

ART WORLD

Ben Davis Selects the 20 Most Memorable New York Gallery Shows of the Year

Ben Davis, Tuesday, November 17, 2015



Installation view of Alex Da Corte's *Die Hexe* (2015).
Photo: John Bernardo. Courtesy of Luxembourg & Dayan, New York.

Winter, as they say, is coming, and with it the season of end-of-the-year "Best Of" lists. We're not quite there yet, but, hey, it's been a rich year, and we got to thinking about it early. Below, 20 of the New York gallery shows that stand out as touchstones of the year (so far), for you to debate when you are compiling your own, maybe over Thanksgiving...



Titus Kaphar, *Yet Another Fight for Remembrance* (2014)
Image: Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

1. Titus Kaphar, "Drawing the Blinds/Asphalt and Chalk" at Jack Shainman, January 15-February 21

Kaphar's painting *Yet Another Fight for Remembrance* (2014)—featuring Ferguson protesters advancing in the "hands up, don't shoot" posture but with their faces blurred out with slashes of white paint, as if fighting against erasure—hammered together the drama of the year in a single elegant painted metaphor.



Joyce Kozloff, *If I Were a Botanist (Gaza)* (2015)
Image: Courtesy DC Moore

2. Joyce Kozloff, "Social Studies" at French Institute Alliance

Française, February 25-April 25; "Maps + Patterns" at DC Moore, March 26-April 25

Coming one on top of the next, these two shows of Kozloff's glorious paintings, incorporating maps but also harking back to 1970s Pattern and Decoration work at its prismatic best, were a joy.



Alex Da Corte installation, 2015
Image: Courtesy Luxemburg & Dayan

3. Alex Da Corte, "Die Hexe" at Luxemburg & Dayan, February 26-April 11

A technical tour de force which transformed L&D's multi-floor penthouse into a kind of fun house for art nerds. Deft references pulled from artists ranging from Mike Kelley to Robert Gober fit together into a seamlessly creepy multisensory environment.



Photo from "Margret: Chronicle of an Affair"
Image: Courtesy White Columns

4. "Margret: Chronicle of an Affair – May 1969 to December 1970" at White Columns, March 6-April 18

As hard to classify as it is to get out of your head, this show offers a trove of found photographs and other detritus documenting the affair between "Margret," a young secretary from West Germany, and her much older lover, a German businessman, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. All of it is real, discovered in a box years after the tryst ended, and in its obsessive precision felt like conceptual art found in the wild.



Hito Steyerl *Liquidity Inc.* (2014)
Photo: The artist via KOW, Berlin

5. Hito Steyerl at Artists Space, March 8 to May 24

This is post-documentary film at its brainy and delirious best. Good throughout—but *November*, Steyerl's 2007 film about an old friend-turned-martyr for the Kurdish liberation movement, is woundingly personal while sacrificing none of the artist's oddness.



Installation view of Stan VanDerBeek at Andrea Rosen
Image: Courtesy Andrea Rosen

6. Stan VanDerBeek at Andrea Rosen, May 1-June 20

There's a fair dose of digital nostalgia in VanDerBeek's digital poem-films, stuttering words rising up and then being consumed by seething pixels. Yet at the same time, these pioneering 1960s-era works are the rare example of new-media art that transcends the novelty of its medium.



One of Susan Cianciolo's "hits" at Bridget Donohue
Image: Courtesy Bridget Donohue

7. Susan Cianciolo, "if God COMes to visit You, HOW will you know? (the great tetrahedral kite)" at Bridget Donohue, May 16-July 12, 2015

A big year for Cianciolo, whose art-fashion hybrids also found their way to MoMA PS1's "Greater New York." Here, along with zines and costumes, she preempted a retrospective with a series of "kits," each box containing



Lorraine O'Grady, *Rivers, First Draft: The Debauchees intersect the Woman in Red, and the rape begins* (1982/2015)
 Image: Courtesy Alexander Gray and Associates

