

# The New York Times

Judy Chicago: "Best Art of 2023"

By Roberta Smith and Holland Cotter

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From left, Henry Taylor's "Untitled, 2022," "Untitled, 2022 " (partial view) and "Fatty, 2006" at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Karsten Moran for The New York Times.

**In addition to its impressionist matchup "Manet/Degas," the Met unveiled Lauren Halsey's spectacular new rooftop installation. Our critics weigh in on this year's most thrilling shows.**

ROBERTA SMITH

## **Invigorating, Surprising, Sometimes Even Violent Color**

Color has a life all its own. Without art, without people, it is everywhere, one of the natural wonders of the world. Still what people have managed to do with it sometimes seems miraculous, a gift. Especially in art, where its generosity and warmth become even more direct. Many of my fondest art memories this year involved powerful doses of saturated or unusual color, manifest in a variety of materials and techniques.

## **Edvard Munch at the Clark Art Institute**

It started with two historic exhibitions that looked afresh at the innovations in color and paint handling that made early Western modernism possible. The summer brought "Edvard Munch: Trembling Earth," a survey of his career at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mass., that concentrated on his involvement with nature and the landscape. The show introduced a less anguished Munch, whose improvisatory stain painting and fresh unexpected colors were ahead of their time.

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## 'Vertigo of Color' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art



André Derain's "Environs of Collioure (Environs de Collioure)," 1905.

Credit: Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; via Galerie Philippe David, Zurich

Further adventures in loose painting and bold colors arrived in October with "Vertigo of Color: Matisse, Derain and the Origins of Fauvism," on view at the Met through Jan. 21. It examined the first, possibly shortest modern art movement of the 20th century, which solidified during the summer of 1905 when Henri Matisse and André Derain worked side-by-side in the South of France. It came to be labeled "les Fauves," or "the wild beasts," amid the scandal their work ignited at the Salon d'Automne that fall. The artists were influenced by Munch's work, but they went for stronger colors and juicier surfaces. Whether or not this show breaks new art-historical ground, it should earn Fauvism an expanded presence in the annals of modernism.

### Doyle Lane at David Kordansky Gallery

In New York's galleries, one of the season's color surprises was an exhibition of 100 eye-popping weed pots made by the little-known Los Angeles-based ceramic artist Doyle Lane from the late '50s to the early '70s. The show, at David Kordansky, constituted the first New York solo of his work. With their small spherical bodies and short, narrow necks (to hold the stem of a weed), Lane's pots were charmingly eccentric. But the colors and unusual surface textures that he

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devised for them have a stunning intensity. (It helped that he favored bright reds and oranges.) When it comes to saturated, man-made color, glazes can leave paint-on-canvas in the dust.

### Henry Taylor at the Whitney Museum of American Art

"Henry Taylor: B Side" at the Whitney Museum (through Jan. 28) didn't take this challenge lying down. This thrilling retrospective, which originated at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, established the L.A.-based artist, now 65, as one of the greatest painters of his generation. His subject is the sometimes gritty reality of Black life in America — from family and community to politics and incarceration — conveyed without resorting to a traditionally realist style. His images are strengthened by his blunt sense of form and composition and his use of slab-like planes of color. With his lavish surfaces, Taylor's figures often project a nearly physical presence.

### Bob Thompson, in 2 Places



Bob Thompson's "An Allegory," 1964.

Whitney Museum of American Art, via Michael Rosenfeld Gallery and 52 Walker, New York

The Henry Taylor show was helpfully preceded by the appearance of one of his heroes, the American painter Bob Thompson. Shows at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery and 52 Walker helped contextualize Taylor's palette, and his use of figuration, with the work of this admired painter who died in 1966 at the age of 29. Often working on small canvases, Thompson made something new by transforming the figurative schemes of Renaissance paintings into bright, monochromatic silhouettes that had a completely different energy. In addition to the heightened retinal pleasure,

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these figures exploded the traditional symbolism of the Western palette and any hierarchical notion of skin tones. Suddenly color was random, without value, and its effect alternately celebratory, chaotic or even violent.

