

BEST OF 2022 ART EXHIBITIONS

# ‘Tea, Torture & Reparations’ at DePaul, an outdoor ‘Flourish’ and a big year for the Cultural Center



Lori Waxman

It's been kind of a nice year in the visual arts: no museum closures; not a ton of major scandals; and many ways in which toxic philanthropy, colonial collecting norms and long-term racist, sexist and classist practices are beginning to be structurally reckoned with.

The Smithsonian announced a new policy allowing its constituent museums to repatriate items acquired unethically, including most of its Benin Bronzes. The Guggenheim and British Museum, among others, removed from their walls the name of the Sackler family, owners of the pharmaceutical company Purdue Pharma behind the opioid epidemic. Cultural workers are forming unions at the art schools and museums where they labor across the U.S.

Yes, Documenta 15 was overshadowed by the discovery of anti-Jewish imagery hiding in plain sight. Yes, Ukrainian cultural institutions have been attacked and looted by Russian forces, in a systematic attempt to subsume one nation's culture under another's. And yes, tomato soup and mashed potatoes have been thrown at priceless works of art in a bid for climate justice.

But calm down, the paintings will be fine — and the desperation is real. Let's try truly paying attention to something other than obscene financial valuations and see how it all feels a year from now.

In the meantime, here are the shows I loved and learned from most this year, more or less in chronological order.

**Everything at the Cultural Center:** No, that wasn't the name of a show, but it expresses how nearly every exhibit I saw at the Cultural Center of Chicago this year belongs on this list.

Of special note was a brave and ballsy retrospective of the painter Robert Colescott; “Instrument in the Shape of a Woman,” featuring the wildly inventive work of Leslie Baum, Diane Christiansen and Selina Trepp; the doggedly quiet observations of photographer Jin Lee; and, on view through the new year, Nelly Agassi's surreal observations about architecture, plants and the female body.

**“Exits Exist: Barbara Stauffacher Solomon”:** The nonagenarian innovator of letterforms gave the Graham Foundation's Madlener House the supergraphics treatment, meaning she had its walls painted over in the giant playful typography for which she has been famed since the 1960s. The show, which originally filled two floors of the Prairie-style mansion, has been compressed into just the ground floor and extended through February 2023.

**“Remaking the Exceptional: Tea, Torture & Reparations | Chicago to Guantánamo”:** The hardest-hitting show of the year was put on at the DePaul Art Museum by Amber Ginsburg and Aaron Hughes, featuring their collaborative work and that of many other artists and collectives, incarcerated and not, reckoning with the connections between police brutality and black-site torture, and how to fight back through creative resistance and international solidarity.

**“Flourish: The Garden at 50”:** The Chicago Botanic Garden's festive anniversary show featured something for everyone, spread out among the property's glorious plantings and landscapes. Visitors could



“Plasticus porticus” by Cody James Norman, seen May 26 at the Chicago Botanic Garden, is made of recycled plastics from the garden and local households. ERIN HOOLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE



ABOVE: Etel Adnan, “Autumn in Yosemite Valley,” 1963-1964, oil on canvas. Part of “Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s-1980s” at the Block Museum in Evanston. THE BARJEEL ART FOUNDATION



ABOVE: A retrospective of painter Robert Colescott was on exhibit at the Cultural Center of Chicago. ROBERT COLESCOTT

RIGHT: “Comfort Items, Camp 5 (Stop lying to the world)” by Debi Cornwall and Djamel Ameziane (2015) from “Remaking the Exceptional: Tea, Torture & Reparations | Chicago to Guantánamo” at the DePaul Art Museum. COURTESY



frolic amid Patrick Dougherty's fantastical towers, made of twisted willow saplings; meander under Cody James Norman's rainbow trellis of recycled plastic; contemplate Edra Soto's spectral house afloat in the lagoon and lots more.

**“Chronicle of a Fall: Nadav Assor & Tirtza Even”:** What is home to you? This is the question the filmmakers asked a half-dozen cultural workers, all of whom immigrated to the U.S. driven by the political realities of their home countries. In the resulting feature-length documentary, presented in an immersive video environment at Gallery 400, the subjects participate and sometimes push back, the filmmakers are visible, there is no stable view of anything, and the viewer feels it all, powerfully.

**“Floating Museum: A Lion for Every House”:** In its most successful communal endeavor yet, the Art Institute partnered with the Floating Museum

collective to bring art to the people, literally. Ten hosts were chosen to live with their choice of a reproduction artwork from the Art Institute's photography collection; 10 local photographers staged domestic portraits of the hosts and their loans; and the Floating Museum assembled it all into a series of novel sculptures and an admirably coherent multipart exhibit that in its own way answered urgent questions about how museums can decentralize power, knowledge, ownership and privilege.

**“Yo Soy Museo: New works by Alberto Aguilar”:** With characteristic wit, playfulness and enthusiasm, Aguilar selected, discovered, arranged and radically reinvigorated not just the collection of the National Museum of Mexican Art but also materials from its archives, bits and bobs in deep storage, broken and remaindered items from the gift shop, and his own ongoing photographic self-portraits, in which his

face is masked by everything from a cat to a piece of bread. Aguilar asks: what's an artifact, what's an artwork, what's a prop, what's decoration? And he answers: with the right attitude, anything.

**“Toolbox” @ Twenty:** The Seldoms: Chicago's most intellectually ambitious dance troupe celebrated two decades of existence by teaming up with four of the city's most exciting artists, including DJ-sculptor Sadie Woods and fiber knitter Jacqueline Surdell. The whole process was on display at the Hyde Park Art Center from start to finish, from introductory conversations to studio tactics to the original artworks and dances that resulted from these novel collaborations.

**“Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s-1980s”:** A must-see for any and all lovers of nonrepresentational painting, this traveling show at the Block Museum offered not just

aesthetic pleasures galore but also a total rethinking of canonical modernism via courtesy artists long ignored by Western art historians, from the bright linear forms of the Casablanca School to the sensuous wit of Lebanese artist Huguette Caland and everything in between.

**Jeanne Dunning:** Not nearly enough people care about roadkill, considering its grotesque prevalence, but veteran Chicago artist Dunning does, enough to collect, preserve and sculpturally treat the remains of birds, rats and other creatures that have been nearly crushed to oblivion. In her deeply unsettling, radically unrepresentational and ethically profound show of this and other recent work at Watershed Art & Ecology, she grappled with the destruction of life and the ways in which we might truly better attend to those most neglected of animals, plants and humans too.

**Those we've lost:** OK, not quite done. A year-in-re-

view column would be remiss to leave unacknowledged those we've lost, which in 2022 included Sam Gilliam, one of the most innovative abstract painters ever and the first Black artist to represent the U.S. at the Venice Biennale; Peter Schjeldahl, The New Yorker's lyrically straight-shooting longtime art critic; Lee Bontecou, who constructed wildly aggressive wall reliefs with deep black holes and famously disappeared from the art world for decades; Claes Oldenburg, creator of monumental and sometimes quite soft sculptures of light switches and hamburgers and other pop culture items; Niki de Saint Phalle, whose unabashedly voluptuous and vivid “Nanas” could be giant enough to walk around inside; and Human, the skinny white hound with the hot pink foreleg who starred in Pierre Huyghe's garden project for Documenta 13. Rest in peace, all.

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