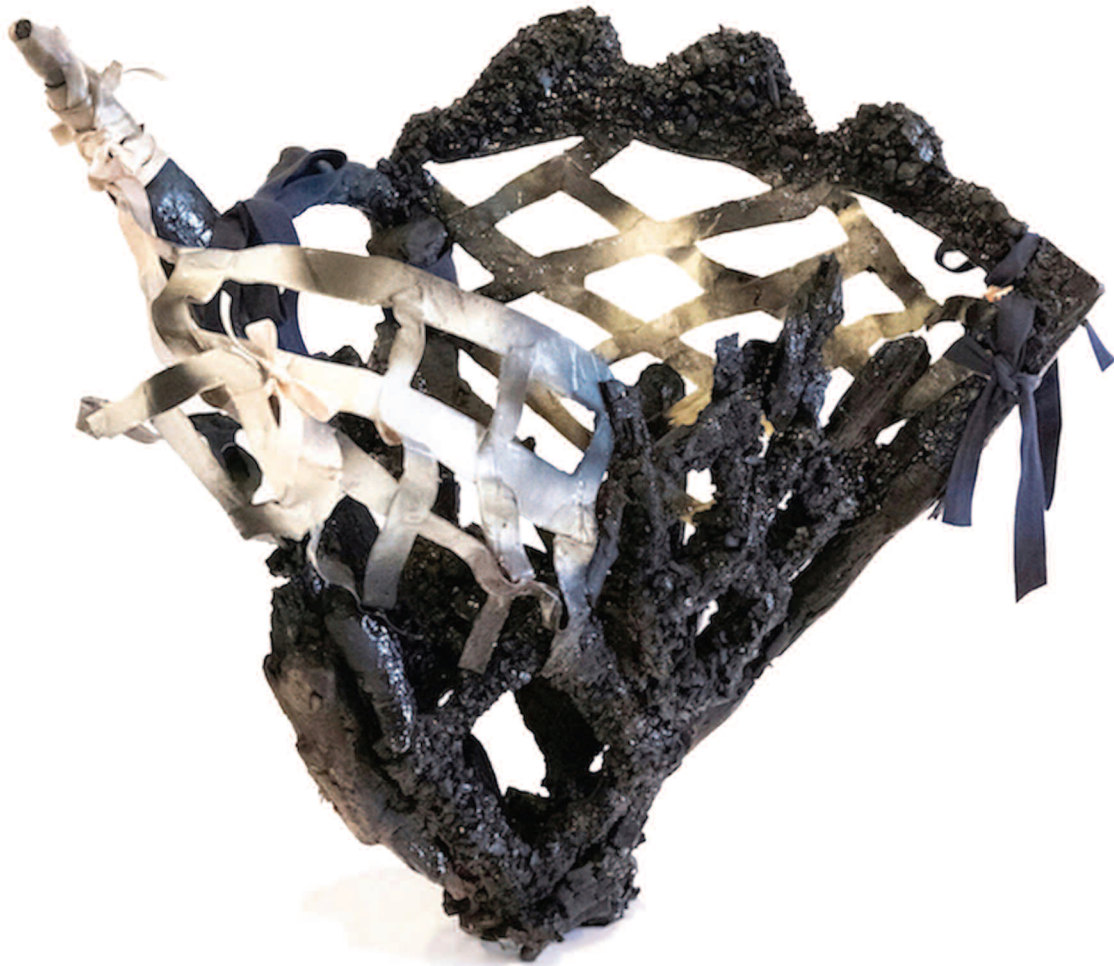
PB: What was your major?

VT: I studied painting, and was focused on abstraction. I was enrolled in a five-year BFA/MFA studio teaching program, which was rigorous and enlightening. After graduation I didn't have a job lined up and wasn't sure what to do next. I wanted to take a break from painting, but I didn't want to abandon artmaking altogether because I was afraid that I would rust over and be unable to start again. So, I moved back home to Nashville, and began digging around my mother's house in search of materials that would inspire me to continue working, but in a different way.

PB: Was this the time when you began fabricating objects from wax paper?

VT: Yes, wax paper became my gateway drug to mixed media! It was a major moment of awakening when I understood that the world was my oyster in terms of materials; that I could use whatever I wanted in my artmaking practice. I realized the transformative possibility of a domestic material like wax paper – I could make something flat and thin voluminous, something mundane special, and something utilitarian ethereal and poetic. That's how it started. It's everything for an artist to find this one little place that you can turn into your universe.

I continued working with female-identifying domestic materials after moving to New York in 2000, but I kind of went bananas, making things out of panty hose, curlers, and tampons. It culminated in 2009 with an installation titled *Reception* that included a sex swing fashioned from a wedding dress, a tampon wedding cake,



Messy Vessel, The Crazy Lady, 2021
burnt wood, leather, ribbon, resin, hardware
29 x 32 x 16 inches
Collection of Sasha and Charlie Sealy

I wanted to paint again, but also retain this really exciting mixed media palette that I'd been honing.

wax paper champagne flutes, and other objects arranged on a marriage bed. It was as if all my greatest hits were gathered up in one sweeping statement.

The piece was brought by the Brooklyn Museum, which was wonderful, but soon afterwards I began to feel that the process of making my work was becoming a bit boring and predictable – I was executing ideas, but crafting each work didn't feel like a creative journey. I wanted to paint again, but also retain this really exciting mixed media palette that I'd been honing. I wondered how I could begin to paint with these materials. That became a really great challenge.

