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Best Art of 2022

This was a year whose high points included an adult-feeling Whitney Biennial, a major survey of contemporary Puerto Rican art, and one of the great big-little exhibitions of all time.

By Holland Cotter and Roberta Smith
Dec. 7, 2022, 5:00 a.m. ET

HOLLAND COTTER

Exhibitions Ride Winds of Change

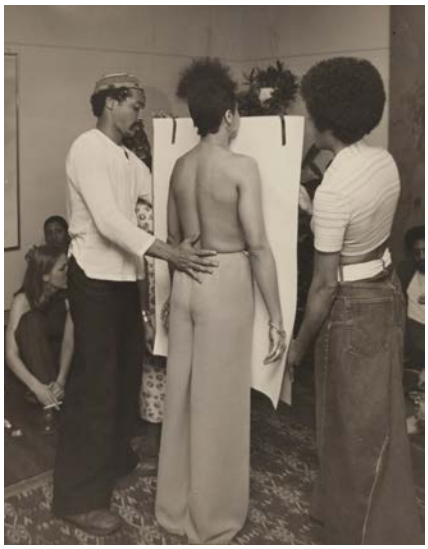
Still in recovery from Covid lockdown, art museums in 2022 tried hard to pull traffic through the door. This meant a season heavily weighted, on the marquee side, toward an Old Normal: familiar, low-risk fare. At the same time, even our big, conservative institutions have started to come to grips with the fact that they need to appeal to new, demographically diverse audiences if they're going to have a future. And this impulse seems to lie behind some of the most stimulating shows of the year.

'New York: 1962-1964' at the Jewish Museum

This startler of a show gave a sense of what an art world New Normal looked and felt like when it hit more than half a century ago. The early 1960s were a manic hinge moment in American culture, between the Cold War and the Vietnam War, civil rights and Black power, old repressions and burgeoning liberations. Art, shifting from Ab-Ex to Pop, felt the tremors from all of this, and they run through the exhibition's art-and-artifact mix. Culturally, New York was perched on the edge of something and leaning forward, a teetering condition, really a New Abnormal, that we can learn a lot from. *(Read our review of "New York: 1962-1964.")*

'Just Above Midtown' at the Museum of Modern Art

When is a time capsule a treasure chest? When does a scrapbook read like a utopian syllabus? When does an art archive achieve its own form of art? When a historical survey like this one comes our way. The gallery named Just Above Midtown debuted in Manhattan in 1974 and was the first African-American-owned commercial art space to plant a flag inside the gated community that was (and still is) a white New York art world. Sustained on hard work and maxed-out credit cards, JAM introduced an amazing array of new talent; by the time it closed in 1986 it had changed the texture of American art, and set a risk-tolerant, can-do model for experimental ventures that have followed (through Feb. 18). *(Read our review of "Just Above Midtown.")*



David Hammons, left, and Suzette Wright, center, at the Body Print-In with Hammons's exhibition "Greasy Bags and Barbeque Bones" in 1975. via David Hammons and Collection Linda Goode Bryant; Photo by Jeff Morgan

The Whitney Biennial 2022

Delayed for a year by the pandemic, this notably somber, adult-feeling Biennial lived up to its hushed title. "Quiet as It's Kept" felt like a ruminative coda to the three years of a soul-rattling national history in which it was conceived, a time marked by social divisiveness, racist violence and relentless mortality. Of the exhibition's two main floors, one was a wide-open showroom with the mixed-bag assortment of objects typical of most biennials. The other was an extended shadowy installation of videos, photographs and audio work of a kind I don't remember from previous biennials, seamlessly atmospheric, time-suspending meditation on history in-the-now. *(Read our review of this year's biennial.)*

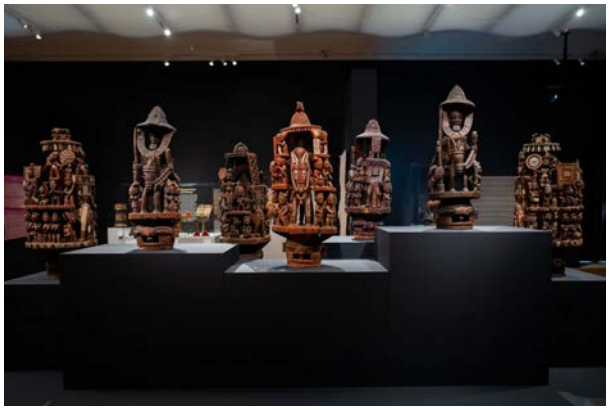
'Bamigboye' at Yale University Art Gallery

