

The New York Times

The Best Art of 2016

By HOLLAND COTTER and ROBERTA SMITH

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The art critics of The New York Times — Holland Cotter and Roberta Smith — share their picks for the best art of the year.

Holland Cotter

“Despite Fear and Uncertainty, Parts of Art Market May Benefit From a Trump Presidency, Insiders Say.” This bit of speculative reassurance, delivered by ARTnews magazine on Nov. 9, gave a good sense of where the soul of the mainstream art world — and there are many other art worlds — lies: in business as usual. Sell. Buy. Art Basel Miami Beach.

Can there be business as usual in the climate of racism, misogyny, homophobia and xenophobia that the election exposed and fostered? Has an economic and ethical line been drawn in the sand between the art market, with its appetite for eye-candy, and alternative factions and modes of production, in whatever forms they may take? Time will tell.

Most of the 2016 art season predated the election but can't help but be viewed, retrospectively, in its light. Meretricious events now look doubly so. Some of the stronger ones look more timely than ever. Here are some that struck me as strong:

1. NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION The inauguration in September of this museum, after decades of dogged, frustrated effort by advocates, was the cultural event of the year. Built on the National Mall, within striking distance of the White House, it arrived at just the right moment: at the start of a new civil rights movement.
2. ‘KERRY JAMES MARSHALL: MASTRY’ One of our greatest contemporary history painters, Mr. Marshall gives imaginative form to much of the narrative the new Washington museum documents. He's also a fabulous formal technician. He finesses the old question of whether political art can be beautiful. (At the Met Breuer through Jan. 29.)
3. ‘THE ART OF THE QUR’AN: TREASURES FROM THE MUSEUM OF TURKISH AND ISLAM ARTS’ In an exceptional year for art in Washington, this survey of hand-copied Qurans at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery is a standout. Most of the books are on loan from Istanbul; some are as small as cellphones, others the size of doors. All are exquisite products of a religion now under threat in the United States. (Through Feb. 20.)

4. 'JERUSALEM 1000-1400: EVERY PEOPLE UNDER HEAVEN' The financially pressed Metropolitan Museum came through with two classic historical spectacles this year, the other being the astonishing "Pergamon and the Hellenistic Kingdoms of the Ancient World." The power of multiculturalism was the bottom-line theme in both shows. "Jerusalem" we see as a lived reality in gorgeous, centuries-old examples of Christian, Islamic and Jewish art. (Through Jan. 8.)

5. 'PAINT THE REVOLUTION: MEXICAN MODERNISM, 1910-1950' This fascinating historical survey is filled with polemical art of the highest, and sometimes subtlest, order. And it usefully suggests some of the problems built into aestheticizing ideology. There are some fantastic artists here, but there are no saints. (Through Jan. 8.)

6. 'MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES: MAINTENANCE ART' "After the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?" That's what Ms. Ukeles asked herself in the 1960s, when, fed up with an art world that put painting on a pedestal and shut women out, she began making art from stuff that most people threw away. She is now into her fourth decade as honorary artist in residence with New York Department of Sanitation. Her retrospective at the Queens Museum is a tribute to a career that has consistently looked at what's overlooked, including the environmental crisis. So there are saints after all. (Through Feb. 19.)

7. 'A FEAST OF ASTONISHMENTS: CHARLOTTE MOORMAN AND THE AVANT-GARDE, 1960S-1980S' Many of the year's best shows were of art by women, including this one devoted to Charlotte Moorman (1933-1991) at New York University's Grey Art Gallery. Moorman was tagged as the "topless cellist" but far beyond being a novelty act, she was an artist of wit and anarchic invention, and the inventor of the Annual Avant Garde Festival of New York, an anti-Art Basel if ever there was one.

8. 'ANTONIO LOPEZ: FUTURE FUNK FASHION' Born in Puerto Rico in 1943, Antonio Lopez came to New York City as a child, and by the 1960s was one of leading American fashion illustrators of his day. With his depictions of black and Latino models, he introduced a new canon of beauty to fashion before his death, of AIDS-related causes, in 1987. El Museo's deep-dive show was drawn from a still barely tapped archive of his work.

