The Year in, and Beyond, the Galleries

BY ANDREW RUSSETH | 12/18 1:40PM

Installation view of T. J. Wilcox, “In the Air,” 2013. (Photo by Bill Orcutt/Whitney Museum)

It’s been brutal trying to whittle down a “best of” list for 2013, but the top slot? That’s easy: the New York art world’s recovery after Hurricane Sandy. It’s astounding to think back to October 2012, when galleries were flooded and art was destroyed, when artists and art handlers, dealers and interns could be found without electricity, carrying soggy works from basements, tearing out drywalls and trying to figure out what to do next. The entire foundation of the art world felt threatened. But galleries dug out. They raised money to help dealers who had suffered losses, and by January most of the affected ones were up and running again.

That experience colored the year for me, as I suspect it did for others. I can’t prove empirically that the art world got any nicer, but it felt like a sense of camaraderie grew out of it. It made an already strong year in art feel just a little bit stronger.

It definitely made the jam-packed summer show that Ryan Foerster hosted at his Brighton Beach home all the more poignant and inspiring. The storm had rendered his bungalow uninhabitable, and...
he was still working on repairs when he opened
the show, stocked with work by exciting young
artists like Zak Kitnick, Rose Marcus, Win
McCarthy, Jory Rabinovitz, Rochelle
Goldberg and Joshua Abelow. It may have
been the liveliest group show of the year,
spreading out into his yard, onto the roof and
into his bathroom.

A fierce competitor for that title is “Draw Gym,”
the blowout drawing exhibition that artist Brian
Belott organized at the ascendancy 247365 and
Know More Games galleries in Brooklyn's

masterful paintings—abstractions, family
portraits, that Obama family stunner—at Derek
Eller; Jamian Juliano-Villani’s explosive, jaw-
droppingly controlled airbrushed numbers from
her debut, at Rawson Projects; Michael
Williams’ gutsy paintings at Canada, in which
he pairs digital prints and airbrush marks to
make art that looks startlingly new; everything
Bjarne Melgaard did around town, but
especially his necrophiliac outing with William
N. Copley at Venus Over Manhattan; Mathieu
Malouf’s gothic-tinged paintings and chic, creepy BDSM lair at Real Fine Arts (not to mention his
luxurious paintings at their Miami Basel booth); Amy Yao’s charming show of six beautifully
accented ladders at 47 Canal; Ajay Kuran’s meaty sculptures, also at 47 Canal, which take still-
developing sculptural modes into deliciously rococo territory (you still have a few days to catch that
one); Ben Morgan-Cleveland’s sly, haunting, frankly disgusting floor works at Eli Ping Gallery,
which he made by leaving affixing sheets of burlap to cobblestone and letting passing trucks do the
work overnight; Yashua Klos’ haunting, fragile paper constructions at Tilton Gallery; Amanda
Friedman’s deliriously weird paintings, which climbed Spare Room Projects’/Jackie Klempay’s
walls and backyard tree in Bushwick; Alice Mackler’s wildly entertaining ceramics at Kerry Schuss;
JTT’s succinct and long-overdue Diane Simpson sampling; Artists Space’s long-overdue and
impossibly fresh survey of Zilia Sánchez; everything by Sam Anderson, whose small, mysterious
sculptures, strewn with animal skeletons and little props, pack serious punches; and the delectable
No-Neck Blues Band ephemera show at Audio Visual Arts.

Galleries also delivered the goods when it came to work by artists who are no longer with us. At
Zwirner, Robert Storr’s Ad Reinhardt show, which included 13 of his black paintings, witty
cartoons and travel photographs, was the revelation of the year, neck and neck with John
Elderfield’s late Willem de Kooning stunner at Gagosian. (There are a few days left on both of
those also.) Meanwhile, Davis & Langdale made a worthy case for an Albert York museum
exhibition, and the Kitchen a strong argument for a much larger Gretchen Bender show. (We’ll get
more at next year’s Whitney Biennial.) And the embattled American Folk Art Museum deserves
Installation still of Bender, ‘Total Recall,’ 1987, at The Kitchen. (Courtesy the Kitchen)

Ei Arakawa at the Guggenheim. (Photo by Paula Court/Guggenheim)

Performance still of Kasper.

Ei Arakawa at the Guggenheim. (Photo by Paula Court/Guggenheim)

Nicolas Ceccaldi and the curators themselves offering up major new works. (Ms. Karlberg and Ms. Henke are hosting a nail-art salon this evening, Wed., Dec. 18.) On the tonier end of the spectrum, Dominique Lévy Gallery staged Yves Klein’s gorgeous “Monotone-Silence” Symphony with a full choir and orchestra at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church.

And did you catch David Diao’s epic, stemwinding lecture on Barnett Newman at Dia? I missed it but got the audio from Dia. It’s amazing, as was his painting show at Postmasters. (Still another reason to be excited about the Whitney Biennial.)

The worst art of the year? The less said about that the better, but the glut of bland, meaningless abstract painting currently dominating Lower East Side galleries is a trend that would be nice to stop now. My least
Diao, ‘Double Rejection 2 (MoMA Boardroom),’ 2012. (Courtesy the artist and Postmasters)

favorite shows of the year: Nate Lowman at the Brant Foundation, Angel Otero at Lehmann Maupin and Josephine Meckseper at Andrea Rosen.

But let’s end on a positive note, with what were, for me, the year’s highlights (setting aside MoMA PS1’s Mike Kelley retrospective, which is in a once-in-a-generation class of its own):

3. The classical music concert that Rainer Ganahl organized early in January (with support from White Columns) at the soon-to-close El Mundo department store in East Harlem, a grand, dilapidated space built as a soaring theater in the 1920s, with professional and student musicians (including artist Ken Okiishi) playing violin and piano, and singing. It was freezing outside, but it was brilliantly warm and deeply melancholic within, amid stacks of clothes and a rapt audience, amid the brutal upheaval that New York continuously inflicts.

2. Danh Vo’s Hugo Boss Prize show at the Guggenheim, for which he presented thousands of trinkets, knickknacks and bric-à-brac (and a few little paintings) from the collection of the late Lower East Side painter Martin Wong (who was himself the subject of P.P.O.W.’s great-looking booth at the ADAA Art Show in March). It was a touching portrait of an artist we lost too soon and a treatise on the meanings that objects generate and the reasons we collect them, whether in our homes or just our heads—a virtuosic piece of art.

1. And finally T. J. Wilcox’s “In the Air” panoramic video installation at the Whitney. Shot through the windows of his Union Square penthouse studio, it shows 24 hours of New York’s skyline in the span of about 30 minutes and is interspersed with other short videos: an improbably hilarious vignette about Warhol and the Pope, a sizzlingly entertaining one about Gloria Vanderbilt and one about Sept. 11 that brought me to the verge of tears. (I know I’m not alone on that.) It ranks as one of the most important, most moving artworks ever made about New York. It makes you see our resilient, evolving city anew and invites you to fall in love with it all over again, and again, and again.