Although the name of the Yoruba artist Moshood Olusomo Bamigboye is still little known outside Nigeria, his mountainous career retrospective at Yale was one of the sculptural high points of the season, and an unusually complete survey it was, encompassing in some 30 carvings every known major work by the artist, who died in 1975. The centerpiece is a spectacular ensemble of masks, among the largest single-piece wood carved masks known from Africa, bristling with entire village-and-

spirit-realms of figures. Bamigboye gave each of these complex sculptures the generic title of "Atofojowo," meaning "you can look at it for a whole day." True. (The show is on view through Jan. 8.) *(Read our review of "Bamigboye: A Master Sculptor of the Yoruba Tradition.")*

'Cecilia Vicuña: Spin Spin Triangulene' at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

With its wind-chime title, this was a first New York survey for Vicuña, an artist who was born in Chile in 1948 and has lived in New York City, mostly under the art market radar, for four decades. Although she's primarily known as a poet, the show was rich in paintings, videos and monumental openwork weavings inspired by Andean Indigenous textiles, all reflecting her career-long eco-activist, pro-underdog politics. In the Guggenheim's modernist cathedral of a rotunda, much of her work looked improvised and impermanent, exactly right for an artist who once said: "We are made of throwaways, and we will be thrown away." *(Read our review of "Cecilia Vicuña: Spin Spin Triangulene.")*



Woodcarved masks for harvest festivals in the exhibition "Bamigboye: A Master Sculptor of the Yoruba Tradition" at the Yale University Art Gallery. Christopher Capozziello for The New York Times

'A Movement in Every Direction' at the Mississippi Museum of Art

The Great Migration, the dispersal of some 6 million Black Americans out of a dangerous Jim Crow South to what they hoped would be a safer and more prosperous life in Northern and Western cities, got an important update in this traveling exhibition, organized by the Mississippi Museum of Art in Jackson, Miss., and the Baltimore Museum of Art. The work commissioned from a dozen contemporary artists and completed during a pandemic that brought most discretionary travel to a halt, was strong, history it addressed compelling, and ongoing as descendants of original migrants, including some of the exhibition's artists, have returned to the South. At the Baltimore Museum of Art through Jan. 29. *(Read our review of "A Movement in Every Direction.")*

'What Is the Use of Buddhist Art?' at Wallach Art Gallery

This small exhibition at Columbia University's Wallach Art Gallery clearly set out its goals in a wall text: it was to lift a set of religious objects from China, Japan, Tibet and elsewhere in Asia out of the context of academic art history and put them back in the temples and tombs and devotional hands for which they were made. The objects were all from the university's seldom displayed collections. Some were plain and timeworn; others were lovely; a few were even starry by museum standards. But presenting them, not as art "masterpieces" but as spiritual power tools, intimately transactional devices, the show brought them to life in a way museums rarely do. *(Read our critic's notebook on "What Is the Use of Buddhist Art?")*

Jamea Richmond-Edwards's "This Water Runs Deep," 2022, in "A Movement in Every Direction" at the Mississippi Museum of Art. Imani Khayyam for The New York Times

