

The 100 Greatest New York City Artworks, Ranked

ALEX GREENBERGER | August 29, 2023 7:00am

When the artist Florine Stettheimer returned from a sojourn in Europe during the 1910s, she vowed to paint New York City as she saw it. She wrote a poem in which she spoke of a place where “skytowers had begun to grow / And front stoop houses started to go / And life became quite different / And it was as tho’ someone had planted seeds / And people sprouted like common weeds / And seemed unaware of accepted things.” She continued on, concluding ultimately that “what I should like is to paint this thing.”

She did so, producing works such as *New York/Liberty* (1918–19), in which downtown Manhattan’s busy port is shown with a chunky Statue of Liberty welcoming a ship. It’s a bombastic vision of all that New York has to offer, and it’s one of the works that make this list, which collects 100 of the best pieces about the city.

The works ranked below take many forms—painting, sculpture, photography, film, performance, even artist-run organizations whose activities barely resemble art. They pay homage to aspects of New York life across all five of its boroughs. Secret histories are made visible, the stuff of everyday life is repurposed as art, and tragic events from New York lore are memorialized. Binding all of these works is one larger question: What really makes a city?

These 100 works come up with many different answers to that query, not the least because a significant number of them are made by people who were born outside New York City.

Below, the 100 greatest works about New York City.



Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (detail), 1974–75. Photo : ©Martha Rosler/Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

19. Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, 1974–75

When Martha Rosler made her work, the Bowery was associated with alcoholism and homelessness—societal issues that many would prefer not to see. In an attempt to reverse the invisibility, Rosler took pictures around the Manhattan street, pairing her black-and-white shots with short texts she collected that refer to drunkenness and drinking. The words and the images occupy an unstable relationship, however: What is described is not obviously portrayed in the photographs, which mainly depict storefronts and sidewalks without people. That neither phrases nor pictures are able to fully grapple with the problems at hand is a testament to the limits of traditional documentary photography, long thought to be a form of truth-telling.

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



Pope.L, *The Great White Way: 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street*, 2001–02. Photo : ©Pope.L./Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

15. Pope.L, *The Great White Way: 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street*, 2001–02

No New York artwork may have been quite as grueling to produce as *The Great White Way*, a performance begun by Pope.L in 2001 that involved traversing the 22 miles from the southernmost tip of Broadway in Manhattan to his mother's home in the Bronx. The catch: Pope.L went that distance not by foot but on his elbows and knees.

The Great White Way is one of Pope.L's famed "crawls," a painstaking series of works that are often performed in public. This one involved the artist wearing a Superman suit—a reference to his aunt's love for the comic-book hero, and to Pope.L's fascination with her passion for a white man who was not even human—with a skateboard strapped to his back. Starting at the Statue of Liberty, he took the ferry to Manhattan and then crawled his way, sometimes going uphill in the process. Because it was so physically difficult, the work was performed in pieces. "Pedestrians acted exactly as you would assume they would to a black man crawling on the sidewalk wearing a Superman suit: some with total indifference, some with open staring and laughter, a much safer reaction given the cameraman and the small crowd of followers watching his every move," a *Brooklyn Rail* critic wrote.