

A year of devastation, new insights

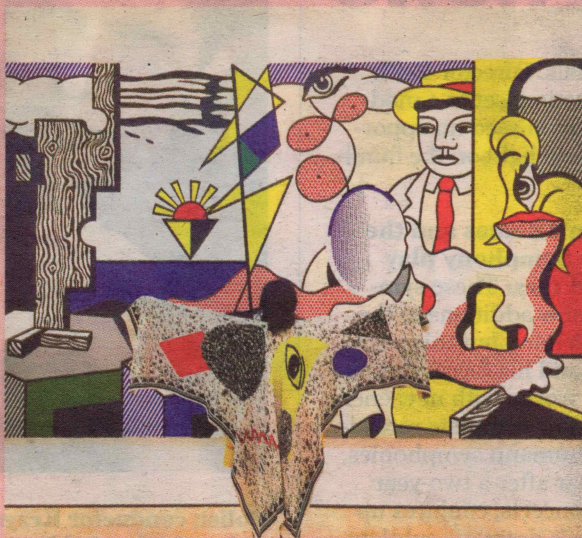
The year 2017 was the fieriest in memory for the visual arts. It opened with Oakland's December 2013 Ghost Ship Fire and the deaths of 36 artists, musicians and others freshly branded on our hearts. The Wine Country fires of October displaced thousands of people, many of them artists, and destroyed 8,889 structures — including the homes and studios of an untold number of celebrated professionals, promising novices and dedicated amateurs. And we exit this cursed calendar as fires on the Southern California coast blaze close by the J. Paul Getty Museum on their way to new state records of devastation.

A struggle to control culture: Incendiary comments, made by leaders who might otherwise have been expected to guide intelligent discussion, fueled the flames of cultural resentment. Thus, we have had furious arguments over whether to celebrate, destroy or reinterpret Civil War sculptural monuments, as if the art might grant us some talismanic control over history. And we have endured raging demands for the removal from the Whitney, the Metropolitan, the Walker and other museums, nuanced works of art that touch, however lightly, on inflamed nerves of race, sexuality and power.

The art world says #MeToo: The blaze of indignation kindled by a recording of our now-president bragging of sexual assault, then spread west to one of Hollywood's most powerful producers, finally reached the art world. Accusations now seem to have toppled, among others, Knight Landesman, publisher of the influential *Artforum* magazine, and Jens Hoffmann, one-time director of San Francisco's CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts.

Art we thought we knew: Bay Area museums were at the top of their form this year, bringing new insights to historical objects. A particular surprise was the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's "Edvard Munch: Between the Clock and the Bed," which put flesh on the bones of the artist known around the world for a single painting, "The Scream." The show brought 44 original, mournful paintings, rarely, if ever, seen on the West Coast. Munch's mastery of form, it turns out, gives his art an authenticity that cannot be read in reproduction. Meanwhile, the Legion of Honor enlivened the centennial of the death of Auguste Rodin by dramatically contrasting the museum's great sculpture collection with two exhibitions of cheeky works by living artists Sarah Lucas and Urs Fischer.

Art that won't sit still: William Kentridge, who



Carla Shen

Instagram poster Carla Shen's self-portrait at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in front of a painting by Roy Lichtenstein.

started with short, hand-drawn filmic works in the early 1990s, has steadily expanded his territory in size and technique. His "The Refusal of Time," a large installation combining film and sculpture, is owned jointly by SFMOMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It had its West Coast premiere through March. Then, the American Conservatory Theater presented "Refuse the Hour" for three performances in November. The stirring "multimedia chamber opera" starred the artist himself, narrating a trip through the fourth dimension that featured photographic film and animation, live music and dance. It was a physical experience of what I imagine to be an Albert Einstein dream.

Ragnar Kjartansson's 2012 installation "The Visitors," also at SFMOMA, and Isaac Julien's "Playtime" (2014), at Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture, are equally immersive, if apparently more straightforward in narrative. Both demand to be seen and are still on view, "The Visitors" only through Monday, Jan. 1, "Playtime" through Feb. 11.

Art in the age of the social media selfie: Carla Shen is a lively woman with a closetful of great clothes, a love of art and, apparently, a fair amount of disposable time and income. She also has a great eye, which she has turned on herself in an ongoing series on Instagram, where she posts as @carlapshen. Shen (a trustee of the Brooklyn Museum and, full disclosure, a personal acquaintance)

finds uncanny visual parallels between apparel in her closet and works of art on public view. They are guileless and celebratory, if not high art — not even self-portraits, she said in an email. "They are just snap shots or even records of my matching hobby."

New Faces: Erica Deeman burst into public consciousness with an expansive show of innovative portraits of black women at the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, and a simultaneous exhibition of new work at the tiny-but-influential gallery Anthony Meier Fine Arts. Marcela Pardo Ariza brought a refreshing comic approach to photography at a new space in the Tenderloin, R/SF Projects. And Alicia McCarthy, hardly a neophyte after some 20 years on the alternative scene, found a broader public with a solo show at Berggruen Gallery and a featured spot in the 2017 SECA Art Award exhibition at SFMOMA.

Art that has it both ways: Avidly crossing supposed boundaries between object and image, the thought-driven (conceptual art) and the emotion-laden (abstract expressionism), the public and the private, Robert Rauschenberg cleared a new path for himself and all who have come after. "Robert Rauschenberg: Erasing the Rules," at SFMOMA through March 25, is a superb guide to the career of one of the 20th century's most influential figures.

Art that made us laugh: Nina Katchadourian's exhibition "Curiouser" is running through Jan. 7 at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University. It is a rare opportunity to laugh out loud at serious art that questions assumptions about identity and authenticity, with a warmth and caring that is a blessing at this crucial moment in American history.

Art to make us cry: If I were to choose a Best Exhibition of 2017, it would have to be the French artist Sophie Calle's "Missing." Presented this summer at the Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture, which has turned itself in two years into a vital center for contemporary exhibitions, it was less a show than a series of deeply intimate encounters with one woman's life, and our own fears of absence and longing.

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