'no existe un mundo poshuracán' at the Whitney Museum of American Art

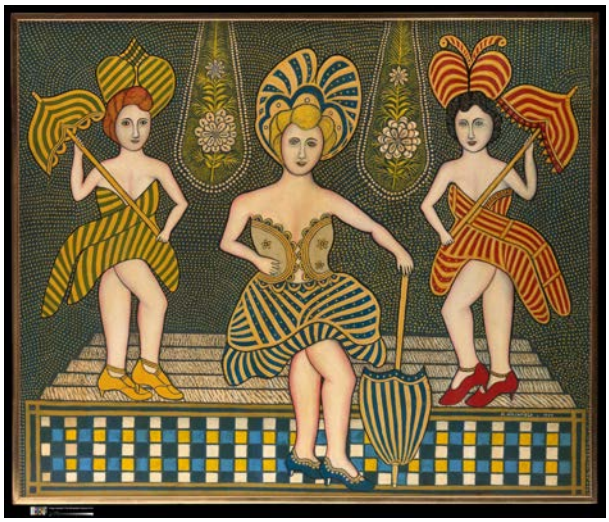
The first major survey of contemporary Puerto Rican art in a leading U.S. museum in nearly 50 years, this show is a labor of love, an expression of anger and grief, and a thing of nuanced beauty. On an obvious level it's about the devastation visited on the island by Hurricane Maria in 2017, but its real subject is the history of U.S. colonialism that long preceded that event and continues today. Almost everything in the show gives lie to the notion that "political" art is, by definition, unbeautiful. And every last work confirms the truth that political is always personal. (Through April 23.) *(Read our review of "no existe un mundo poshuracán.")*

'Water Memories' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

This poetically faceted pocket-size show about the material and symbolic role of water in Native American life includes a transfixing 2016 video of political demonstrators — "water protectors" — at the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in the Dakotas. On cue, they lift sun-reflecting mirrored panels above their heads and begin an eddying, light-glinting processional dance of protest and preservation. In a year when climate change activism finally got the culture world's full attention through (as of this writing) nonviolent shock-tactic assaults by young protesters on high-profile works of art, this nuanced show about elemental preciousness stood out. (Through April 2) *(Read our review of "Water Memories.")*

ROBERTA SMITH

A Trove of Unexpected Delights



Morris Hirshfield's "Stage Beauties," 1944, in the exhibition "Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered" at the American Folk Art Museum. Robert and Gail Rentzer for Estate of Morris Hirshfield/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y.; via Metropolitan Museum of Art

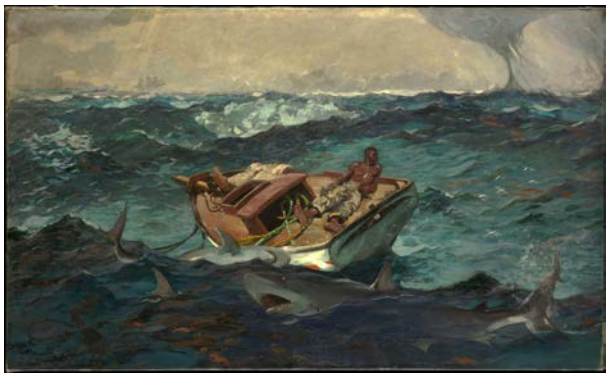
This year's movable feast of outstanding museum and gallery exhibitions often left me breathless. The ones that hit me hardest tended to be monographic undertakings that brought to light overlooked careers, offered new approaches to familiar ones and sometimes encouraged curatorial creativity. The artists revealed in these shows were insiders, outsiders and, as such boundaries dissolve, both-siders. All but a few of them delved into the past, yielding renewed relevance to the present.

Winslow Homer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's magisterial "Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents" took a fresh look at the great 19th-century American painter, underscoring an attraction to conflict that resulted in his grittily sympathetic portrayals of the battles and devastation of the Civil War; racial tensions in both the United States and the Caribbean; and the human struggle to survive, expressed most powerfully in his paintings of rescues at sea and storm-tossed ships and shores. But also here was Homer the lover of paint, whose tactile surfaces, sense of space and unusual compositions identified many of his canvases as suavely proto-modernist. *(Read our review of "Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents.")*

Matisse at the Museum of Modern Art

"Matisse: The Red Studio" at the Museum of Modern Art was one of the great big-little exhibitions of all time. It presented the artist's radical, nearly all-red view of his studio from 1911 in the midst of all the paintings, sculptures and ceramics pictured therein (a total of 10 works). The gathered works included little-known paintings like the luscious Post-Impressionist "Corsica, The Old Mill," of 1898, and heavyweights like "Young Sailor II" of 1906, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Standing among them looking at "The Red Studio" created the uncanny sensation of being on the inside looking out as well as vice versa. (*Read our review of "Matisse: The Red Studio.*")