PB: How did you resolve it?

VT: Around 2011, I started creating works from long strips of textiles including antique clothing, trimming, ribbons, and the like. **Primrose Path Engulfed in Smoke** is a good early example. What solidified this direction was a residency at Materials for the Arts, a program of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs that offers studio space and an array of upcycled materials, many of which were donated by the fashion industry. There, the works started to reengage with the wall as I wove and layered different colored pieces of fabric and trim of various thicknesses and textures into textile-based paintings. They eventually were shown in my first solo exhibition at Geary Contemporary in New York. I made several more series in this vein, and the rest just evolved from there.

PB: When did you return to Nashville?

VT: In 2014, for many reasons. The quality of life here is much better for my family, but career-wise it was seemingly a backward step – I mean, you don't really move to Nashville to up your game professionally in the art world. But I have to say being back here has been awesome. There's an energy and vitality that's percolating in formerly mediocre cities like Nashville; they're having a renaissance. And honestly, I don't think I would have received a grant from the Joan Mitchell Foundation or a residency at Yaddo if I was one of the scores of New York and LA artists always under consideration. So, it's been advantageous in surprising ways.

PB: But I have to ask. How do you balance living in such a conservative state with being a forward-thinking contemporary artist and woman?

VT: I actually have a new answer to that – you wrap your arms around it and embrace it. I had this “aha” moment not too long ago as I was preparing an essay for a grant application. As I was thinking about what to write, I realized that I'm a middle-aged, mid-career artist, making work about the female identifying experience in deep red Middle America. This is now who I am! And you know what? I'm good with that – I'm very proud.



Primrose Path Engulfed in Smoke, 2011
ribbon, clothing, antique textiles, mixed media
68 x 63 x 5 inches

I feel the pandemic reinforced the importance of the domestic materials that I work with, because as everyone was relegated to the home, it became your entire world, offering confinement and comfort.

Vadis Turner

born in 1977, Nashville, Tennessee
lives in Nashville, Tennessee

1999 BFA Boston University, Boston, MA

2000 MFA Boston University, Boston, MA

Selected Recent Exhibitions

- 2022 *Vadis Turner* (solo exhibition), OZ Arts, Nashville, TN
Window Treatments (solo exhibition), Zeitgeist Gallery, Nashville, TN
Women Artists: Highlights from the Hunter Museum of American Art, Knoxville Museum of Art, Knoxville, TN
- 2020 *The F Word: We Mean Female*, Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, TN
Cups and Grids (solo exhibition), Geary, New York, NY
- 2019 *Megaliths* (solo exhibition), Ent Center for the Arts, University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, CO
- 2018 *Bedfellows* (solo exhibition), Zeitgeist Gallery, Nashville, TN
Continuity of Context, Cheekwood Estate & Gardens, Nashville, TN
Hunter Invitational IV, Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, TN
Vadis Turner/Nathaniel Donnett, The Carnegie Center for Art & History, New Albany, IN
- 2017 *Confabulations of the Millennia*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Maine College of Art, Portland, ME
Elevate: Alicia Henry & Vadis Turner, 21C Hotel & Museum, Nashville, TN

- Embedded Message*, Visual Arts Center of Richmond, Richmond, VA
FemiNest, Equity Gallery, New York, NY
Vadis Turner: Tempest (solo exhibition), Frist Art Museum, Nashville, TN
- 2016 *Bells + Burn Piles* (solo exhibition), Geary, New York, NY
- 2015 *Summer Reading*, ZieherSmith & Horton, Nashville, TN
Woman House, Eric Firestone Gallery, East Hampton, NY
- 2014 *Minimal/Maximal*, Kinz + Tillou Fine Art, Brooklyn, NY
- 2013 *Off The Wall*, Mirus Gallery, San Francisco, CA
Past Perfection (solo exhibition), Geary, New York, NY
Repetition & Ritual, Minnesota Museum of American Art, St. Paul, MN
Summertime, Jenkins Johnson Gallery, New York, NY
The Lonely Sea and Sky, Allegra LaViola Gallery, New York, NY
- 2012 *Bad for You*, Shizaru Gallery, London, England
Haberdashery, Eric Firestone Gallery, East Hampton, NY

Honors & Awards

- 2022 *Artist Fellowship*, Vermont Studio Center, Johnston, VT
- 2020 *Artist in Residence*, Hambidge Center for the Arts, Rabun Gap, GA
- 2019 *Individual Artist Fellowship*, Tennessee Arts Commission, Nashville, TN
- 2018 *Artist in Residence*, Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, NY
- 2016 *Painters and Sculptors Grant*, Joan Mitchell Foundation, New York, NY
- 2013 *Artist Fellowship*, Materials for the Arts, Long Island City, NY
- 2012 *Artist in Residence*, Museum of Art and Design, New York, NY

Museum / University Collections

- Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY
Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, TN
KMAC Museum, Louisville, KY
Tennessee State Museum, Nashville, TN
21C Hotel & Museum, Louisville, KY

For further information, visit
www.vadisturner.com



above: Vadis Turner in her studio, Gallatin, TN, 2021
Photo: Hannah Deits

back cover: *Painted Ribbon Grid Study*, 2021
ribbon, acrylic, archival adhesive
16 x 20 inches

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