### **Judy Chicago at the New Museum**

"Judy Chicago: Herstory" at the New Museum looks at the extensive career of this pioneer feminist and creator of "The Dinner Party," revealing that her involvement with color was as nearly various as her ways of referencing women's bodies. Small minds might qualify her colors as "feminine," but Chicago constantly intensified them or used transformative approaches. For example, in the mid-1960s, using heated-up pastels, she spray-painted automotive lacquer in symmetrical abstractions that evoked female bodies on car hoods hung on the wall. (Two decades before Richard Prince, but never mind.)

In the early '70s, she borrowed further from car decoration when, on canvas, she sprayed the squares of grids with darker pastels that fade to white. These can be taken as homages to her most radical work: the clouds of often pastel smoke, which she unleashed in the desert and sometimes in architectural settings between 1968 and 1974. These feminized ephemeral earthworks are captured at the New Museum in effortlessly voluptuous photographs.

### **'What That Quilt Knows About Me' at the American Folk Art Museum**



An 1853 appliqué bedcover by Sarah "Sallie" Ann Garges at the American Folk Art Museum's "What That Quilt Knows About Me" exhibition. American Folk Art Museum.

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One of the most invigorating outbursts of color occurred in "What That Quilt Knows About Me," at the American Folk Art Museum. This immersive display of 19th-, 20th- and even 21st-century textiles made by free and enslaved people, including a British soldier, a German tailor and an Amish farm woman reminded us that bold, undiluted color goes back a ways in the American visual vocabulary. The most powerful example in this array was a bedcover from 1853 made by Sarah "Sallie" Ann Garges of Doylestown, Pa. In embroidery and appliqué on a blazing orange ground, it accounts for many of the laborers, buildings, animals and plants that were central to farm life.

### **Gego and Sarah Sze at the Guggenheim**

There were of course some outstanding shows that had almost nothing to do with color. Two of them occurred last spring, side-by-side at the Guggenheim Museum, dovetailed to a mutually illuminating degree, with their common ground being the 1970s ideal of the elimination or, more academically, the dematerialization of the art object. The shows' titles even hinted at continuity: "Gego: Measuring Infinity" and "Sarah Sze: Timelapse."

Most of the museum's spiral ramp held a full-dress retrospective of the German-Venezuelan artist Gertrud Goldschmidt (1912-1994) who called herself Gego and whittled her art down to near-nothingness by working almost entirely with wire. She called her spare sculptures "drawings without paper." The Guggenheim's spiral was topped off with a midcareer survey of Sze, an American artist known for see-through, magically levitating installations conjured from detritus and small objects that included wire, matchsticks and tiny video screens.

### **Lauren Halsey at the Met**



Lauren Halsey's site-specific installation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, "the eastside of south central los angeles hieroglyph prototype architecture (I)" Credit: Amir Hamja for The New York Times

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Spring also brought one of the greatest works of public art New York has seen in some time, to the Met's Roof Garden. Lauren Halsey's blazing-white structure, "the eastside of south central los angeles hieroglyph prototype architecture (I)," was specific to two very different, far-flung sites: a New York museum with a big commitment to antiquities and a storied Los Angeles neighborhood. Inspired by the Met's own Temple of Dendur, Halsey's temple is incised with a wild filigree of graffiti and shop signs taken from the walls and buildings of South Central L.A. It was a battle royal of high and popular culture, and they both won.

HOLLAND COTTER

The Drumbeat of War, With Moments of Transcendence

In 2023, weekend gridlock returned to the lobbies of some of our big museums — and a heartening sight it was, a sign of continuing rebound from pandemic doldrums. As might be expected from institutions in comeback mode, we got lots of box office names (Picasso, Picasso and Picasso). But there were also surprises: unfamiliar histories, hidden careers brought to light and, at a slack moment in contemporary art, some jolts of forward motion.