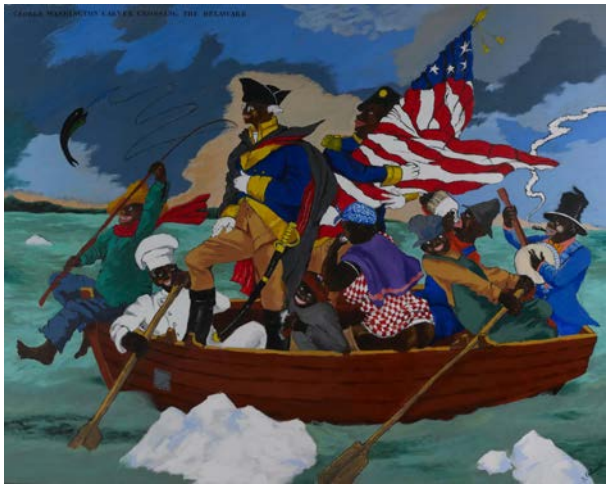
Winslow Homer's "The Gulf Stream" (1899/reworked by 1906), the centerpiece of his exhibition "Crosscurrents" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Louise Bourgeois at the Met

As of last spring, the French-born New York artist Louise Bourgeois was known for her enormous bronze arachnids, scary-looking creatures not unlike the people-eating monsters in "War of the Worlds." But June brought the Met's "Louise Bourgeois: Paintings," an exhibition of 50 little-known works in oil on board made during the first decade after she relocated to New York in 1938. The change may have shocked the art-schooling out of her. Painted with the directness of a self-taught Surrealist, these haunting works made extensive use of Bourgeois's anxieties as a new mother, her affinity for a deep red the color of blood and her tendency to see houses as female beings — ideas that led to her first sculptures. It was like being given a whole new artist. *(Read our review of "Louise Bourgeois: Paintings.")*

Robert Colescott at the New Museum

The New Museum's raucous survey "Art and Race Matters: The Career of Robert Colescott" brought overdue attention to a rare American painter, who, like Peter Saul and Leon Golub placed equal emphasis on form and subject matter. His irreverent Pop-inflected style pitted the history of painting against an unsettling, sometimes politically incorrect commentary on race in America. It is hard to imagine many younger painters, most notably Kerry James Marshall and Henry Taylor, without his example. *(Read our review of "Art and Race Matters: The Career of Robert Colescott.")*



Robert Colescott's "George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page From an American History Textbook," 1975, at the New Museum. The Robert H. Colescott Separate Property Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Jim Nutt at Venus Over Manhattan

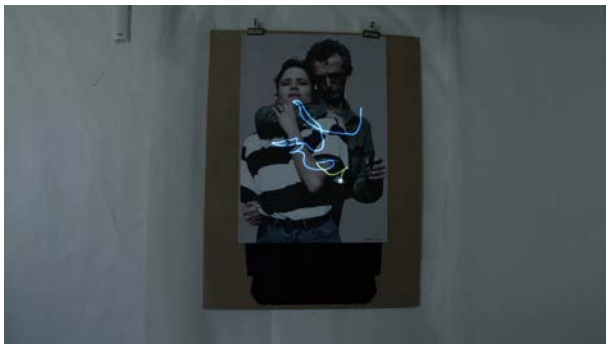
One of the year's best shows in a commercial gallery (which I unfortunately saw on its last day) was "Jim Nutt: Portraits" at Venus Over Manhattan, a rare sighting of a reclusive contemporary master. It brought together six paintings and 14 drawings from 1987 to 2013, showcasing a talent in which Northern Renaissance precision and frugality are met by caustic harshness based in Surrealism and American popular culture. Nutt reduces the face to a kind of map where each feature exists in isolation, with its own style. Noses resemble geological outcroppings; eyes, which rarely match, can be indicated with the most delicate of marks. They all come together in the end, but only after careful examination. Someday this artist will get the museum retrospective he deserves.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden at 52 Walker

More excellence on the commercial gallery front came from 52 Walker, the Zwirner gallery's TriBeCa space, in the form of "Tiona Nekkia McClodden: Mask / Conceal / Carry." There McClodden, one of the most innovative artists of the moment, created a mysterious, unsettling environment in which guns, their handling and firing, their surrounding rituals and body language were broken down to yield abstract paintings, bronze sculpture, small wall reliefs and performance video. It was a gun-haunted show for a gun-haunted nation. *(Read our review of "Tiona Nekkia McClodden: Mask / Conceal / Carry")*

