ARTS

"I, myself, am strange and unusual."
BEETLEJUICE TIM BURTON

In new novel, one of Yale's first female students draws on college years

BY ZORA PENAGER DAVIDSON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

When Alexis Krasilovsky '71 graduated from Yale College's first coeducational class in 1971, she immediately started drafting parts of a novel based on her experience.

She continued writing it in subsequent years, but, Krasilovsky said in a video interview, she held off on publishing the book until her parents passed away because of their disapproval, along with fear of retaliation from California State University, Northridge, where she worked as a professor.

Krasilovsky's decades-long project, much of which was inspired by her diary entries from her time at Yale, was finally published last month, and she said she believes it to be the testament to focusing on creation above all else — something she hopes all female artists do.

"I think you just kind of have to do your work," she said. "Hope for the best, find a way to survive and keep your work surviving."

Titled "Portrait of an Artist as a Young Woman," the novel follows Ana Freid, whom Krasilovsky described as a floundering filmmaker and "ditzy, bougie wannabe revolutionary white girl." In the novel, Ana relives her experiences as one of Yale's first women during the late 1960s and 1970s.

"I had already tried to apply to Yale when I was in high school," Krasilovsky said. "The counselor just laughed at me, and said, 'Girls don't go to Yale.'"

Krasilovsky applied to Smith College instead, where she attended before transferring to Yale for her junior year. Her undergraduate years were "a time of great experimentation and protest," she said.

The novel's Ana also navigates various regional art scenes, complex and sometimes volatile personal relationships with her mother and male romantic partners and the contentious politics of the New Left, including the civil rights, women's liberation and anti-war movements.

Citing the Vietnam War, New Haven Black Panther trials and May Day, Krasilovsky recalled that she was excited to participate in the changing campus climate.

"I was really interested in those things as well as sexual liberation," she said. "I was euphoric that I could take the pill, and then I was finally not at my parents' house. And I had a wild time totally buying that women could have one-night stands and have sexual freedom and enjoy it."

Although "Portrait of an Artist as a Young Woman" is a work of fiction, many of Ana's experiences in the novel mirror Krasilovsky's real life. Krasilovsky said she felt she was more comfortable writing about these experiences in a fictional format than if she were writing about herself.

"Many of the images and lines come from diary entries," Krasilovsky said.

In the novel, Ana creates a film during her senior year, which is described in the book as "a documentary about the New York art world, portraying the top artists as overblown egomaniacs." Its real world counterpart is "The End of the Art World," which Krasilovsky shot and filmed during her own senior year at Yale.

Krasilovsky said that she plans to release a poetry book in April 2027 and that she is also adapting "Portrait of an Artist as a Young Woman" into a screenplay.

Lydia Temoshok '72 said in a phone interview that she thinks "Portrait of an Artist as a Young Woman" is an accurate version of Yale's coeducation journey from a first-person perspective.

Temoshok said she believes other books about the beginnings of Yale's coeducation depict the first female coeds as "beleaguered victims" rather than having an equal amount of agency.

"I think Alexis' book talks much more authentically about the real relations that women had with men," Temoshok, who also transferred from Smith College in 1969, said. "Maybe not all women. Maybe some women did feel beleaguered. Maybe some women did feel set upon. But what Alexis's book shows is that no, we had choice."



COURTESY OF PHILIPS SHUM

Alexis Krasilovsky '71 was part of Yale's first coeducational graduating class. Many images and lines from her September novel, "Portrait of an Artist as a Young Woman," come from her college diary, she said.

Mary Pearl '72 GRD '76 '82, who transferred from Wellesley College, agreed that "Portrait of an Artist as a Young Woman" presents an accurate representation of the lives of the first women at Yale. In a phone interview, she said that the early years of Yale's coeducation involved a "firehose of attention, not all of it desired," on female students.

"When we came down into the dining room, we had to walk down the center to go to get our trays to collect our food, and really it felt like a catwalk," Pearl said of the Davenport dining hall. "I had a very tame life. My response to the onslaught was to get a boyfriend just so I didn't have to deal with it."

