

Alex Greenberger, "The 100 Best Artworks of the 21st Century," *ARTnews*, March 5, 2025

ARTnews Est. 1902

The 100 Best Artworks of the 21st Century



BY The Editors of ARTnews, Art in America
March 5, 2025

A global recession, a pandemic, 9/11, the Arab Spring, Brexit, the rise of Web 2.0, unrest in the face of economic stability, wars in Afghanistan, Ukraine, Gaza, and elsewhere: these were but a few of the many events that have defined the past 25 years, a period characterized by tumult and uncertainty. That all may explain why art appeared to change faster than ever all the while, with artists burning through styles and tendencies with each coming year.

With the 21st century now at the quarter point, we've taken the opportunity to pinpoint the greatest artworks of the past 25 years. Even though we set down some parameters for ourselves, it was no small task—one made more difficult by the restless creativity of artists during this period.

The joy of an epic list like this one is that it can't encapsulate everything: we know we've left some artworks off, simply because there was no shortage to choose from. We hope you'll discover some amazing pieces here, reflect on some that are much-loved already, and debate the merits of others. And moreover, we hope to learn of new artworks through the conversations we hope our list inspires.

Below, a look back at the greatest 100 artworks of the 21st century so far, as selected by the editors of ARTnews and Art in America.

1 Arthur Jafa, *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death*, 2016



Arthur Jafa: *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, 2016.

Photo : ©Arthur Jafa/Courtesy the artist, Gladstone Gallery, and Sprüth Magers

A scorching sun; Notorious B.I.G. rapping; Martin Luther King Jr. riding in a car; police committing violence; protests raging for civil rights and Black Lives Matter; Barack Obama grieving the victims of the Charleston church shooting; Mahalia Jackson performing. These are among the memorable clips packed into this video, which aspires to distill the rich range of Black experience in the US into just seven minutes. Working from his extensive archive of other peoples' pictures, Arthur Jafa offered a full gamut of experiences from death to celebration, at a time when footage of Black Americans dying violent deaths at the hands of police proliferated in the media. Set to Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam," Jafa's video is a sublime artwork that teeters between abject horror and bona fide beauty. Its final image is tough to shake: a clip of James Brown performing his ecstatic music until he collapses. — A.G.