

ART • WEEKEND

12 Revelatory Exhibitions from 2017

Each of these exhibitions showed me something I had not seen before.

John Yau | 4 days ago



Florine Stettheimer, "Asbury Park South" (1920), oil on canvas, 50 x 60 inches (127 x 152.4 cm). Collection of Halley K. Harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, New York (image courtesy Jewish Museum, New York)

My roundup of memorable exhibitions from the past year includes one that opened in 2016 but closed in 2017, and one that I did not write about. The list is not arranged hierarchically so that readers should not project anything into the order in which I put them. It had to do with memory rather than preference. What guided my choices was simple: I wanted to call additional attention to exhibitions that showed me something I had not seen before, and, in some cases, might not even been aware of not having seen it.

1) *Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952-1965*, at Grey Art Gallery, New York University, curated by Melissa Rachleff

If 1962 is the dividing line between one art world and what we seem to have inherited — the moneyed domain of the big, slick, well-produced, and shiny, not to mention the monumental, industrial, and tastefully rusted — *Inventing Downtown* will bring you back to the period before the art world became arty, segregated, and hierarchical, and introduce you to the early work of Yayoi Kusama, Bob Thompson, Leo Valledor, Yoko Ono, Romare Bearden, Nanae Momiyama, Marcia Marcus, Robert Kobayashi, Jean Follet, Walasse Ting, Norman Lewis, and Tadaaki Kuwayama.

2) *Florine Stettheimer: Painting Poetry* at the Jewish Museum

The painting "Asbury Park South" (1920) is about an Enrico Caruso recital on July 4, 1920, at Asbury Park. We have a slightly elevated view of the boardwalk, pier, beach, and ocean, all bathed in different hues of yellow. Although Asbury Park was a segregated beach, with designated areas for blacks and whites, Stettheimer shows us an integrated social milieu of families, people dressed to the nines and bathers frolicking in the calm water. The audience in the grandstand viewing this scene is also a mixture of blacks and whites. It is a fantasy and it is whimsical and it is something more.



Flora Crockett, "Untitled" (n.d), oil on canvas board, 20 x 24 inches (image courtesy Meredith Ward Fine Art)

3) *Flora Crockett: works from the 1940s and 1950s* at Meredith Ward

In 1937, by now in her mid-40s, Flora Crockett returned to America from France, divorced and alone. She rented an apartment on 14th Street and Eighth Avenue, where she lived and worked until she died in St. Vincent's Hospital in 1979. Despite the lack of recognition, and having to work full-time, Crockett persevered and produced a remarkable body of work deserving of our attention. One reason for our consideration is that, by some standard, she did everything wrong: she made easel pictures on prefabricated canvas board;

she made impure abstract paintings; she seems not to have given a fig about what the Abstract Expressionists were up to.

4. *Teju Cole: Blind Spot and Black Paper* at Steven Kasher

Teju Cole's filmic pairing of photograph and text turn the images into shots from an ongoing chronicle of what he has seen and the states of consciousness it has provoked in him, the unexpected connections and associations. These include biblical texts, classical texts, yesterday's and today's news, memories, research, and much else. They are a record of a man's attempt to stay alive and alert, open to the world he is literally passing through.

5. *Stanley Whitney: Drawings* at Lisson Gallery

This exhibition opened up a wider and deeper view of a major artist whose drawings underscore a central feature of his work: he has never retreated toward refining complexities or softening the dissonance.

6. *Ruth Asawa* at David Zwirner

She was a woman of Japanese ancestry making art in the years after World War II, which was a double whammy. Looking at this exhibition, and thinking about Asawas' persistence and generosity, I realized why Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" has often bothered me. In that poem, read by nearly all American schoolchildren, the poet talks about taking the road "less traveled." That is all fine and dandy if you have that choice. Asawa did not. More than once, she had to make a road where there was none. She was a pioneer out of necessity.

7. *Marcia Marcus, Role Play: Paintings 1958-1973* at Eric Firestone

In 1960, during the rise of Pop art and Minimalism, the art world was not ready to accept Marcus's conceptual approach to portraiture. Perhaps now it is.

8. *Stanley Rosen: Beginnings* at Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects

Stanley Rosen taught at ceramics at Bennington College from 1960 until 1991. Other faculty



Marcia Marcus, "Florentine Landscape" (1961), oil on canvas, 78 1/2 x 94 1/2 inches, Neuberger Museum of Art Purchase College, State University of New York; gift of Roy R.

