

Tim Griffin, "Top 10 of 2020," *Artforum*, December 2020, pp. 124 – 125.



TIM GRIFFIN

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1

JOHN BALDESSARI, IN MEMORIAM For me, even now, Baldessari is an artist hidden in plain sight. I remember visiting his retrospective at Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien in Vienna fifteen years ago and being staggered by the sheer volume of great unknown (to me) works he produced but left others to pursue: here a sculpture that clearly anticipated Jenny Holzer, there a photo sequence taken up by Mike Kelley. In this way, Baldessari's role as a teacher, turning over conventions (with the ostensibly innocuous yet transgressive power of humor) and continually creating other possibilities in art and beyond, for others, was essential to his practice and remains essential in these times.



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TOMASHI JACKSON (NIGHT GALLERY, LOS ANGELES) Jackson suggests how painting could arrive at another mode of public address—and even insist again, through armature and assemblage, on addressing viewers as necessarily social subjects. In "Forever My Lady," Jackson's appropriated images of civic reality revolved around the historical right to vote and, more specifically, around the suppression of such democratic principles for Black voters in the United States. Set and draped by Jackson on scaffolds reminiscent of awnings in Athens (where Jackson was recently artist-in-residence), the pictures—recalling flatbed painting on the one hand and *affichiste* endeavors on the other, and made all the more concrete by the projection of R&B music videos in the gallery—inevitably brought viewers' minds back to the architectures around us. Form and politic again as one.

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TRISHA DONNELLY (MATTHEW MARKS, NEW YORK) It's impossible for me to see Donnelly's sculptures apart from questions of time. Invoking classical form, they seem ruins in advance—projecting the passing of our current era, just one within a sequence of so many others—or better, disrupting any such sequence by realizing a past embedded in our present, so that her works are like stone ghosts. (This last sense is augmented by the barely seen ripples and ridges in their surfaces, which can suggest the work of masonry sects or eons of erosion.) Here, such cultural contingency was only amplified by the white-cube frame broken by the artist, who opened one rear door and removed another to reveal a brick-lined interior vestibule exposed to the elements.



3

RODNEY MCMILLIAN (PETZEL, NEW YORK) McMillian is another artist concerned with the ways in which materials accrue cultural histories and personal meaning, records that he dialed into our present in this gorgeous exhibition of crocheted blankets—some inherited, some purchased—whose painted overlays verged on abstraction while evoking, and invoking, natural landscapes. Leaping to my mind in the Upper East Side gallery setting was Douglas Crimp's well-known adage from the introduction to *On the Museum's Ruins* (1993), in which his grandmother upsets the scholar's theoretical conceits by schooling him in the difference between lace and embroidery, tooth and eye—making clear how "what any of us sees depends on our individual histories." A brilliant articulation of this principle in our day's material idioms, both mass-produced and homespun.

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1. John Baldessari with the bronze plaque from his *Cremation Project*, 1970. 2. View of "Trisha Donnelly," 2019–20, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York. All works: *Untitled*, 2019. 3. Rodney McMillian, *Untitled (setting sun)*, 2019, latex on cotton and acrylic blanket, 94 x 87". 4. Tomashi Jackson, *Girls Time (Heartbreak Hotel)*, 2020, acrylic, paper bags, Pentelic marble dust, canvas, fabrics, linen, inkjet print on PVC vinyl, 107 x 81 x 12".



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Petzel

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5. Al Loving, *Untitled*, 1982, mixed media, 60 1/4 x 48". 6. Jutta Koether, *100% (Portrait Robert Johnson)*, 1990, diptych, oil on canvas, each panel 59 x 27 1/2". 7. Jack Whitten, *Geometric Collusion #1*, 1981, acrylic, pastel, and charcoal on paper, 26 1/2 x 19". 8. Robert Longo, *Untitled (Refugees Moonbird Sighting, Mediterranean Sea; May 5, 2017)*, 2019, charcoal on mounted paper, 97 x 120". 9. Simone Leigh, *Brick House*, 2019, bronze. Installation view, High Line Plinth, New York. Photo: Timothy Schenk.



