

2020 IN REVIEW

THE BEST ART OF 2020

By Andrea K. Scott
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Farah Al Qasimi's series of seventeen effervescent color pictures, taken in New York City neighborhoods favored by immigrants, appeared on a hundred bus shelters citywide. Photograph by James Ewing / Courtesy Public Art Fund

This has been a despicable year, but not without its silver linings. The puppy population of New York City soared, Biden beat Trump, and the truth-to-power urgency of Black Lives Matter

finally became undeniable. But to reflect on the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many others—including the more than three hundred thousand lives lost to COVID-19 in the U.S.—returns us to the *annus horribilis*.

In early December, Pantone named its official colors for 2021, a decision that seemed to channel both the bleakness and the bright spots of the past year, not to mention the brain freeze of indecision that 2020 levels of uncertainty induced. Instead of championing one color, as it has in the past, Pantone anointed two: “Ultimate Gray,” a dispiriting fog, and “Illuminating,” a sunny yellow. The Internet was quick to point out that the combo also called to mind a banana and duct tape, the materials of Maurizio Cattelan’s infamous contribution to the 2019 edition of Art Basel Miami. The thought of that infuriatingly brilliant one-liner (now in the collection of the Guggenheim) makes me almost nostalgic for the vacuous hoopla of art fairs.

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New Yorker writers reflect on the year’s highs and lows.

It’s hard to believe that, in the first week of March, eight fairs did descend on New York City, for Armory Week. A number of overseas galleries made the trip, as they usually do, but the news from Europe was already worrisome, and some handshakes were being politely declined, from the Park Avenue Armory to Piers 90 and 94. (Belated apologies to the prescient collector whose offer of an elbow bump I greeted with side-eye.) On March 18th, it was announced that the Met was temporarily closing its three branches; a state-mandated shutdown of nonessential businesses soon followed.

For months, looking at art became staring at screens, and a new three-letter acronym entered the lexicon: O.V.R., for “online viewing room.” If that sounds like an enticement to see artists envision new forms with digital means, downgrade your expectations to “slideshow.” Still, the art world has been luckier than other cultural sectors of New York City. Museums and galleries reopened this fall, and there were fewer closures of the latter than feared, although one did mark the end of an era. After

twenty-six years as an independent tastemaker, the British expat Gavin Brown closed his enterprises and took a job with the doyenne Barbara Gladstone.

Perhaps the happiest art news of this dismal year is that intrepid new galleries continue to open. Another silver lining of 2020 is the reassurance that art is unstoppable. The following is a list of some beacons that cut through the pandemic blur.

Jacob Lawrence



Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art / © The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation / ARS