



the art of the holidays

arts & entertainment

Here's a little secret: the holidays are a great time to visit one of New York's museums or galleries. Think of them as your end-of-year pick-me-ups, your oases among the hustle and bustle, where the most wonderful time of the year includes more than shopping—although you can certainly do that, too. And when viewed in the context of the holidays, several current exhibitions can reflect the reasons for the season in unexpected ways: light sculptures, fluorescent tape installations and old-fashioned magic contribute to the overall merriment that overtakes the City for the next month. So whether you're looking to spend the last of those unused vacation days or looking to entertain guests after seeing the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center, here are 10 exhibitions that embody the spirit of the holidays.

1. Laughter isn't the most common reaction at exhibitions appearing at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, but the museum just happens to be hosting the jolliest show in the City right now: [*John Baldessari: Pure Beauty*](#), a retrospective of works of the conceptual art pioneer. Like the painting the show is named after—which bears its own title hand-lettered against the color of a tombstone—many of the pieces are just laugh-out-loud funny. *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* and *The Backs of All the Trucks Passed While Driving From Los Angeles to Santa Barbara, California, Sunday, January 20, 1963* are exactly what you think they are. The image and the title, depending on what you see first, confirm each other, the punch line that is no less funny even if you know the answer. (Ends January 9, 2011.)

2. The punch lines in [*Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958–1968*](#), on view at the Brooklyn Museum, are more subtle and pointed. The exhibition collects the work of more than 20 artists, such as Yayoi Kusama, Martha Rosler and Lee Lozano, many of whom were working well before the sexual revolution and the burgeoning feminist art movement. We're definitely in *Mad Men* territory: in fact, Mara McAfee's 1963 painting *Marvelous Modern Mechanical Men*, with its lineup of men in black suits, evokes the spirit of the AMC show's opening credits. It was a time when women artists were expected to fulfill the role of wife first, and even though the "pretty" ones, such as Marisol and Niki de Saint Phalle, were able to hang with the guys, they struggled to be taken seriously. Yet even under this precondition, the work is self-aware and filled with a wry understanding, a saving grace. (Ends January 9, 2011.)

3. The little girls in [*Nobody's Fool*](#), the Asia Society and Museum's ambitious retrospective of Japanese painter and illustrator Yoshitomo Nara, aren't as witty as the

women in *Seductive Subversion*, but they are more openly rebellious and wear their adorable impishness all over their faces. Here, the much-loved illustrator gets his first major New York show, with more than 100 paintings displayed. The galleries employ uneven wooden floors and frames and makeshift walls to create an alternate reality: viewers can peek through rough-hewn windows, explore little rooms with tiny drawings hung on the walls and clamber up the lollipop steps to a giant dollhouse, all while dreamy '80s pop music plays over the speakers. Even the adults become active participants in the childhood dream houses they never had. (Ends January 2, 2011.)

4. If Yoshitomo Nara offers an alternative vision for an elfin playground, the [Japan Fashion Now](#) exhibition at The Museum at FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology) offers an equally alternate view of contemporary fashion. The show is grounded with the 1980s revolution in clothing from Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, before giving way to the new generation of up-and-coming fashion designers in Tokyo—especially like Hiroyuki Horihata and Makiko Sekiguchi of Matohu, Toshikazu Iwaya of Iwaya for Dress 33, and Chitose Abe of Sacai. Together, they work an avant-garde sensibility with aspects of subcultural and street style into unexpectedly joyous, bright combinations. (Ends April 2, 2011.)

5. If you're looking to venture outside, artist Jim Campbell has installed 2,000 lightbulbs as a sculpture, [Scattered Light](#), in the middle of Madison Square Park. The lights, hanging like a curtain between two trees, form a screen onto which Campbell has projected 3-D images of busy commuters that he filmed in Grand Central Terminal. Viewed from afar, the interplay of shadow and light is more distinct. Get closer, however, and the surface falls apart. The shadows appear as mere twinkles in the air, forming an unlikely holiday tree that's the perfect mix of comfort and excitement. (Ends in February 2011.)

6. The Pace Gallery's exhibition of light artist Robert Irwin, [Way Out West](#), doesn't twinkle so much as shine, like a menorah in the window. For his 14th exhibition at the esteemed gallery, Irwin has wrapped his fluorescent tubes in 10 different colored gels to achieve a wide range of colors. The two largest works in the show, *Way Out West* and *Pacific Jazz*, each measure 6 feet tall and 27 fixtures wide, and they're the ones that greet you when the elevator doors open on the second-floor gallery. By playing off the space between the tubes, the walls and the environment, the light achieves a church-like quiet, a meditative respite. (Ends January 29, 2011.)

7. Another artist who uses fluorescent materials, Aakash Nihalani, has a new show up at Bose Pacia in DUMBO. His public installations are created out of tape and installed, quite literally, on the street in cities throughout the world to emphasize the layers and depth already present in the urban environment. Here, Nihalani introduces a fun new series of abstract aluminum works called [Overlap](#), as well as using his more traditional media of tape and cardboard to create a pink, outlined rendering of a Jeff Koons balloon dog. (Ends December 18.)

8. There's a special type of architecture highlighted in an underrated exhibition at The

Museum of Modern Art. The show, entitled [*Small Scale, Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement*](#), showcases 11 architectural projects on five different continents that use site-specific, socially sustainable, ecological solutions to respond to needs in underserved communities. The projects tend to focus on three areas: education (schools in Burkina Faso, Los Angeles and Bangladesh), transportation (a cable tram in Caracas, Venezuela) and housing (apartments in Lebanon, Paris and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil). Every piece stands out, but *\$20K House VII (Dave's House)*, *Rural Studio* is a favorite: among the 120 projects that Auburn University's satellite school The Rural Studio has completed, this one aims to address the lack of affordable housing in Hale County, Alabama, where 40% of the population is eligible for federal housing loans. (Ends January 3, 2011.)

9. In a new show, [*The Mexican Suitcase*](#), at the International Center of Photography, the museum has released a collection of 4,500 negatives—known as the "Mexican Suitcase"—from the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939, from photojournalist Robert Capa. The suitcase is actually three small boxes that also contained the work of two other photographers: Chim (David Seymour) and Capa's partner in love and business, Gerda Taro, who is a revelation here. The exhibition presents nearly all of the negatives as contact sheets, hung throughout the main floor. There's a palpable tension the closer you get to the end, where Taro's photos, especially, gain a frenetic dimension that reinforces what we already know: the last days of her life reflect challenging conditions, heavy fighting and a worsening situation from which she was ultimately unable to escape. (Ends January 9, 2011.)

10. The latest offering at The Jewish Museum is an inspired bit of high-concept, high-wire showmanship: [*Houdini: Art and Magic*](#) documents the life and times of the world's most famous escape artist using archival films, photos and promotional posters. Alongside the artifacts are contemporary pieces by artists who have been inspired by the Harry Houdini ethos, including Vik Muniz, Raymond Pettibon and Petah Coyne. Artifacts such as the Water Torture Cell and the Milk Can coexist with videos from Allen Ruppersberg and an installation from Matthew Barney, illustrating how Houdini's ability to transform commonplace objects into magic elements has been absorbed by artists working in performance, video and installation. And like a little Christmas miracle, the museum is open on December 25. (Ends March 27, 2011.)