

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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When the Art Stared Back And Other Trends

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CORRECTION APPENDED

WHAT a long, strange year it has been. As disillusion with the Obama presidency took hold in many quarters, and a Republican majority prepared to take control of the House in January, it seemed only fitting that the specter of the 1980s culture wars should rear its cynical, bigoted head.

A few harsh words from the conservative Catholic League and a handful of congressmen caused the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution to order the removal of a truncated version of a 1987 video by the activist-artist David Wojnarowicz from an exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. The piece included 11 seconds of ants crawling over a plastic and wood crucifix that, it was said, would offend Christians. This institutional crumbling in the face of what was after all only criticism (hello!) showed a shocking lack of intellectual spine. Heaven forbid that art should challenge people with its intense emotions or with thoughts they don't already think. Buoyant auction prices followed by brisk sales at Art Basel Miami maintained the illusion that the art world was somehow immune to the recession. But there are growing signs that the second shoe has yet to drop.

A telling detail: In New York many galleries started extending exhibitions. An unusually high number mounted only two in the four-month fall season. Six-month shows became more frequent among smaller museums like the American Folk Art Museum, the Museum of Arts & Design and the Neue Galerie, as well as others around the country. This contributed to the feeling that some of the city's more fragile museums and non-blue-chip art galleries were barely scraping by.

In museums participatory art was noticeably on the rise, creating an illusion of egalitarianism. Visitors to the retrospective of the performance pioneer Marina Abramovic at the Museum of Modern Art could enter the exhibition by walking between closely spaced nude performers standing at attention, and hold staring contests with Ms. Abramovic in the museum's atrium. In the Whitney Museum's Christian Marclay exhibition visitors wrote musical notes (and lots of other stuff) on a wall for pianists to improvise from.

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Things were taken further at the Guggenheim Museum, where Tino Sehgal combined the participatory and the invisible. He demonstrated that it is possible to have an engaging art exhibition involving nothing but walking and talking. It helped to have Frank Lloyd Wright's spiraling rotunda serving as an architectural metaphor for the path of life. (Another blow for the nonvisible was struck by Susan Philipsz, the first sound artist to win the Tate Britain's prestigious Turner Prize.)

One of the bigger and better participatory ventures of the year occurred atop the Metropolitan Museum of Art, of all places. There the artist twins Mike and Doug Starn -- best known for large, taped-together photo-objects -- extended their piecemeal assembly technique to engineer an enormous, thatchlike bamboo scaffolding that seemed to erupt from the museum's decorous roof garden. Tied together with rock-climbing cord in a manner used in construction sites around South America and Asia, "Big Bambú" offered visitors breathtaking views of the city from an elevated labyrinth of passageways, porous tunnels and lookout points that creaked and swayed in the wind.

Not all viewer participation worked out as planned. The Chinese provocateur Ai Weiwei covered much of the floor of the Tate Modern's immense Turbine Hall with several inches of hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds. They were intended to be walked on, sat on and handled by visitors, as a kind of crunchy, tactile surrogate for China's 1.3 billion people. But after two days ceramic dust stirred up by the public also raised alarm about respiratory hazards; standard viewing procedures -- look, don't touch -- were imposed for the duration of the seven-month installation.

On other occasions thinking big went exactly nowhere. Given the run of the Park Avenue Armory Drill Hall and a sizable budget, the veteran filmmaker Peter Greenaway basically came up empty with "Leonardo's Last Supper." Subtitled "A Vision by Peter Greenaway," this glitzy, tedious exercise in high-tech imaging alternately magnified the fresco's flaking surface into desertlike landscapes and imbued its figures with the dimensionality of a carved tourist souvenir. Perhaps attempting to compensate for the virtual visual harassment of Leonardo's masterpiece, Mr. Greenaway actually compounded the fiasco by adding a cannibalized version of his digital meditation on Veronese's immense painting "The Wedding at Cana." It was an entertainingly site-specific spectacle in the summer of 2009 when projected in a lavish Benedictine refectory in Venice for which the work, now at the Louvre, was painted. Here it merely contributed to a flop so spectacular that it almost made you feel sorry for its creator. Almost.

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One of the year's brighter signs was the visibility of female artists on all fronts. In the scrum of exhibitions surrounding the Frieze Art Fair in London, the small survey of Klara Liden's architectural interventions and re-creations at the Serpentine Gallery, the forward-looking alternative space in Regent's Park, was a standout. Back in New York a newly refurbished Artists Space showed work by the overlooked German Minimalist Charlotte Posenenske; and the Elizabeth Dee Gallery rented a floor of the building formerly known as the Dia Center for the Arts to amount a spacious Dia-like survey of the work of the influential Conceptual artist Adrian Piper.

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art the exhibition "Playing With Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage" proposed that the onset of collage be moved back nearly half a century and across the English Channel, out of the studios of the Cubists and into the drawing-rooms of upper-class British women making tableaus from cut-up photographs. At the Modern "On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century" teems with work by little-known or under-shown women. The Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, N.Y., resurrected Faith Ringgold's staunch early paintings, and the Brooklyn Museum added a roster of women to the history of Pop Art. And in New York galleries substantial shows by women have been abundant, including those by newcomers like Liz Magic Laser, Shio Kusaka, Keltie Ferris and Tatiana Trouvé, as well as better-known artists like Sarah Sze, Anya Kielar, Huma Bhabha, Claire Pentecost, Rineke Dijkstra, Mika Rottenberg, Siobhan Liddell, Pipilotti Rist and Joan Snyder. Diverse in age, style and medium, the girls are all right, and getting better all the time. Too bad they don't run Washington yet.

Correction: December 26, 2010, Sunday

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction: A credit last Sunday with a picture of a construction by the sculptor Huma Bhabha misidentified the gallery that provided the photograph. It was Salon 94 -- not Peter Blum Gallery, New York.

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