Still, Pearl said coeducation at Yale allowed her to join a "really wonderful" community of women.

182 women graduated in 1971 as part of Yale College's first coeducational graduating class.

Contact
ZORA PENAGER DAVIDSON *at*
zora.penagerdavidson@yale.edu

Pioneering Black art and literature featured in new Beinecke displays

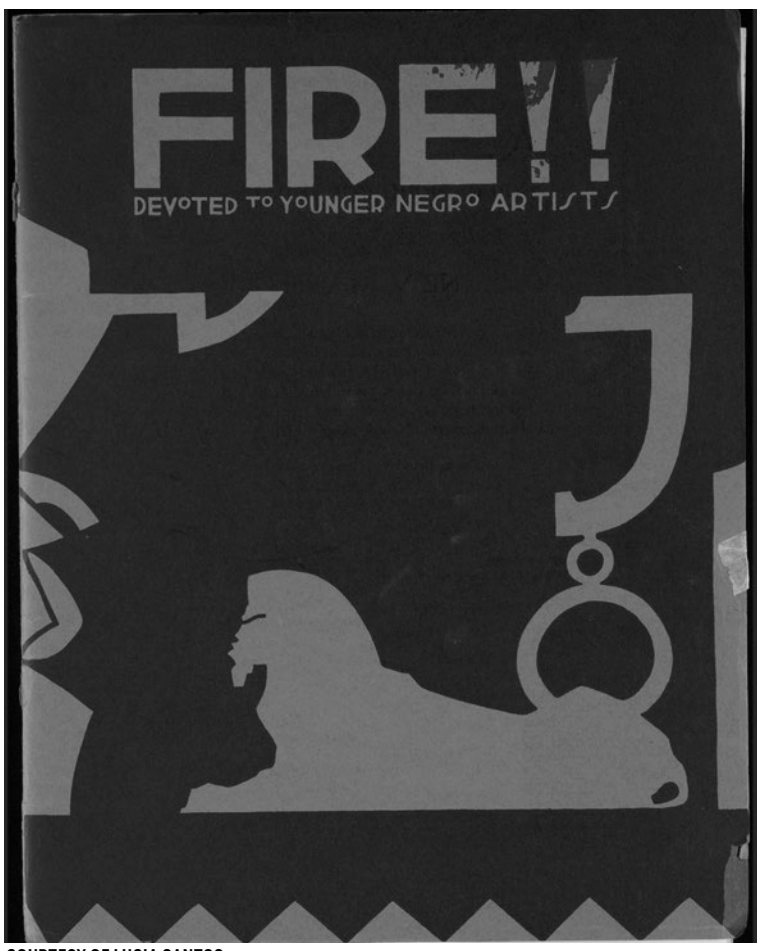
BY EHI OCHE
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library launched two new exhibitions celebrating Black literary experimentation on Oct. 19.

One of the new exhibitions, titled "Beauty Unadorned: 'Fire!!' and the Harlem Renaissance," celebrates the 100th anniversary of Fire!! A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists. The short-lived, radical African-American literary magazine was created at the height of the Harlem Renaissance — a time of Black intellectual, artistic and cultural movement centered in Harlem, New York City.

The only issue of Fire!! was published on Nov. 12, 1926, and featured work from Black writers and artists who later became influential and recognizable figures.

"Most of the co-editors of Fire!! were barely known when they participated in the venture of the Magazine," Melissa Barton '02, the exhibition's curator, wrote in a statement to the News. "Now, every single one of them is remembered for numerous contributions to Black art and civil rights. That is truly remarkable and exceptional, but it's also inspiring."



COURTESY OF LUCIA SANTOS

Two new exhibitions at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library showcase Harlem Renaissance-era magazine Fire!!, which only printed one issue during the height of the Black literary and artistic movement.

