

Best Art of 2019

This was a year of highs that included political protest in the art world, a historic Whitney Biennial, inspiring monuments and a revamped MoMA.



Clockwise from left: Amy Sherald's "When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be (Self-imagined atlas)," 2018; Bust of Dushara, from Petra, 1st century B.C.–1st century A.D.; Detail view of El Anatsui's "In the World But Don't Know the World," 2019. Clockwise from left: Amy Sherald and Hauser & Wirth; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times; Laetitia Vancon for The New York Times

By Roberta Smith, Holland Cotter and Jason Farago Dec. 6, 2019, 5:00 a.m. ET
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ROBERTA SMITH

Unexpected Delights

From retrospectives to debut shows, and, yes, even the MoMA reopening, art held our attention with innovation and variety.



The newly reopened Museum of Modern Art. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

1. MoMA's Reopening

For New York, the signal event of the year was October's reopening of the Museum of Modern Art with its newly expanded, improved building and more inclusive, historically accurate permanent collection hang, which fleshes out the epic of Modernism with works by women, artists of color and non-Westerners. There are more creature comforts: lots of chairs by Jean Prouvé and sofas by Charlotte Perriand in the lobby, for example. And for the occasion, all other

exhibitions on view were also drawn from the permanent collection, with the latest show from the “Artist’s Choice” series being especially notable. Titled “The Shape of Shape,” it was chosen by the New York painter Amy Sillman, who orchestrated a dense installation that compared and contrasted work by around 70 artists. The result was a visual feast that might also be read as a reminder to MoMA’s brainy curators that pleasure is its own form of knowledge.

2. ‘Vija Celmins: To Fix the Image in Memory’ at the Met Breuer

This ravishing retrospective traces the changing expanses — waves, night skies, desert floors — over six decades, illuminating the artist’s penchant for revealing the infinite in the intimate (and vice versa) while pitting perception, philosophy and patient process against one another. An impressive argument for her greatness, the show also emphasized the strengths of Marcel Breuer’s landmark building in a rare collaboration of artist, curator and architecture.

3. Leonora Carrington at Gallery Wendi Norris of San Francisco, in New York

This pop-up exhibition offered further evidence that some of the best Surrealist paintings were made by women working in Mexico. Surveying the art by the well-born rebellious Brit Leonora Carrington (1917-2011), it revealed a fantastical imagination influenced in part by myths learned as a child from her Scottish mother and nanny. There were several showstopping canvases, especially “And Then We Saw the Daughter of the Minotaur” (1953), which MoMA acquired and put on view as a centerpiece in its reconfigured Surrealist gallery. It depicts an orange-robed female Minotaur and a pale flowerlike creature greeting two children in black perhaps as they return from school, with a lithe spirit trailing behind them. A genre scene it is not.

4. ‘John Dunkley: Neither Day Nor Night’ at the American Folk Art Museum

This exhibition (organized by the Pérez Art Museum Miami) introduced the work of the self-taught Jamaican artist to American audiences. Part folk artist, part Surrealist, Dunkley (1891-1947) was best in luminous landscapes in which strange trees, outsize plants and sudden waterfalls cast a hypnotic spell.

5. ‘Amy Sherald: The Heart of the Matter,’ at Hauser & Wirth

The relatively unknown Ms. Sherald shot to fame in 2017 when she was commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery to paint Michelle Obama’s official portrait, and soon after achieved representation by a blue-chip gallery that quickly scheduled her New York debut. Ms. Sherald, who is 46, rose to the occasion, holding down an enormous space with just seven new portraits, also of black subjects, that took her formally distinctive, beautifully painted realism to a new level.

6. ‘A Specific Eye: Seven Collections’ at Demisch Danant

This Greenwich Village design gallery invited several art-related sorts — artists, photographers and art dealers — to display some of their most cherished objects on furniture designed in the 1960s by Maria Pergay (still working at 89). The resulting arrangements had a cabinet of curiosities intensity. This could be a biannual event.

7. Eli Leon Collection at the Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive

A trove of 3,000 quilts by African-American artists is surely one of the most transformative museum gifts of the late 20th-century. Among the riches of the Eli Leon collection are over 100 dazzling quilts and other textile works by Rosie Lee Tompkins, (1936-2006), one of the few women in the top tier of American outsider artists. The collection will form the basis of a major retrospective that opens at BAMPFA on Feb. 19, 2020.