'Manet/Degas' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art



Edgar Degas, "Family Portrait (The Bellelli Family)," 1858-69, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Jeenah Moon for The New York Times.

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Box office names don't get much hotter than those in "Manet/Degas," a timed-ticket show that opened in September at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and continues there through Jan. 7. Imported from Paris, where it debuted at the Musee D'Orsay, it was a tee-off event of the Met's fall season, and all the ingredients of a major event are here: charismatic images, an alluring installation, a theme — the uneasy relationship of two artist-frenemies — with plenty of flex and quirks, and a combustion chamber at the center in the form of Manet's "Olympia," on a first-time trip to New York.

### 'Tree & Serpent' at the Met

Overall, the Met had a very good year. Only steps away from "Manet/Degas," in a suite of adjoining galleries, was a show of surpassing beauty and even greater rarity called "Tree & Serpent: Early Buddhist Art in India, 200 BCE-400 CE." At its July opening, monks chanted Pali prayers, and ancient South Indian sculptures projected a visual music of their own: In them, forest birds sang, mythical creatures roared, and semi-divine beings clapped their hands and danced. In our environmentally conscious time, the museum offered a vision of an earthly paradise that's now feeling all but lost. The Met scored on the transcendence front again in November with the opening of "Africa & Byzantium," through March 3.

### International African American Museum in Charleston, S.C., and 'Africa Fashion' at the Brooklyn Museum



The International African American Museum opened in Charleston, S.C., this year.

Credit Leslie Ryann McKellar for The New York Times

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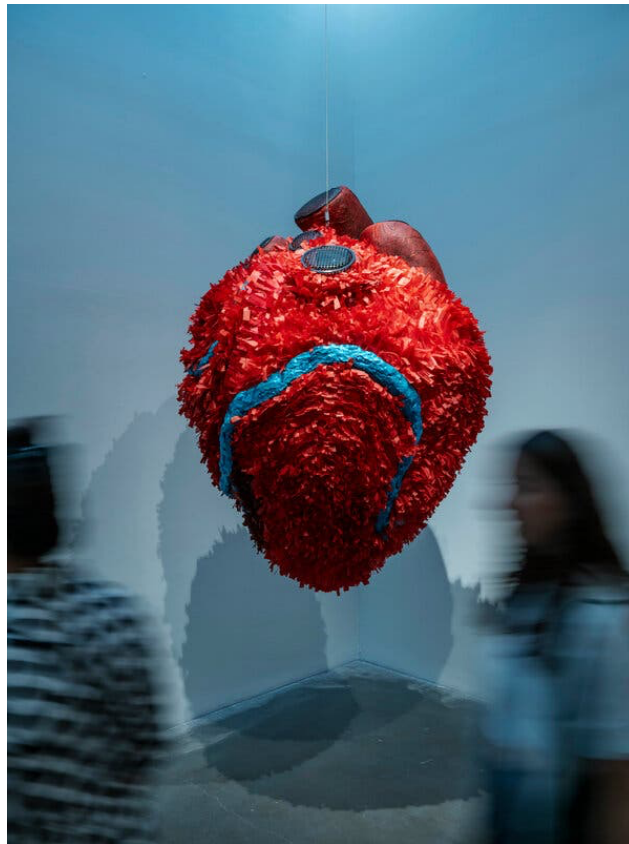
In the harbor at Charleston, S.C., on the site of a pier where, in the early 18th and 19th centuries ships carrying tens of thousands of enslaved Africans deposited their human cargo, the long-planned and much-delayed International African American Museum finally opened last June. It's the first major new museum of African American history in the country to bring Africa itself fully into the story of the Afro-Atlantic passage, and it does so through an absorbing assemblage of historical objects, ever-growing archives, multimedia installations and new art.

And giving a sense of global African culture in the present, at first hand and exuberant full force, there was the sunburst of an exhibition called "Africa Fashion" that traveled from London to the Brooklyn Museum, where it offered a lesson in historical and political showing-and-telling that the Met's Costume Institute might learn from.