Fernanda Gomes at Peter Freeman

Peter Freeman Inc. unveiled a revelation: the latest from Fernanda Gomes, a Brazilian artist born in 1960 who had not shown in New York since 2006. Using mostly found, slight materials, including fragments of furniture, supplemented by touches of white paint, Gomes improvises a touching poetic, economical art out of almost nothing. Presenting over 30 works, including two optically engrossing installation pieces, Gomes echoed modern art movements from Constructivism to Fluxus and beyond, and left us wanting more. *(Read our review of Fernanda Gomes's show.)*



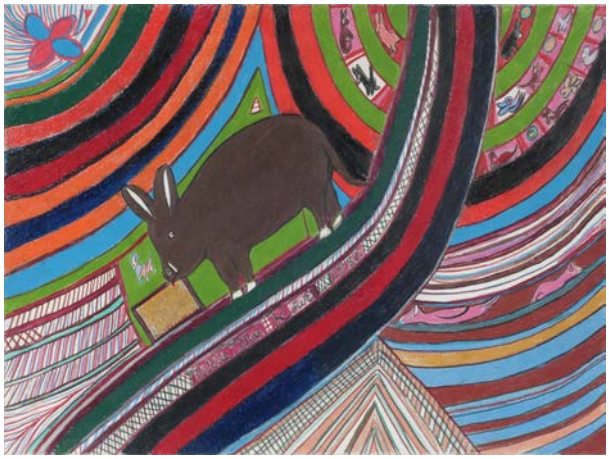
Tiona Nekkia McClodden's "Precision, in spite of a threatening figure," 2022, in her show at 52 Walker. via Tiona Nekkia McClodden and 52 Walker, New York

Nellie Mae Rowe at the Brooklyn Museum

At the Brooklyn Museum "Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe" (through Jan. 1), organized by the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, provided the city's first in-depth exposure to the achievement of this self-taught artist who worked for decades as a housekeeper before devoting herself to full time to art. She specialized in crayon drawings, made powerful by a singular sense of color and pattern, that have the impact of paintings. They mix fact and fantasy, as with a work filled with arcing and swooping lines being used as a lunch spot by an untroubled brown pig. "Untitled (Pig on Expressway)" recalls the farm of her childhood and conjures the urban renewal that would shatter her Black neighborhood. *(Read our review of "Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe.")*

Morris Hirshfield at the American Folk Art Museum

The line between insider and outsider art was further dissolved by "Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered" at the American Folk Art Museum (through Jan. 29). It resurrects the achievement of Hirshfield (1872-1946), a retired tailor and shoemaker, whose seven-year career (during his brief retirement) included an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943. Hirshfield depicted women, showgirls, nudes, the occasional male and a zoo's worth of animals as well as still lifes, buildings and landscapes in stylized form. Resembling empowered cutout dolls, all his subjects were rendered stiff, flat and forceful, in thick but meticulous paint, stippling (usually for greenery) and pulsing patterns. In a time when figurative painting proliferates, Hirshfield's synthesis of form and narrative inspires. *(Read our review of "Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered.")*



Nellie Mae Rowe's "Untitled (Pig on Expressway)," 1980, at the Brooklyn Museum. Estate of Nellie Mae Rowe/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; via High Museum of Art, Atlanta

'All the Beauty and the Bloodshed'

The mesmerizing, wrenching film that is "All the Beauty and the Bloodshed" represents a well-balanced collaboration between the documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras and the autobiographically inclined artist Nan Goldin. Poitras puts us literally in the middle of the protests — usually at museums — initiated by Goldin and her organization P.A.I.N. (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now), which exposed to public view the role of some members of the culturally prominent Sackler family in the opioid crisis. Goldin — with questions from Poitras — narrates her eventful, often tragic life, excerpting her celebrated slide shows, and giving her story an even more harrowing coherence, while making some new revelations. Part of the slide shows' emotional power has always resided in Goldin's impeccable ear for musical accompaniment. Here it varies from Purcell to Lucinda Williams and is as spot on as ever. *(Read our review of "All the Beauty and the Bloodshed.")*