8. Jasper Johns at Matthew Marks Gallery

This display of new paintings, prints and drawings was one of the best and most open-ended shows of Mr. Johns's long career. Presenting new series and revisiting old ones, the show centered on two paintings and numerous drawings based on a photograph of an American soldier during the Vietnam War weeping over the lives lost in the day's battle. The bent figure is camouflaged by contrasting textures in shades of green and gold, from which the figure gradually emerges, grounding the sense of muted grief.

9. 'Simone Fattal: Works and Days' at MoMA/P.S.1

The first museum exhibition devoted to this Syrian-born Lebanese artist (who has lived for many years in the United States and Paris) revealed a polymathic talent interested in painting, drawing and film, but best represented by a profusion of mostly small, roughly improvised glazed ceramic sculptures dizzying in their suggestions: of animals, figures, ancient artifacts, religious rituals, tourist souvenirs, desert structures ruined by war, and, always, of life lived and the encroachments of time. The variety, carefreeness and layered meanings added up to a body of work with few equals in the realm of ceramic sculpture.

10. The Art World Mourns

Okwui Enwezor, Virginia Zabriskie, Takis, Leon Kossoff, Matthew Wong, Carolee Schneemann, Ed Clark, Francisco Toledo, Bruce W. Ferguson, Mavis Pusey, Lutz Bacher, Robert Ryman, Gillian Jagger, Joyce Pensato, Mary Abbott, Charles Ginnever, Marisa Merz, Claude Lalanne, Ronald Jones, Ingo Maurer, John Giorno, David Koloane, Huguette Caland, Jill Freedman, Robert Frank, Nancy Reddin Kienholz, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Dan Robbins, I.M. Pei, Stanley Tigerman, Douglas Crimp, Hildegard Bachert.

HOLLAND COTTER

Visions and Revisions

Looking back at art in 2019, here are 11 goods, bests and most-instructives. And a bigness problem.



A protest at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Activists targeted trustees and questionable sources of funding at the city's major museums. The New York Times

1. Bad Money

A protest at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Activists targeted trustees and questionable sources of funding at the city's major museums. The New York Times

The most radical museum events of 2019 were the many individual protests aimed at questionable sources of art patronage. Nan Goldin called for institutions to cut ties with the Sackler family, owners of Purdue Pharma, the company that makes OxyContin; Decolonize This Place demanded the ouster of the Whitney board's vice chairman, Warren B. Kandors, whose company, Safariland, manufactures tear gas; the Guerrilla Girls went after the Museum of Modern Art trustees Leon Black and Glenn Dubin for their business relationships with the

convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein; several activist groups targeted a third MoMA trustee, Larry Fink, over his company's investment in the private prison industry. But, goes an old argument, hasn't art always been bankrolled by bad money? Sure, goes the new thinking, but why should that be O.K.?

2. A Historic Biennial

The 2019 Whitney Biennial made history: Of its 75 artists, a majority were nonwhite, and half were women. That the art chosen by the curators, Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley, complicated identities, rather than narrowing them down, added to the show's politics of resistance.

3. A Museum Under Revision

On the occasion of its reopening, after a \$450 million, 47,000-square-foot expansion, MoMA took steps, cautious but significant, toward rethinking the obsolete white, male, nationalist version of Modernism that has long been its brand. The obvious difference now is the presence of "difference" itself in the form of art — a lot recently acquired — from Africa, Asia, South America and African America, and an unprecedented amount of work by women. Is the rethinking foundation-shaking or skin-deep? Time will tell. The museum promises a complete rehanging of the permanent-collection galleries every 18 months, and all eyes will be on the first rotation. With much to admire and much to argue with, the general direction feels right.

4. A Plus

Exhibitions celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall uprising and the budding gay liberation movement were widespread last summer. There were several in New York, and, as commemorations tend to do, they felt simultaneously resurrecting and entombing. The exception was the very lively "Nobody Promised You Tomorrow: Art 50 Years After Stonewall" at the Brooklyn Museum. About to close (it is on view through Dec. 8), it's a survey of new art that carries the story of liberation forward into the L.G.B.T.Q.+ present and into realms of gender fluidity that sometimes found a chilly reception within the gay movement itself in the L.G.B.-only days of 1969.

