

The Best Art of 2018

By Roberta Smith, Holland Cotter and Jason Farago

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The art critics of The New York Times tell you what rocked their worlds this year: notable art events, works in museums and galleries, emerging artists and how they found beauty in unexpected places.

Roberta Smith's List | Holland Cotter's List | Jason Farago's Global Highlights

ROBERTA SMITH

Winners and Losers



A series of Altarpieces in “Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future” at the Guggenheim use ascending and descending triangles set against energized orbs. Mysticism informed her pioneering abstraction. George Etheredge for The New York Times

When the going gets rough, there's always art. It can soothe and teach you, and arm you with new tools and perspectives with which to face the world. This year had some great winners and obvious losers.

Winner: Art History, Refigured

One of the most thrilling winners was European and American art history. Magnificent exhibitions at three museums advanced new research in areas that had seemed thoroughly explored. The Guggenheim Museum offers a revisionary chapter about the start of modern abstraction in its current headliner, "Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future," introducing works that this Swedish artist and mystic made in 1906-7. Suddenly, the most sacred genesis tale of Modernism — the invention of abstract painting — has acquired a female actor who actually got there several years ahead of the revered triumvirate of Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich. Af Klint's joyous paintings, with their radical palette, scale and openness, push abstraction toward the future. (*Through April 23.*)

Another gauntlet landed with "Posing Modernity: The Black Model From Manet and Matisse to Today," at the Wallach Art Gallery of Columbia University. Partnering with the Musée d'Orsay, the Wallach has combined some great paintings (by Manet, Bazille, Degas, Matisse and Bearden) with fascinating ephemera, bringing new detail about the plight and presence of black women in late-19th-century Paris life and art, and following this theme through the Harlem Renaissance into the present. (*Through Feb. 10.*)

In Washington, the Smithsonian American Art Museum unveiled "Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor," a stunning retrospective of this once-unknown outsider genius (1853-1949), a former slave and tenant farmer who spent the last decade of his precarious life making drawings on the streets of Montgomery, Ala. Effortless in their fusion of narrative and form, Traylor's images distill memories harsh and pleasant into taut silhouettes on found cardboard. They now count among the greatest works of 20th-century American art, and thanks to a magnificent catalog, the artist is obscure no more. The show will not travel, so plan a trip to Washington soon. (*Through March 17.*)

Loser: The Metropolitan Museum of Art Blinks, Twice

Everyone who likes art, except residents of New York State, lost when the Met persuaded New York City officials to replace "pay what you wish" with an egregious mandatory fee of \$25. With this, the immensely wealthy Met sacrificed one of its most honorable features: the broad accessibility offered by libraries. The loser is visual literacy.

In the fall, financial anxiety led the Met to back out of the last three years of its eight-year lease of the Met Breuer and reabsorb its department of Modern and contemporary art into its main building. The program at the Met Breuer has been surprisingly good and getting better, but

attendance hasn't been high enough. It certainly didn't help that the Fifth Avenue museum remained the staging ground of big-draw contemporary shows like the David Hockney retrospective or the recent display of gifts from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation.

Winner: Van Gogh Again



Willem Dafoe as Vincent van Gogh in "At Eternity's Gate," a film directed by Julian Schnabel. Lily Gavin/CBS Films

The year brought an outstanding movie about a painter: Julian Schnabel's "At Eternity's Gate," an intimate, atmospheric treatment of the last days of Vincent van Gogh. Such endeavors rarely attain credibility, and yet this century now boasts two, the other being Mike Leigh's lavish "Mr. Turner" (2014). "At Eternity's Gate" is carried by its star, Willem Dafoe, whose gripping performance is aided by his uncanny resemblance to the artist. Mr. Schnabel's stated goal was to desensationalize the story of van Gogh — usually depicted as a mad artist who killed himself and died in obscurity. The movie makes a good case against each of those points, starting with its plain, unsensational style. What we get is an impassioned, articulate artist who adored nature and painting it and had a touchingly codependent relationship with his younger brother Theo. Mr. Schnabel also sides with those who argue that van Gogh did not commit suicide and proposes that he was killed by two youths playing with a gun.

Winner: A Genre Revitalized

Former President Barack Obama and the former first lady Michelle Obama elevated a dreary academic ritual — the official White House portrait — making a routine post-presidential event an instance of change. Seeing advantage in the renewed liveliness of figure painting, the couple chose a well-known painter, Kehinde Wiley (for Mr. Obama's portrait), and a lesser-known artist, Amy Sherald (for Mrs. Obama's). The depictions at the National Portrait Gallery are more than good enough — and the better for being such distinctive, explicitly human departures from a fossilized tradition that, with luck, will never be the same.

Winners: The Citizens of Chicago



Kerry James Marshall's beloved mural about the power of books, "Knowledge and Wonder," will remain at the Chicago Public Library's Legler branch. City of Chicago

A much-loved public mural by the painter Kerry James Marshall is staying put. Called "Knowledge and Wonder," it was commissioned in 1995 for the Chicago Public Library's Legler branch, on the city's West Side, and celebrates the library as a source of mystery and wonder for children. With Mr. Marshall's profile and his prices on the rise, the city decided to sell it at Christie's, hoping to raise \$10 million to fund an expanded library and a new public-art program. But with rising prices come increased clout, and when Mr. Marshall objected to the sale of his 10-by-23-foot work, the mayor, Rahm Emanuel, reversed course.

Loser: An Auction Low

The British street artist Banksy put up a work at Sotheby's auction house that half-destructed as the gavel came down, thanks to a remote-control shredder built into its frame. (It sold for \$1.4 million.) The audience seemed genuinely shocked; those behind the podium, not so much. Banksy's clever trick is sure to earn him a footnote in auction history, which is no stranger to stunts (most involving chandelier pricing). Still, this one did give rise to a slender hope that if such tricks become an auction house staple, serious people might go back to buying art the old-fashioned way — from galleries. But not yet. Everyone was back at the madness the following week, bidding up a Hockney and a Hopper to record prices.

HOLLAND COTTER

Best in Show



Installation views of “Afro-Atlantic Histories” at the São Paulo Museum of Art.
Eduardo Ortega

In 2018, a politically shuddersome year, the international art world was both out to lunch and on the alert. Art fairs and auctions continued to serve as conveyor belts for investment capital. Cheerleading and celebrity chat passed for discourse. At the same time, a spirit of resistance was building, and some critical projects came to pass.