9. 'MARCEL BROODTHAERS: A RETROSPECTIVE' One of the best Museum of Modern Art surveys in years. Certain art and poetry — Broodthaers (1924-76) produced both — have an anarchic potential that resists all authority, including institutional taxidermy, political packaging and market approval. This fabulously shambolic show made that point. (It's made again in the museum's current Kai Althoff retrospective.)

10. 'ROBERT IRWIN: ALL THE RULES WILL CHANGE' Yet another 2016 gift from the nation's capital, this enchanting retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum was about the thought-altering potential of sheer perceptual magic. The exhibition title said it all.

11. THE NEW YORK SEASON YEAR SAW SOME FINE GALLERY SOLOS. Omer Fast (James Cohan); Rachid Koraichi (Aicon); Zoe Leonard (Hauser & Wirth); Hilton Als (The Artist's Institute); Carolee Schneemann (Lelong and P.P.O.W.); Howardena Pindell (Garth Greenan); and an installation by the ineffable Genesis P-Orridge at the Rubin Museum.

12. TREASURED PEOPLE LEFT US. Bill Berkson, Tony Conrad, Houston Conwill, Bill Cunningham, Jaime Davidovich, Marisol Escobar, Fred Holland, Abbas Kiarostami, Ben Patterson, Annie Pootoogook, S. H. Raza, Malick Sidibé, K. G. Subramanyan.

13. INDISPENSABLE BOOKS arrived, among them "Working Conditions: The Writings of Hans Haacke" (M.I.T. Press); "Civic Radar," by Lynn Hershman Leeson, accompanying her retrospective at ZKM/Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany; and "Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965," the catalog for a world-embracing global show at the Haus der Kunst, Munich.

14. FINALLY, the end of the season, and more specifically the election, brought at least one new artist-authored poem, this one by the 2014 Hugo Boss prize winner Paul Chan, written with the staff of Badlands Unlimited, the published imprint he founded. Titled "New No's," it reads:

No to racists

No to fascists

No to taxes funding racists and fascists

No mercy for rapists

No pity for bigots

No forgiveness for nativists

No to all those

No hope without rage

No rage without teeth

No separate peace

No easy feat

No to bounds by genders

No to clickbait as culture

No to news as truths

No to art as untruths

No anti-Semitic anything

No Islamophobic anything

No progress without others

No meaning without meaning

No means no

No means no

No means no

No means no

Roberta Smith

At its best, art is an essential source of comfort, wisdom and hope — and this past season was no exception. Despite our tragically riven society, museums, galleries and alternative spaces often reflected a softening of divisions and hierarchies with exhibitions that were less white, less male or less doctrinaire in historical view. They gave every sign that the art out there, past and present, is still richer and more various than we can ever know.

1. THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART continued to redefine its profile as perhaps the world's leading repository of Modernism, disrupting its vaunted linear narrative with a belated overview of Francis Picabia's fertile zigzagging (through March 19). A stunning show of Edgar Degas monotypes gave his towering achievement a more modern tilt. The Bruce Conner retrospective deviated from the museum's New York-Europe axis, while the German artist-diva Kai Althoff challenged every aspect of the curatorial process — installation, catalog, back of the house — with a chaotic yet magical arrangement of art and collectibles that seemed staged inside a big white ark.
2. THE GUGGENHEIM, which has presented solo shows by artists from non-Western regions consistently over the last decade, struck a blow for a broader Western modernism with a magnificent survey of the Hungarian Constructivist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, who seemed never to have met an art or design medium he couldn't advance.
3. THE JEWISH MUSEUM unearthed the life and work of the architect-designer Pierre Chareau (1883-1950), previously known mostly for a single modernist masterpiece, the Maison de Verre in Paris, in a first American retrospective framed in a snappy design by Diller Scofidio & Renfro.
4. THE WHITNEY MUSEUM once more flexed its immense fifth floor with the triumphal "Open Plan," which gave five artists working in markedly different media the run of the

entire space for up to two weeks. The jazz innovator Cecil Taylor; the painter and musician Lucy Dodd; the filmmaker Steve McQueen; the earth artist Michael Heizer; and the skilled manipulator of human consciousness Andrea Fraser all outdid themselves, teaching us about life, space and the exhibition as form.