5. Breaking News From the Past

The most innovative historical show I saw last season was "The World Between Empires: Art and Identity in the Ancient Middle East" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It took the classic ancient-art-survey model, with its chronological lineup of archaeological treasures, and filtered it through 21st-century realities. Several of the sites considered — Palmyra and Dura-Europos in Syria, Hatra in Iraq — have in recent years been subject to campaigns of ideology-driven destruction, disasters that the show addressed directly and throughout.

6. True Monuments

Contemporary public sculpture has an iffy track record, but we got sterling examples this year. Simone Leigh's "Brick House," a 16-foot-tall bronze figure of a black woman merging with an African architectural form sits commandingly on the spur of the High Line that bridges 10th Avenue. Four luminous bronze female figures by Wangechi Mutu fill the once empty sculptural niches on the Met's Fifth Avenue facade. And, in an extension of Siah Armajani's traveling survey at the Met Breuer, the Public Art Fund installed that artist's ineffably poetic "Bridge Over Tree" on the East River between the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges.

7. Retrospectives, Finally

In 2019, museums trained a spotlight on important but little-known artists in retrospectives of work by Alvin Baltrop at the Bronx Museum; Harmony Hammond at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Conn; Mrinalini Mukherjee at the Met Breuer; and Zilia Sánchez at the Phillips Collection in Washington (and now at El Museo del Barrio in New York). For me, the most stirring survey of all was an informal one. On a visit to Medellín, Colombia, I was taken into the storage area of the city's Museum of Modern Art, where the director, Emiliano Valdés, pulled out rack after rack of paintings by the great Colombian political artist Débora Arango (1907-2005).

8. Gallery Solos

Outstanding, among the short-term sightings of the season, were Alex Katz's big, dark, deep landscapes at Gavin Brown's Enterprise; William Powhida's exquisitely incisive, connect-the-dots dissections of art and politics (including the Kandera affair) at Postmasters; and a David Hammons solo at Hauser & Wirth in Los Angeles which, blocks away from one of the country's largest urban homeless encampments, included its own tent city.

9. A Bigness Problem

Hauser & Wirth was one of a handful of international gallery franchises — Gagosian and David Zwirner are others — busy hoarding artists and real estate. Zwirner made interestingly offbeat things of its imperial power in two excellent group shows: "God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin," put together by the critic Hilton Als, and "The Young and Evil," organized by the artist and writer Jarrett Earnest. Gagosian, by contrast, continued to calcify into utter predictability. It is now often the equivalent of a luxury car showroom and an art bank.

10. Losses

In October, New York City's much-admired cultural affairs commissioner, Tom Finkelpearl, who knows local art and its history better than anyone in town, abruptly resigned from his post. In July, the blind poet and East Village legend Steve Cannon, founder of the journal *A Gathering of the Tribes*, died, and with him went the spiritual archive of an irrecoverable New York era.

11. Moving Up

This year, as in most years, I looked to smaller museums and university galleries for unusually inspiring and instructive shows. I found a gem in “Dharma and Punya: Buddhist Ritual Art of Nepal” at Cantor Art Gallery at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. Assembled by two scholars, Jinah Kim and Todd T. Lewis, it uses objects to tell a tale of the little-studied traditions of a popular religious art in the Kathmandu Valley, an art that is devotional, intensely social and inevitably political, and one that takes the pursuit of do-no-harm generosity as its subject, creed and goal.

JASON FARAGO

Art for Our Moment

Greta Thunberg’s denunciations, Gov. Jay Inslee’s presidential run, Getty wildfires, Greenlandic buyout offers: This year, at last, the immensity of the climate crisis fully broke into public consciousness. Culture, like climate, demands assessment at global scale — and if art has any objective in the Anthropocene, it’s to dissolve our ecocidal self-absorption and find our reflections in the lives of those unlike us.



“Sun & Sea (Marina)” won the Golden Lion at this year’s Venice Biennale. Gianni Cipriano for The New York Times

1. ‘Sun & Sea (Marina)’

Their names are Rugile Barzdiukaite, Vaiva Grainyte and Lina Lapelyte — and these friends from Kaunas, Lithuania, the immensely deserving winners of the Golden Lion at this year’s Venice Biennale, created an unforgettable performance whose even temper cloaked an ecological sucker punch. In “Sun & Sea (Marina),” an opera staged continuously on an artificial beach, bathers sang blithely of package holidays and disposable water bottles, and faintly sensed that the seasons are coming unstuck. In November, Venice’s worst flooding in half a century shuttered the Biennale and inundated Saint Mark’s Basilica, just as the populist-led regional government rejected a raft of climate measures. But some of the Lithuanian pavilion’s sand has been recycled, to bulk up an island disintegrating into the lagoon.