5
"WITH PLEASURE: PATTERN AND DECORATION IN AMERICAN ART, 1972–85" (MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES; CURATED BY ANNA KATZ WITH REBECCA LOWERY)
 Few recent exhibitions so powerfully prompted a revisiting of art history as "With Pleasure," a proliferating constellation of buoyant shapes and colors demanding not only that we recognize anew the significance of the Pattern and Decoration movement but also that we consider how it stood in counterpoint to and proximate dialogue with contemporaneous Minimalist exercises. If turning away from Minimalism in concept was an impulse for such work (see Janet Kozloff's 1976 manifesto for the "anti-pure," "An Answer to Ad Reinhardt's 'On Negation'—Negating the Negative," which wall texts used as a frame), today the material politic of putting art back in everyday life is palpable. Among the quiet revolutions for an art system in transition: Al Loving's 1975 "painting" made from strips of fabric cut up and sewn back together, inspired by his grandmother's quilting. Another, from 1982, seemed made yesterday.



8
ROBERT LONGO (METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK) Longo is willing to see what most others look past even now in the Western world's steady communications stream, and his "Pictures" practice remains among the most qualified to tackle the explosive imagery that has rendered our everyday political sphere—as represented in the media—so ambiguous and even remote. His is a history painting for a time when narratives are continually turned; he gives pictures renewed realism, as well as a necessary tactility, in an era when technological abstraction reigns.

6
JUTTA KOETHER (LÉVY GORVY, NEW YORK) Forever agile, Koether has been integral to scenes from Cologne to New York, and her different lives were incarnated in this powerful exhibition of new large-scale canvases paired with works from the 1980s and '90s, all of them summoning and navigating different eras of painting's collective reception—and rejection. Yet Koether's twin-canvas piece *100% (Portrait Robert Johnson)*, 1990, speaks to her infectious ethos of commitment, whatever the contingencies or clichés: a ruby-red expressionist portrait of the blues musician alongside blocks of text that survey terms for artistry from ASTRAL and SPIRITUAL to OBSESSED and MACHINE (to say nothing of AURA). It should come as no surprise that Koether's latest portrait in this register, *Neue Frau (New Woman)*, 2019, is of leftist phenom AOC.

7
JACK WHITTEN (HAUSER & WIRTH, NEW YORK) Similarly traversing eras of reception, "Transitional Space," a survey of Whitten's works on paper, was exceptional for its compressed sweep of a practice steeped in fundamental materiality: drawings that are by definition traces of an intimate mode extended across decades, shuttling from representation to abstraction and, more provocatively, from abstract idea to studied execution. Here again was an artist whose work never conforms to the day's overarching concepts, or any aesthetic regime, making the show as resonant in its resistance as ever.



9
SIMONE LEIGH, BRICK HOUSE (THE HIGH LINE, NEW YORK) Leigh's monumental *Brick House* sculpture intrigued me from the start for being seen as much in transit as at rest: One frequently encounters it from below, walking or stuck in traffic (or speeding along, if you're lucky). It stands rooted in a place, a marker on a path, but it lingers in the mind long after it is out of view. Installed in spring 2019, it has made me reconsider it against the backdrop of the neighborhood and its strange cadences of metropolitan structures developed and volumes emptied. The terms for monumentality have been inverted, with the figure newly creating the ground. Said differently, and architecturally: Whereas spaces have long shaped behaviors, perhaps our moment possesses a commutative property.

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SPECULATIVE THEORY To paraphrase John Cage, these days it feels like one can hear the old music. The old books come alive in a moment of urgency (and slow-motion emergency). Language has often had a bad rap in art circles, and rightly so, given its historical tendency toward totalizing concepts and an impression of critical models' diminishing returns. But surpassing this skepticism is a growing hunger to describe what might yet come of this saturnine year and emergent age. □