5. THE NEW MUSEUM also reshaped the definition of art and those who make it with “The Keeper” and gave monographic shows to the painter Nicole Eisenman and the digital shaman Pipilotti Rist, two of our moment’s best artists who happen to be women.

6. BROOKLYN narrowed the gender gap with shows of the sculptures of Beverly Buchanan and the beyond Photo Realism paintings of Marilyn Minter, whose work signals that the art of the 1980s is due for an overhaul. (The Buchanan runs through March 5, the Minter through April 2.)

7. AT THE MET BREUER, that signal emanated powerfully in the slightly baggy retrospective of the painter Kerry James Marshall, whose 30-year career has brought craft, art history and the history of black life in America into a thrilling new alignment. It reminded us that authentic art is identity art; some is just more overtly so. The big Met also devoted a rare full-dress retrospective to a historic artist of the so-called fairer sex with “Vigée Le Brun: Woman Artist in Revolutionary France,” revealing the skilled portraitist of Marie Antoinette and a woman who had a second career after the monarchy fell.

8. THE BARD GRADUATE CENTER presented “Artek and the Aaltos: Creating a Modern World,” a handsome, densely installed, freshly researched landmark exhibition about the great postwar Finnish designer Alvar Aalto that highlighted his debt to Aino Marsio-Aalto, his wife and a designer in her own right.

9. ALTERNATIVE SPACES illuminated new or unknown art in invaluable ways. Seen at Participant Inc., the all but unknown early paintings, painted sculptures and installations of the filmmaker Ellen Cantor were the great surprises of a series of shows about her work. White Columns revised the 1980s further with the first American exhibition of the British painter Denzil Forrester, whose improvisational depictions of people at reggae clubs operate in the gap between Matisse and Archibald Motley. At Artists Space, a newcomer, Cameron Rowland, revived and revised the idea of the ready-made by using a group of convict-made objects to link the history of slavery to contemporary prison labor.

10. COMMERCIAL GALLERIES sometimes seemed to be functioning like alternative spaces themselves. At Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, the filmmaker Arthur Jafa unveiled “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death,” which weaves existing music and mostly found footage into a wrenchingly beautiful meditation on black life, family and culture in America — a seven-minute-long life-changer through Dec. 17. At Luhring Augustine Bushwick, Glenn Ligon’s multiscreen video deconstruction of Richard Pryor’s brilliant stand-up (in the film “Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip”) resulted in a masterpiece.

And the Clearing, also in Bushwick, introduced the French dancer-artist-activist Lili Reynaud-Dewar, whose videos forge a new relationship among architecture, movement and the naked body — here tinted red in homage to Matisse’s “Dancers.”

11. ON THE WEST COAST, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art had something of a banner year with an exhibition of Catherine Opie’s “O Project,” portraits that document the love and dignity of people who defy narrow definitions of sexual normalcy; an exhaustive retrospective of Robert Mapplethorpe (in collaboration with the Getty) and a survey of the horror movie polymath Guillermo del Toro. At the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, you can still see “Morning: Chapter 30,” the first retrospective of R. H. Quaytman’s austere merging of painting, photography and location, and “Mickalene Thomas: Do I Look Like a Lady?,” the artist’s latest excursions into black female identity carried out in photography, video and exuberant 1970s interiors. (Both shows run through Feb. 6.) One of the year’s most memorable exhibitions was the Berkeley Art Museum’s “Architecture of Life,” which inaugurated its outstanding new building while roaming from prehistoric cultures to the present. It was a profound meditation on form, functional and otherwise — the ultimate source of art’s essential comfort, wisdom and hope.

Correction: December 7, 2016

An earlier version of this article described imprecisely the first American exhibition of the British painter Denzil Forrester. His show at the gallery White Columns has improvisational depictions of people at reggae clubs, not jazz clubs.

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