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The Year in Arts: Visual Art

Fine shows abounded last year in traditional and surprising places

7 JAN 2009 • by Amy White

A storefront in downtown Durham. An abandoned barn in Cedar Grove. A church in Chapel Hill. And a few museums and galleries, too. In these venues, likely and unlikely, 2008 was full of possibilities for vital, worthwhile art in the Triangle. Looking back at the year, there was no one obvious place to enjoy artwork but rather an ever-percolating mix of options that often delivered surprise, interest and depth.

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It seemed the world was watching the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke this year, with two high-profile exhibitions, starting with Barkley Hendricks' *Birth of the Cool*, designated by *Vogue* magazine as one of the 25 cultural "must-see" exhibitions of the year. The show didn't disappoint, focusing primarily on Hendricks' life-size portraits of everyday people. These works functioned simultaneously as cultural time capsules of 1970s attitude and fashion and as timeless testaments to Hendricks as a formidable painter.

The other Nasher show in the national and international spotlight was *El Greco to Velázquez*, recently voted third in *Time* magazine's top 10 museum exhibitions of the year. The show boasted a scholarly breakthrough, a revision of the cultural history surrounding the reign of Philip III in 17th-century Spain. The show was a rare opportunity to view paintings by acknowledged masters and relatively unknown artists of significant quality. The scholars who wrote about the exhibition in its catalog tended to downplay the bleak undercurrent of the Inquisition—and its attendant violence and persecution. After writing about the show I discovered Jonathan Kirsch's book, *The Grand Inquisitor's Manual: A History of Terror in the Name of God*, which brilliantly illuminates the mechanism of the Inquisition and traces its enduring influence throughout history from the Salem witch trials to Hitlerian strategies to the torture methods employed at Abu Ghraib.

The John Hope Franklin Center gave us several notable shows, from a fascinating display of musical scores by the great new music innovator Luigi Nono, to an investigation of the workings of young graphic novelist Dash Shaw, to a glorious archival presentation of work by notorious, seminal performance artists The Kipper Kids. All three of these exhibits, which could themselves be seen as conceptual works of art, were the brainchildren of curator Diego Cortez.



Javier Piñón's "Untitled," at Branch Gallery.

Photo courtesy of Branch Gallery

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"To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power."
—Maya Angelou

AVEDA INSTITUTE CHAPEL HILL

create balance.

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Branch Gallery served up a continuing series of strong shows, including Calvin Burton's hybrid abstract/ landscape/ architectural paintings and Javier Piñon's obsessive collage works that recombined rodeo cowboy imagery with interior design elements such as chairs and chandeliers. Another highlight was Nadine Robinson's powerhouse installation "Das Hochzeitshaus (The Wedding House)" (2003), a tower of white booming loudspeakers that radiated an aural environment, a cacophony of wild laughter, evangelical proselytizing and speaking in tongues.



Robert Rauschenberg's "Painting with Grey Wing," from its *Circa: 1958* show at Ackland Art Museum

Photo courtesy of Ackland Art Museum

Julie Mehretu's *City Sitings* at the North Carolina Museum of Art introduced this phenomenal young artist and her huge-scale cartographic works to the region. Durham's new Golden Belt arts complex offered a beautiful installation of reproductions of Jacob Lawrence's *Migration* series of 60 paintings, stunningly installed in the raw open space of a former factory building. The Ackland celebrated its 50th anniversary with *Circa: 1958*, a stellar overview of more than 60 artists working at a "hinge" moment in modern art, a time of radical inquiry and transition. A few standout presentations at Horace Williams House included Rachel Campbell's whimsical narrative works in oil and Ellen Giamportone's atmospheric night scenes, evidentiary photographs that seemed to solve imaginary criminal investigations.

Wootini presented a few standout shows, in particular the crazed technicolor graphics of UPSO (aka Dustin Amery Hostetler). *Low End Theories* at Lump was a smart survey of young practitioners engaging in high-low strategies. Amy S. Kauffman's installation "Fleet(ing)," a minimalist floor work constructed of paper chewing gum wrapper boats, was an ephemeral gesture that carried aesthetic

A vertical stack of logos. At the top is the David Wade Salon logo, featuring a stylized 'DW' in yellow and black. Below it is the 'LOCAL LOGOS' logo in white text on a black background. Underneath is the 'intrepid media' logo in blue text on a white background. At the bottom is the 'support the locals!' logo in white text on a black background.

