

The Best Art Shows of 2011

Three *Voice* critics name their favorites from the past year

Art



Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York

Nice sunset:
Lisa Yuskavage's
Outskirts

OK, folks—here you go. The top NYC art shows that happened in 2011, selected by three of our ever-discerning art writers.

R.C. BAKER

"De Kooning: A Retrospective" (Museum of Modern Art). The way we talk about Masaccio or Velázquez or Cézanne today is the way they will talk about Willem de Kooning in the year 2525. This comprehensive retrospective is up until January 8—go see what all the noise will be about.

"Sigmar Polke: Photoworks 1964–2000" (Leo Koenig, Inc.). Slopped with chemicals and smudged with massive fingerprints, these black-and-white prints fused conceptual wit—abstraction supplied by shots of the artist's own abstract drawings—with a loopy netherworld of overexposed figures in enigmatic settings. Polke (1941–2010) consistently nailed the alchemical sweet spot of materials, application, and content that makes painting such a potent medium. Damned if he couldn't do it in the darkroom, too.

Jack Smith: "Thanks for Explaining Me" (Gladstone Gallery). Smith (1932–1989) celebrated the body's desires with lush tableaux that gave equal visual weight to cascading beads, pendulous breasts, billowing drapes, and dangling scrotums—everything was gorgeous. While the dazzling new prints struck for the show felt a tad precious—Smith's almost morbid disregard for archival niceties was evinced here through a wall of marvelous performance fliers slathered with Wite-Out—the rich colors,

dizzying textures, and lotus-eating abandon of his films and photographs expose why aesthetes in the know always crave their next Jack Smith fix.

"Tune in Screening: Psychedelic Moving Images From Socialist Yugoslavia 1966–1976" (Stephan Stoyanov Gallery). These short films made for the most heartening exhibition of the year, transporting viewers to a mirror-world of the '60s. Accompanied by a familiar capitalist soundtrack—the Stones, Pink Floyd—images such as disembodied business suits swaying above roiling fields of flowers or sexy youths frolicking on jagged rocks conveyed a reckless determination to transcend moribund communist aesthetics. Although their audiences were severely limited by government censorship, these artists aimed their films at the ages, and their time has finally come.

B. Wurtz: "Works 1970–2011" (Metro Pictures). The aesthetics of detritus revealed themselves in Wurtz's sculptures, inducing a romantic buzz from essentially nothing—plastic bags, shoelaces, yogurt caps. Whether a pyramid of wood scraps or an abstract mural cobbled together from colored binders, Wurtz distills beauty from the everyday.

ROBERT SHUSTER

"Crafting Genre: Kathryn Bigelow" (Museum of Modern Art). This intriguing survey of filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow's career—which includes *The Hurt Locker* and *Near Dark*—traced her fascination with dramatizing brutality.

Storyboards, set-design sketches, personal works on paper, and an early student film all demonstrated careful considerations of structure, composition, and texture—efforts that have made Bigelow's scenes of terror (sniper fire, the deaths of vampires) so artful and so unbearably tense.

Helen Frankenthaler: "East and Beyond" (Knoedler & Company). Showcasing Frankenthaler's abiding interest in an Eastern sensibility, the exquisite abstractions here invited prolonged meditation. The paintings, with those gorgeous blends of thinned-out colors, often suggested lush Chinese landscapes, while the complex woodcuts were dream-state visions, their rich imagery blurred behind the prominent scrim-like grain. Sadly, the exhibit marked the last year of this venerable institution, which decided—surprising everyone—to call it quits.

Jean-Pierre Gauthier: "Recent Work" (Jack Shainman Gallery). An experimenter in the mechanical production of sound, Gauthier assembled a delightful menagerie of ragtag robots that, struggling to move their parts, did nothing but wheeze, whistle, roar, and squeak. But like newborns eager to engage the world, these odd, useless creatures—exposed tangles of wire, motors, and tubes—reminded us of something fundamental: the joy of simply being alive.

"German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse" (Museum of Modern Art). The woodcuts and lithographs were almost a century old, but their bold, jagged forms and their focus on plights of the soul (sex, death, hunger, terror) felt entirely modern and rel-

evant. In particular, Otto Dix's *Der Krieg* (1924)—a series of beautifully textured etchings depicting stark, battlefield agonies—still stands among the most powerful indictments of war ever produced.

"Under Destruction I, II, and III" (Swiss Institute). A Dada-esque carnival of ruin and waste, the contraptions and videotaped performances in this three-part group show pointedly mocked the excesses of ubiquitous violence and mass-production. The marvelous absurdity included a machine that dropped jelly-smear slices of bread on the floor, a martyred refrigerator suffering a public stoning, and a wrecking ball that smashed the gallery wall at your command.

CHRISTIAN VIVEROS-FAUNÉ

"After the Goldrush: Contemporary Photographs From the Collection"

(Metropolitan Museum of Art). An uptown hit that got the jump on downtown politics, this group show became the first museum outing to take on, in the curator's words, "the recent tumult at home and abroad." Deftly and ecumenically organized, the exhibition's 25 images—by 15 artists, among them oil and water shutterbugs Hans Haacke and Philip-Lorca diCorcia—punched way above their weight.

Francis Alÿs: "A Story of Deception" (Metropolitan Museum of Art). An overdue display of the museum's holdings of the vaunted global conceptualist, this show celebrated the artist's unique mash-up of politics and poetics. Consisting largely of visual parables that marry art and social issues, the exhibition featured a videotaped allegory in which 500 volunteers spaded a sand dune forward two inches. Who said faith can't move mountains?

William Powhida: "Derivatives*" (Postmasters Gallery). Love him or hate him (either way, he's on everyone's mind), Powhida has cornered the market on side-splitting snark—especially the hand-biting kind. His recent show featured drawn letters, lists, and maps tracing financial and artistic influence (yours truly is mentioned, obviously erroneously). But if you believe his work just deals in tales from the art crypt, think again. It's about the deep-throating of money—everywhere, by everyone, all the time, with venal gusto.

James Siena (Pace Gallery). Featuring work created over the past three years with the use of "visual algorithms"—self-imposed rules that turn obsessive doodling into bright enamel paintings—Siena's abstractions usually evoke ADD prodigies and scientists with Einstein hair. Antic groupings of zigzags, loops, interlocking sequences, and the odd nasty bit, his latest efforts also recalled diagrams of chaos crossed with the Book of Kells.

Lisa Yuskavage (David Zwirner). A display of "testicular virility" (to quote Rod Blagojevich) rarely seen among living painters, this show embarrassed both comparisons to younger imitators and, also, the usual pukewarm pieties. Cinematic in scope, disturbingly psychological in character, and radioactively gorgeous in facture, Yuskavage's realist perversions grew in both scale and maturity. Her latest Sexy Sadies own their confidence and vulnerability like they do their double D cups.