8. Lorraine O'Grady at Alexander Gray Associates, May 28-June 27

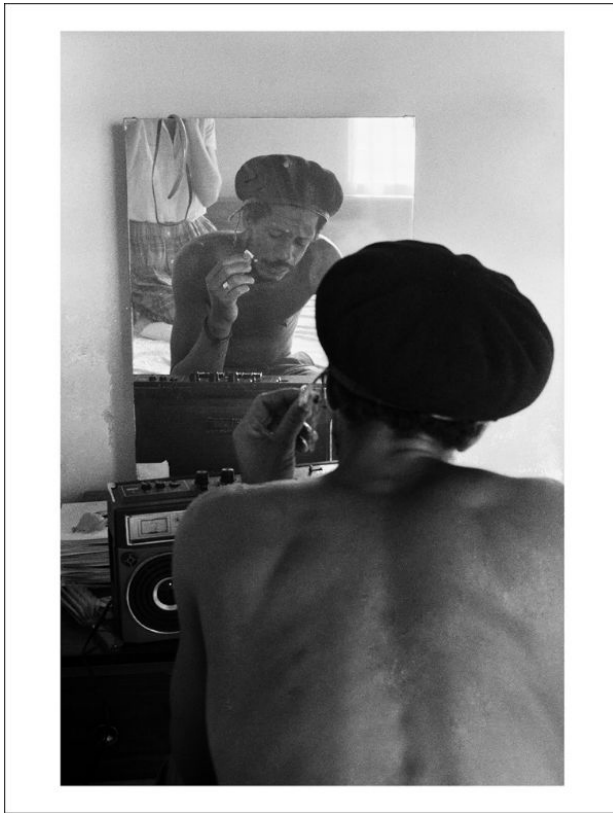
In 1983, the great Lorraine O'Grady staged a guerrilla tableau vivant in Central Park, dubbing it a "collage-in-space." Titled *Rivers, First Draft*, it featured performers clad in different colors representing different aspects of O'Grady's own life story (the "Woman in White," the "Teenager in Magenta," etc.). It was performed only once. The photos are a bit like looking at a memory of a dream, but also capture a very lucid mix of vulnerability and sophistication.



Tom Phillips,
Humument Fragment: Menswear(2012)
Image: Couresy Flowers

9. Tom Phillips, "Pages From a Humument" at Flowers, July 23-August 29

For decades, the British artist has been systematically reworking the pages of an obscure Victorian novel, over-painting the words to transform it into an elaborate cycle of poem-paintings. Here was a chance to catch up on where the 78-year-old's gorgeous lifework has taken him lately.



Robin Graubard, *stone – cool brown's house* (n.d.)
Image: Couresty JTT

10. Robin Graubard, "jungle" at JTT, July 1-August 3, 2015

Installed in digressive clusters throughout the small LES gallery, Graubard's photos pack in a lot of life at its most beautiful and intense—from the joyous messiness of club life in New York's punk heyday to the pensive Florida beach scenes of her most recent compositions.



Emilio Bianchic, *Nailture* (2015)
Image: Courtesy Postmasters

11. Emilio Bianchic, "Nailture" at Postmasters, July 22-August 15

This Uruguayan wunderkind makes his own demented spin on YouTube nail-art tutorials, a glorious fireball of good-natured Internet weirdness.



Karel Appel, *Little Cobra Painting* (1948)
Image: Courtesy Blum & Poe

12. "The Avant-Garde Won't Give Up: Cobra and Its Legacy" at Blum & Poe, September 9-October 17, 2015

You can say that the artists of the postwar Cobra movement made some really ugly paintings, but I am sure that they would only take that as a compliment: They were out to flout good taste as part of a pretty ambitious program of attacking bourgeois society. The Alison Gingeras-curated show was a great chance to take stock of that project, and also consider some of the lesser-known twists in the Cobra story.



Jaimie Warren,
Screenshot from *Somebody to Love* (2015)
Image: Courtesy American Medium

13. Jaimie Warren, "Somebody to Love" at American Medium, August 9-September 13

Big-hearted and zany, Warren's installation/video/performance-art ode to Freddy Mercury and Renaissance art was the most exhilarating opening of the year.



Cameron, *Untitled (Peyote Vision)* (1955)
Image: Courtesy Deitch

14. Cameron, "Cinderella of the Wastelands" at Jeffrey Deitch, September 8-October 17, 2015

Deitch returns to NYC with this genuinely spooky show spotlighting the single-named Cameron (née Marjorie Cameron; 1922-1995), whose unironically occult imagery of devil-men and ecstatic goddess figures are leavened by the cold lucidity of her Aubrey Beardsley-esque line. A seductive, dangerous-seeming show.



Installation shot at Adrián Villar Rojas's exhibition "Two Suns" at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.
Photo by Brian Boucher.