A red banner with the text "VIEW OUR ADVERTISERS!" in white. Below the banner is a photograph of a wooden sign with a white arrow pointing right and the text "OPEN FOR BUSINESS" in white.

weight. Also at Lump was a vibrant solo exhibition of Canadian [Jason de Haan](#), whose new-age mad-scientist construction "Hope, Love, Peace, Healing, Generosity, Purpose, Harmony" (2008) sent oscillating sound waves through clusters of multicolored crystals.

[Taj Forer](#)'s agrarian photo documentation projects materialized in multiple locales (including Raleigh's reawakening Contemporary Art Museum) and, in the spirit of aesthetic collaborator Wendy Ewald, was manifested not only in Forer's own photographs but in those taken by participants in workshops held at the Anathoth Community Garden in Cedar Grove, N.C. [elin o'Hara slavick](#) masterminded several engaging group shows, including *Heroes at Lump*, *The Holy Show* at the Community Church of Chapel Hill and an ongoing curatorial effort bringing young artists to the walls of [TABLE](#), a food bank organization in Carrboro.



"Lettuce Harvest, Cedar Grove, North Carolina," by

Taj Forer at CAM/ Flanders 311

Photo courtesy of Flanders 311

Other out-of-the-way surprises included a one-day exhibit called *Dot Matrix* that took place last month in a barn deep in the farmland outside of Hillsborough. It turned out to be a group of proactive art students from Piedmont Community College and their teacher, artist (and Team Lump member) Jerstin Crosby, whose spontaneous, sprawling, corrugated-box and rubber-ball sculpture set forth the plaintive decree: "Even Sculptures Get Sad Sometimes." Another venue that is always better than one might expect, given its minimal space and skewed architecture, is the back room of Nested, the home interiors store in Carrboro that features a rotating monthly exhibit. This year's offerings included "Condition, Circumstance, Order," Kerri Lockwood's photography and mixed-media installation that juxtaposed real scissors with subtle, vulnerable images of the

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body. Joanna Welborn's sociological study at the The ArtsCenter of Carrboro, entitled *Are We Friends?*, offered a fresh mysterious quirkiness in photographs of people hiding behind photographic masks of their imagined selves. Also at The ArtsCenter, in its East End rental gallery, was a tour de force by artist-as-imaginary-friend [Oleg Lulin](#) (who may or may not actually be real-life artist Amanda Barr), whose thorough conception "From Saratov, with Love" included a sculptural fake moustache, expressive ink dog portraits, clunky but sublimely metaphysical wall sculptures and a goopy plaster cast "self-portrait" that felt vaguely reminiscent of Stalin and made no bones about the metal pants hanger protruding at its base.


The year drew to a resounding close with [LRLR RLRR](#), a performance by artists Casey Cook and Harrison Haynes that took place at Branch Outpost, a converted storefront in Durham. Both artists, who are also skilled rock drummers, set up drum kits on either side of the storefront windows and embarked on a two-hour repetition of the same locked-in minimalist drum pattern. The result was both meditative and energizing, fascinating as theater, music, dance, sculpture and social experiment.


In the last moments of this year, between Christmas and New Year's, I found myself at Wilmington's [Cameron Art Museum](#) and caught the exhibition of *From Bearden to Ruscha*, a selection of contemporary paintings on loan from the N.C. Museum of Art. Familiar works such as Betty McIver's "Reminiscing" (2005), Ed Moses' "Blk-Jack" (1995) and Ed Ruscha's "Scratches on the Film" (1993) came to life in this space, presented with a freshness and clarity. Here's hoping the year ahead will prove the new buildings currently under construction at the NCMA to be as effective—and that interesting art will continue to appear in venues both formal and improvised.

3 COMMENTS

“ I've never really understood the belief that photography is art. The art of any subject involves the hand of the artist...a machine is not a hand. A FLOATING COWBOY, TOTALLY MACHINE MADE, IS NOT ART. To pay money to assume an attitude of superior awareness is not only insane it is the epidimy of the emporor has no clothes. Van Gogh may have been insane but he an artist.

by graurog (graurog@sbcglobal.net) • , California • 8 Jan 2009, 3:33pm • [Report this comment](#)

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