Neuberger (image courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery, New York)

the first solo exhibition of his sculptures and drawings to be presented in New York.



Stanley Rosen, "Untitled" (2016), stoneware clay, 10 1/4 x 10 3/4 x 4 1/2 inches, photo: Peter Crabtree (all photos courtesy Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects)

members during this time included Pat Adams, Anthony Caro, Paul Feeley, Vincent Longo, Jules Olitski, and Tony Smith. Rosen is 90, and this was

9. *Matt Bollinger: Between the Days* at Zürcher Gallery

Matt Bollinger's attention to quotidian details and Middle American atmospherics is extraordinary. He is interested in the different kinds of light that fill this world – the pale green light of a computer's screensaver, the subdued, dusty pink light of morning, the gray light cast by a television watched by someone alone in the dark. On the screen, we see pale green tears falling. Emotions are what other people have. Bollinger combines dispassionate observation and extreme tenderness towards his subjects, an unlikely combination that

gives his works an emotional depth few of his figurative contemporaries are able to attain.

10. *Ad Reinhardt: Blue Paintings* at David Zwirner

We forget that Ad Reinhardt was in his mid-50s when he died. This show of 28 blue paintings show two sides of Reinhardt, the restless experimenter with a sensitive touch and the master of renunciation and austerity. In the blue paintings done before 1952, when he settled on a square format and a rigorously sectioned composition, every work was different. Reinhardt was not interested in doing the same thing twice, which suggests that we might be looking at the later blue and the black paintings wrong. The vertical paintings convey his lifelong interest in making extreme statements in which looking is central.



Kerry James Marshall, "Bang" (1994), acrylic and collage on canvas 8 ft. 7 in. x 9 ft. 6 inches, the Progressive Corporation (© Kerry James Marshall)

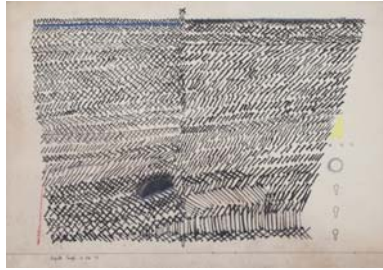
11: *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry* at Met Breuer

This show opened on October 25, 2016 and closed on January 29, 2017, spanning the convulsive change that America began to undergo when it elected Donald Trump as President on November 7, 2016, and inaugurated him on January 20, 2017. In his merging of medium and subject matter, Marshall recognized that he had to insert himself into a history that was declared finished, and therefore closed off to him and to others — women and artists of color. The authorities (or are they the authoritarians?) who pronounced painting to be dead lived in a bubble: they refused to recognize how neatly the narrative they kept spinning fit into

the erasures and belittlements characterizing America's modern era. This era is marked by the Dred Scott decision (1857), the Chinese Exclusion Act (1880), Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896), Hollywood's denigration of blacks and Asians throughout its history, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's executive order (February 1942) ordering the relocation of all Americans of Japanese ancestry to internment camps, the Supreme Court's overruling in 2013 of key parts of the

Voting Rights Act (1965), and the election of Donald J. Trump as President: white fear turned into the new normal. But what's normal for some is hell for others. This is why Marshall's achievement is nothing short of miraculous. Amidst all the pronouncements of the death of painting, and the celebration of the latest accommodation to that dated narrative, Marshall has refused to eat from the hand he has been offered. He has tackled social history, portraits, and history painting, and has concocted figures from his imagination without sugarcoating any of it.

12. *Arpita Singh: Tying down time* at Talwar Gallery



Arpita Singh, "Untitled" (1976), ink and pastel on paper, 18.75 x 24.75 inches (image courtesy Talwar Gallery)

An admired artist in India, Arpita Singh, who is best known for her figurative paintings of woman, often floating in an elusive space, rarely shows in America and that is our loss. These drawings will likely surprise those who know Singh's figurative work. Done between 1973 and '82, these abstract drawings confirm the restless, experimental current running through her art. During this time, working with a pen or brush to apply ink and/or poster paint to paper, which often has a rough tooth, Singh never settles into a mode or style.

Paradoxically, the works are circumscribed and remarkably open. The drawings are stark and sensuous, bleak and overflowing. They evoke joy and tragedy, purpose and purposelessness. I found them deeply moving, even if I could not give a name to what I was feeling.