15. Adrián Villar Rojas, "Two Suns" at Marian Goodman, September 9-October 10

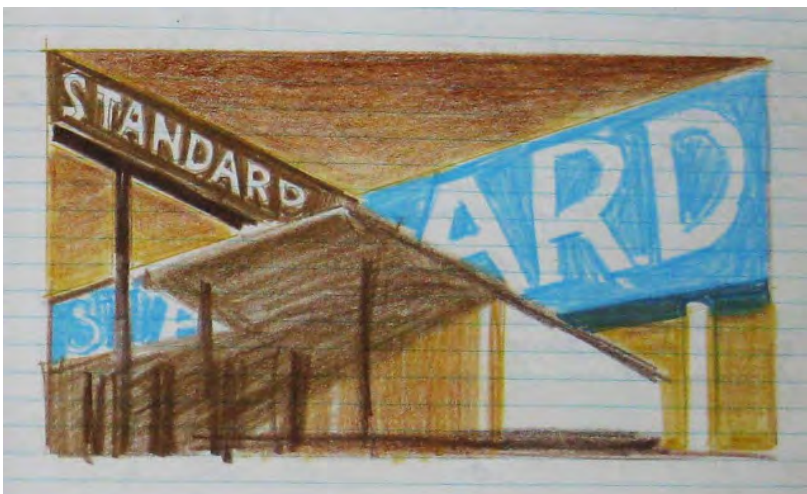
The Argentine artist's full-size, toppled version of Michelangelo's *David* is the star of this show, but what made the installation was the details—the floor tiles embedded with bits of fossilized detritus, the slate gray curtains, the natural light. The whole thing is an achievement of contemporary-art theatricality that feels at the same time like a lament for a dying language of high-culture pomp.



PaJaMa, *Paul Cadmus and Margaret French, Provincetown* (ca. 1947)
Image: Couresty Gitterman Gallery

16. PaJaMa at Gitterman Gallery, September 9-November 7

From the '30s to the '50s, Paul Cadmus, Jared French, and Margaret French fused into an art clique, with their own polyamorous three-way relationship as its subject. The result was a suite of lush, lovely photos of them and others from their circle, arrayed in beach settings or captured in enigmatic play. The most interesting, most exciting show I saw all year.



Mason Williams, *Journal sketch* (1969)
Image: Couresy Alden Proejcts

17. "Double Standard: Ed Ruscha and Mason Williams" at Alden

Projects, September 10-October 18; "Work for Hire: Ed Ruscha & Mason Williams" at Alden Projects, October 30-November 29, 2015

An out-of-the-blue two-parter at the narrow LES space that surveys the unexpected interplay between the titan of West Coast Pop art and the folk singer Mason Williams, a long-time friend and comrade from Oklahoma.



Trevor Paglen, *Autonomy Cube* (2015)
Image: Courtesy Metro Pictures

18. Trevor Paglen at Metro Pictures, September 9-October 24

The neat way that Paglen's art fits with a paranoid post-Snowden sensibility may have, in fact, obscured the radicalism of this exhibition's centerpiece, *Autonomy Cube*, a sculpture created in collaboration with Internet activist Jacob Appelbaum that allows visitors to browse the web anonymously (un-surveilled by the government) via the Tor network, which bounces your communications across a network of volunteer nodes. The point is to get these functional sculptures into the collection of institutions around the world, thereby using art resources to strengthen the Tor network—in effect, proposing a model of institutional-critique in reverse, using institutions as a base for a practical critique of society.



McArthur Binion, *DNA: Black Painting: I* (2015)
Image: Courtesy Galerie Lelong

19. McArthur Binion, "Re:Mine" at Galerie Lelong, September 10, 2015-October 17, 2015

Binion has a great story: born in 1946 in Mississippi, the son of a cotton farmer, he made the scene in New York in the '70s Minimalist heyday. Lately he's experienced a huge comeback. His newest works weave their disciplined patterns of paint-stick marks over copies of his birth certificate, ID, and old address books—the personal percolating under the minimal grid. One of the year's huge discoveries for me.



Ron Nagle, (2012)
Image: Courtesy Matthew Marks

20. Ron Nagle, "Five O'Clock Shadow" at Matthew Marks, September 11-October 24

The way this wizardly ceramicist deftly contrasts textures, these works are too visual, too weird, and too visceral to adequately blurb. The year's best case for abstract sculpture, made via ceramics.

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