

Rays of Light and Menacing Shadows

Roberta Smith's 2013 Art Highlights, and Some Concerns



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Roberta Smith's Art Moments of 2013: A look at the Met's new European Painting Galleries and works by James Turrell and other artists.

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Published: December 12, 2013

It's hard to say whether 2013 was a lucky or unlucky year for the art world, but it was definitely packed with exhibitions and events that inspired or dismayed, sometimes in related clusters.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art mostly shone this year, especially with the unveiling of its enlarged and rearranged **European Painting Galleries**, which start to give this splendid collection the space it deserves. That followed news of Leonard Lauder's munificent gift of Cubist art. My first thought was: Yay! We'll be able to catch a glimpse of Modernism's main genesis myth without having to slog through the ever more crowded and soulless Museum of Modern Art.

The Met also delivered with '**Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity**,' which brought fresh context to an art-historical chestnut; the sumptuously revelatory '**Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500-**

1800,’ which traced the heated give-and-take for fabric designs and techniques among far-flung cultures; and finally **‘Carlo Scarpa,’** a stunning exhibition of the Venetian glass that the artist (1906-78) designed for the Venini company from 1932 to 1947. That show’s profound clarity of form and beauty holds lessons for everyone and transforms the pit-like lower level of the Lehman Wing into a viable exhibition space. In hindsight, the Met’s cramped and too-small retrospective of the great Ken Price last summer would have looked great there.

This was the year that outsider art came in from the cold, most prominently in the centerpiece exhibition of the Venice Biennale. Organized by the Biennale’s artistic director, Massimiliano Gioni, **‘The Encyclopedic Palace’** expanded the mainstream and its canon by including many artists, healers and thinkers from throughout the 20th century in its mix of contemporary artists. The result was, surprisingly, one of the most coherent, carefully plotted exhibitions of this size in years.

Over the summer in London, Ralph Rugoff’s smaller but choice **‘The Alternative Guide to the Universe’** at the Hayward Gallery argued for inclusiveness with equal clarity and far fewer, mostly outsider visionaries. This year also brought the gift of the large, impeccable collection of Sheldon and Jill Bonovitz to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which responded with **‘Great and Mighty Things,’** a sprawling yet regal exhibition that teemed with curatorial potential.

The **Outsider Art Fair** relocated to Chelsea, where it looked completely at home. And from its cramped quarters on Lincoln Square, the American Folk Art Museum continued its quiet comeback, most memorably with **‘Bill Traylor,’** an exhibition of work by one of America’s greatest artists, a former slave (1854-1949) and now a former outsider.

The environmental blockbuster became even more of a thing this year with Random International’s **‘Rain Room’** at the Museum of Modern Art, an elaborate sensor-driven carnival-worthy gimcrack that rained water everywhere except where visitors moved, at least in theory, and James Turrell’s similarly high-tech, candy-colored, Pharaonically titled **‘Aten Reign’** at the Guggenheim. But the quiet tortoise in the total immersion race was the Whitney’s reinstallation of Robert Irwin’s **‘Scrim Veil — Black Rectangle — Natural Light,’** a factually titled work from 1977 of the analog if not the Luddite kind, since it used only natural light.

For a brasher but affecting spectacle, there was Rudolf Stingel’s glorious redo of the **Palazzo Grassi**, a carpet-lined, painting-dotted, three-story environment that split the difference between analog and digital while mustering a site-specificity several layers deep.

The low point of the year was without doubt the sight of the struggling city Detroit devouring its own soul by contemplating the sale of works from the renowned collection of the **Detroit Institute of Arts** in the face of bankruptcy. A nadir in this potentially tragic farce was this memorable argument in a suit brought by the city’s creditors: “It needs to be a construct that addresses the fact that the D.I.A., or art, is

not an essential asset.” That must be why this country has so many art museums so full of so much art.

Then there was the self-inflicted abuse, this time by the **Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts**, which auctioned off one of its two paintings by Edward Hopper to raise money to buy contemporary art. The news release announcing this event noted that the academy had already acquired a video installation by Bill Viola — which doesn’t exactly bode well — while Harry Philbrick, the director of the academy, remarked in an interview that buying contemporary art is “a crapshoot.”

By that measure, the Hopper appears to be one of the few paintings in the academy’s collection that is an actual crapshoot winner. And its reward? Being sold for \$40.5 million. It will be interesting to see what contemporary art the academy acquires with these shabbily gotten gains.

Another bit of farce played out this fall when the estate of the American sculptor **David Smith**, advised by VAGA, the licensing and rights organization, lodged a copyright complaint against a Brooklyn artist, **Lauren Clay**. Ms. Clay was about to exhibit miniature versions of Smith’s large, welded, stainless-steel “Cubi” sculptures that she had fashioned in pastel-painted papier-mâché. VAGA thought she should have requested (and probably paid for) the estate’s permission. Although Ms. Clay would seem to have had a strong “fair use” case, she understandably lacked resources and agreed not to make further works of this nature.

What kind of paranoia or ignorance caused this sad and unnecessary trampling on one artist’s rights by the keepers of another artist’s flame? By this standard, Leonardo’s legacy would be threatened by Marcel Duchamp’s addition of a mustache to the Mona Lisa. Picasso should have complained about all the Picassoid works that Arshile Gorky made on his way to originality. And Brancusi’s protectors should be up in arms about the fairly faithful but clearly fake versions of his “Endless Column” and “Newborn” by artists like Richard Pettibone and Sherrie Levine. The incident left a chill in the air and tainted Smith’s legacy far more than Ms. Clay’s pastel “Cubi” did.

A version of this article appears in print on December 15, 2013, on page AR24 of the New York edition with the headline: Rays of Light and Menacing Shadows.