

# 2014: The year in visual arts

## Museums flourishing; galleries still faltering

By James Chute 4 p.m. Dec. 26, 2014



Artist Jack Whitten at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. — *Eduardo Contreras*

The more things changed, the more they stayed the same in San Diego's visual art community during 2014.

In terms of the city's two primary art institutions, the San Diego Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, there was every reason to be encouraged. Both had a very strong year marked by high-level exhibitions and institutional advancement.

But if you are an artist, you might have a different perspective.

San Diego's art galleries, which for years have better served tourists looking for souvenirs than locals looking for serious art, remain a discouraging topic. And with two respected art enterprises closing their doors and going into private consulting during 2014, there's little reason to think the situation is changing for the better.

But let's stay positive.

"Sorolla and America" at the San Diego Museum of Art was a big success. Sorolla is a particular passion of the museum's director, Roxana Velásquez, and this stellar exhibition co-produced by the museum offered a definitive view of the Spanish artist and his work. Given Sorolla's renewed popularity in Spain and now the U.S., it seems viewers are discovering him all over again.

The exhibit was also among the first to benefit from the museum's renovated first floor galleries. Room by room, Velásquez is slowly transforming the once-dark, dated museum, much to the benefit of the art and the viewer. Those pristine galleries that hosted Sorolla are now housing the excellent touring exhibition, "Gauguin to Warhol: 20th Century Icons from the Albright-Knox Art Gallery."

What the San Diego Museum of Art did for Sorolla, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego did for the amazing Jack Whitten. "Jack Whitten: Five Decades of Painting" is the first comprehensive show in years for this remarkable, underrecognized genius. Whitten's compelling, often unsettling and always thought-provoking work reveals a unique voice that at its most inspired is equal to anything produced in the second half of the 20th or the beginning of the 21st century (yes, that's a big, reckless generalization, but visit the exhibit yourself, on display through Jan. 4; then you tell me what you think).

The only element missing was context, but a planned La Jolla expansion for the Museum of Contemporary Art will allow the exhibition of the museum's permanent collection, which should provide welcome perspective to exhibits like Jack Whitten.

Once you move outside of the museums, the situation gets a little more fuzzy. Consider Art San Diego 2014 Contemporary Art Show at Balboa Park. (And what does it mean that in its five previous incarnations it was an art "fair"?)

From the beginning, founder Ann Berchtold has been searching for a formula where the level of the art would match the level of the collectors attending the show and result in sales. Apparently, she and the show's new owner, Redwood Media Group, found it this year.

For the first time, the show released a sales report, which detailed sales in excess of \$1 million. Unfortunately, to get those sales, the level of art in the show is moving more in the direction of an Art Walk-like event (albeit a very expensive Art Walk) rather than a truly international art fair.

San Diego's top galleries, which have participated in several of the previous annual "shows," were absent this year. Salazar Fine Art was there and apparently did well, selling a "Madonna" bust for \$14,000 and attracting interest on a \$250,000 reproduction of the "Pietà" (it gives new meaning to the term "contemporary art").

At least the Art Labs by local artists and San Diego organizations felt like less of an afterthought and more a source of energy and delight this year, especially the installations by UC San Diego students and by ARTS: A Reason to Survive.

Among the attendees at the show was art dealer Tom Noel, in support of one of the excellent regional artists he represents, Marianela de la Hoz. She was a winner of the San Diego Art Prize (with Philipp Scholz Rittermann), which brought with it a spot at the show.

Noel and his partner Larry Baza have been steadfast supporters of several of San Diego's most promising regional artists. But after seven years, they shut down Noel-Baza Fine Art Gallery in Little Italy. They have transformed themselves into a consulting enterprise that presents occasional "pop-up" shows, including one now up at Art Produce Gallery in North Park.

Scott White Contemporary Art, a regular in previous incarnations of Art San Diego and one of the city's premiere galleries, closed its doors in La Jolla. It has a space in Little Italy, but it is devoting itself to the consulting business, although the gallery is sometimes open by appointment and is a frequent participant in art fairs outside San Diego.

It's a chicken and egg proposition: With so few serious galleries, serious San Diego collectors can't be blamed for spending their money elsewhere (primarily Los Angeles and New York). But as long as collectors look for art elsewhere, there will be few serious San Diego galleries.

Perhaps because of the uniqueness and distinctiveness of what they are offering (you won't see Sorolla or Whitten shows in Los Angeles), the museums have broken out of that cycle.

You don't have to go to L.A. to see great art, so why should you have to go up there to buy great art?