2. Okwui Enwezor

Some deaths feel like the end of an era — but the example of Okwui Enwezor, the most significant curator of the last 30 years, will govern for decades over the global art world he helped forge. In exhibitions like the ravishing “El Anatsui: Triumphant Scale,” which opened at the Haus der Kunst in Munich just before his death in March, the Nigerian modeled a broader artistic discourse nourished by politics, economics and current events, and affirmed that African artists were as “contemporary” as their Western counterparts. If it now seems self-evident that an exhibit with new art only from the United States and Europe is provincial, that is because of Okwui, who in art and in life made cosmopolitanism an ethical duty.

3. MoMA Turns South

Among the inaugural offerings at the larger, nimbler, hardly perfect, much improved Museum of Modern Art, the most important is “Sur Moderno”: a stupefying showcase of more than 200 midcentury abstract works from Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina and Uruguay. These gifts from the collector Patricia Phelps de Cisneros make essential viewing on their own; when they later get integrated into MoMA’s refreshed collection displays, they will reshape a museum approaching fluency in Spanish and Portuguese.

4. ‘Monumental Journey: The Daguerreotypes of Girault de Prangey’

The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s exquisite exhibition of these architectural images of the 1840s — including the first photos taken of Athens, Cairo and Jerusalem — was one of the finest shows of early photography I’ve ever seen. Its intertwined themes of technology, colonialism and wanderlust still resound in the time of Google Street View.

evoked the wreckage of time through the most subdued gestures, like a Rodin installed backward and a carpet exhumed from the museum's trash.

THREE MUSEUMS RECLAIMED UNDERSTUNG HEROES OF European art of the 15th and early 16th centuries. Brussels's Center for Fine Arts, known as Bozar, brought out the paintings, prints and tapestries of the all-media monster Bernard van Orley; the Palazzo Reale in Milan revived Antonello da Messina, the Sicilian savant; and the National Gallery of Art in Washington went to bat for Verrocchio, the artistic paterfamilias of Medici Florence. Add to these a new show of the Renaissance women Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana, at the Museo del Prado in Madrid, and old canvases are looking mighty fresh.

6. ... and One (Leonardo) Reborn

The Musée du Louvre's "Leonardo da Vinci" took a decade to organize, with loans uncertain until opening day. But the curators Vincent Delieuvin and Louis Frank pulled off a benchmark achievement in cobwebs-clearing, which sloughed off celebrity and conspiracy and returned Leonardo to us as a genuine artist. The very archetype of a scholarly blockbuster.

7. 'Matthew Barney: Redoubt'

Mr. Barney's return to his birth state of Idaho inspired his greatest film since the "Cremaster" cycle, infused with a new agility thanks to the intrepid dancer and choreographer Eleanor Bauer. His freer gaze on American exceptionalism and environmental degradation was also channeled into electroplated etchings and ambitious multimetal sculptures, now at the UCCA Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing.

8. Lee Ufan

In Beacon, N.Y., the Dia Art Foundation has been undertaking a quiet but considerable broadening of its collection — and made its most profound new addition this summer, with an impeccable new display by Lee Ufan, Korea's most significant sculptor. In the company of Mr. Lee's delicate contrapuntal arrangements of sand, rope and boulders, Dia's American and German all-stars suddenly seemed a bit ponderous.

9. Christodoulos Panayiotou

If you think institutional critique is a joyless enterprise, two heart-stopping shows by this Cypriot artist reveal the romance in mining the museum. At the Camden Arts Center in London, Mr. Panayiotou took the doors off their hinges and replaced window panes with pink glass to equate two sundered islands: his own Mediterranean homeland and Brexit-divided Britain. And at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, he

evoked the wreckage of time through the most subdued gestures, like a Rodin installed backward and a carpet exhumed from the museum's trash.

10. The Paris Fire Brigade

History tumbles toward oblivion, yet still heroes rush in. The blaze that engulfed Notre-Dame on April 15 came much closer than first acknowledged to annihilating the 850-year-old cathedral. It stands, roofless but intact, thanks to the 600 lionhearted firefighters and engineers who risked their lives for the world's cultural patrimony. The motto of Europe's largest fire department befits our ecological era: "Sauver ou périr," save or perish.