### 'Indian Theater' at the Hessel Museum of Art

"Indian Theater: Native Performance, Art and Self-Determination Since 1969" at the Hessel Museum, Bard College, was, hands down, the most stimulatingly inventive contemporary group show I saw this year. It was part of a surge in visibility for new Native American art, one that began in the spring with the Whitney Museum's stirring five-decade-career survey of Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, and that continues with "The Land Carries Our Ancestors: Contemporary Art by Native Americans," organized by Smith at the National Gallery of Art.

### Two Major Solos in New York



Pepón Osorio, "My Beating Heart (Mi corazón latiente)," 2000. Credit: Karsten Moran for The New York Times

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Air, light, height, with a tingle of vertigo, are what the Guggenheim Museum's spiraling rotunda is about. Which made it a near-ideal setting for the buoyant, lucent, constellational work of Gego, who made some of the most radically beautiful sculpture of the second half of the 20th century, as seen in a five-star, five-story Guggenheim retrospective called "Gego: Measuring Infinity."

Another exhilarating survey, "Pepón Osorio: My Beating Heart/Mi corazón latiente," at the New Museum wasn't, strictly speaking, a retrospective. It began in 1993, by which time the Puerto Rico-born artist had already been making significant work for some years, and it concluded with a project still in progress. But it captured him at creative high tide in five more-is-more environments of a kind that continue to make him, in a post-multiculturalist, identity-smoothing, melting-pot art world, an insistently anti-assimilationist voice. (Read our reviews of "Gego: Measuring Infinity" and "Pepón Osorio: My Beating Heart/Mi corazón latiente.")

### Offbeat Brilliance From Under-the-Radar Artists

And the season gave us a look at some remarkable artists who have been in the shadows. "Far-out" is an accurate, but inadequate, descriptor for the high-flying (and often plain high) cultural magus named Harry Smith. And the label "polymath," too, while true, falls short for this innovative painter-filmmaker-collagist-musicologist-designer-scholar-curator-collector/hoarder, whose very first and very strange (it could not be otherwise) institutional solo, "Fragments of a Faith Forgotten: The Art of Harry Smith" opened at the Whitney Museum in October and is on through Jan. 28.

Hard-to-slot figures like Smith too easily drop from the radar. Having them back is a gift, and two more came into view this year in "Darrel Ellis: Regeneration" at the Bronx Museum of the Arts and "Christian Walker: The Profane and the Poignant" at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art. Both shows surveyed the careers of Black gay American photographers who did experimental work, had some art-world presence in the 1980s and '90s but died young and were forgotten. They may not have crossed paths in life, but their rise into view this season instantly alters and broadens the canon.

### War



An-My Lê, "Sniper II," from the series "Small Wars," 1999-2002. Credit: An-My Lê and Marian Goodman Gallery

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The soundtrack for the 2023 season was the drumbeat of war. And war as a perpetual reality, nascent or active, is the main subject of the work of the photographer An-My Lê, whose lucid New York survey is at the Museum of Modern Art through March 9. Her specific point of reference is the American War in Vietnam, which she directly experienced. But her photographs, whether of historical skirmishes re-enacted for sport, or of life aboard U.S. military ships patrolling the globe on ostensible "peace missions," or antiwar protests, keep the ceaseless drive to combat front and center.

So does the single work that stayed with me longest this year, an hourlong fictional film by another Vietnamese-born artist, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, included in his solo show at the New Museum. Titled "Unburied Sounds of a Troubled Horizon," the film is about a young woman who runs a scrapyards in a part of Vietnam where the earth is still seeded with land mines left over from the war. There she works through her grief over a brother's death (from a cluster-bomb explosion) by learning from a Buddhist monk how to turn salvaged metal into percussion instruments, which, when struck, generate healing music. Turning bombs into chimes: an image to carry like a talisman into what threatens to be a bellicose year ahead.

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