Novelist Wallace Thurman was the primary organizer and magazine editor of Fire!!. Key co-editors and contributors to the project included poets Langston Hughes and Richard Bruce Nugent, painter Aaron Douglas, writers Zora Neale Hurston and Gwendolyn Bennett and journalist John P. Davis.

"I wanted the exhibit to really highlight how young this cohort was—most of them were in their mid-20s—and how much they viewed themselves as a separate generation at odds with an older guard," Barton wrote.

Barton, who is the curator of drama and prose for the Yale Collection of American Literature, said the creators of the magazine wanted to assert that there was no singular right way for Black artists to express themselves.

Professor Shane Vogel, a professor of English and Black Studies, echoed similar sentiments. He said Fire!! countered popular ideology of respectability politics championed by older Harlem Renaissance-era activists who believed that positive representations of blackness would reverse stereotypes and demonstrate the moral upstanding citizenship Black people wanted to portray.

"Fire!! is distinct in that it was a kind of black avant garde art magazine that really challenged the sensibilities of the respectable literary establishment," Vogel, who also serves as chair of the theater, dance, and performance studies department, said in a phone interview.

The magazine also explored nontraditional and taboo topics for audiences at the time, Vogel said, including homosexuality and interracial relationships. He added that the visual art incorporated in Fire!!'s first and last edition was experimental for the time.

According to Barton, Fire!! is now seen as a predecessor of the zine movement and to "DIY publishing."

"I think the generational and aesthetic conflict it represents is something many people of a great many identities can remember and learn from," Barton wrote. "One of my greatest hopes has been to show students and other younger people that their voices can be powerful."

The exhibit features many elements and artifacts from the era, including photographs and personal correspondence to and from the founders.

Only about 50 copies of the magazine still exist in library collections today, according to a press release. Unsold copies reportedly burned in a basement fire in 1926, an exhibit plaque reads.

Barton said one of the stories highlighted in the exhibit highlights how Fire!! was reprinted in the 1980s by one of its co-editors, Richard Bruce Nugent, who was the only member of the group still alive at that time. Barton explained that although Fire!! was groundbreaking when first published, the reprint established its lasting legacy as an unconventional magazine celebrating Black queer literature.

The creators struggled to distribute copies of Fire!! and few were sold at the time of publication, she said. While similar magazines of the time period could be purchased for 15 cents each, Fire!! was much more expensive, priced at $1 per copy.

Christopher Valentine GRD '29, who is studying Black queer and literary studies, also said Nugent played a significant role in the reemergence of Fire!!

"Fire!! entered into the public domain and Nugent and his friend Thomas Wirth began republishing it in the late 1970s," Valentine wrote in a statement to the News. "When it was published in the 1920s, Fire!! wasn't read as a queer object, that was arguably a creation of the 1980s."

Certain works from the few surviving copies of Fire!! are also displayed in the exhibit.

One page featured in the exhibit displays the short story "Smoke, Lilies and Jade: A Novel, Part I" by Nugent, which features "a young bisexual artist, through hazy, stream-of-consciousness wanderings," according to the exhibit's plaque. Handwritten drafts of the magazine's foreword, written by Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman, are also on view.

"I think it remains an incredibly valuable resource for young artists to look to and to seek inspiration from," Vogel said.

The exhibition on Fire!! is featured alongside another Beinecke exhibition titled "Cave Canem: A Home for Black Poetry," which showcases the story of the Black nonprofit literary organization beginning in its founding in 1996. Established as a fellowship of poets by Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady, the organization was an important space for Black poets and is still active today.

"From the original boundary-pushing works that formed Fire!! to the archives of the poetry collective Cave Canem, Beinecke Library's upcoming season of exhibitions underscores the depth of Yale Library's Special Collections and their capacity to encourage inquiry and foster new scholarship," Michelle Light, an associate University librarian for Yale Library's special collections, wrote in a press release.

Both "Beauty Unadorned: Fire!! And the Harlem Renaissance" and "Cave Canem: A Home for Black Poetry" will be on view at Beinecke Library through May 30, 2027.

Contact
EHI OCHE *at*
ehi.oche@yale.edu.