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BALTIMORE CITY PAPER | 12/10/2008

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Top Ten

The Year in Art



MITRO HOOD

Franz West. Sisyphos @Ix. 2002. Installation At BMA. The Rachofsky Collection. (C)Franz West.

best show of the year because it embodies what the Baltimore art scene is all about: It is a ballsy, irreverent romp with everyday materials and a devil-may-care attitude. West may be an international super-artist from Austria, but his attitudes and sentiments are refreshed and renewed here in Baltimore. Hands-on, clunky, hilarious, and, even ugly, West's oeuvre of furniture, collage, installation, and sculpture compels and fascinates Baltimore viewers because it mirrors and embodies us. (Cara Ober)

2 Grimaldis @ 405, Area 405

"Area 405" sounds like it should be located in a remote spot of the New Mexico desert and, fittingly, the gallery is a wee bit off the beaten path for the average Artscape patron. But C. Grimaldis Gallery's satellite exhibition of large-scale sculpture held in Area 405's industrial space was more than worth the extra effort to find. Outside of Grimaldis' usual white-box format, the works revealed new and unexpected facets. Chul Hyun-Ahn's "Tunnel" was the show's real stand-

BALTIMORE'S ART COMMUNITY continued to grow in activity and quality in 2008, and it's increasing scope is the primary reason *City Paper* changed up its year-end top picks process a tad this year. So much is going on in visual art in Baltimore right now a good deal of it doesn't always get covered in local media, including *CP*, and in our current hobo economy mainstream media arts coverage, sadly, is often one of the first to feel the constriction of the belt. (Fact: The sports desks will *always* be better staffed than the arts.) So for this year's Top 10 list *CP* asked for top 10 lists from its visual arts writers--Martin L. Johnson, Bret McCabe, and Kate Noonan--and lists from local arts bloggers Cara Ober (Bmore Art) and Alex Ebstein (There Were Ten Tigers) in an effort to offer a more varied Top 10 list and, ideally, bring some *CP* reader attention to other arts coverage out there. Plus, as in any arts community, we're all in this small boat together. (See citypaper.com for individual top 10 lists.)

1 Franz West, To Build a House You Start With the Roof: Work 1972-2008, Baltimore Museum of Art

The BMA's Franz West retrospective doesn't win the prize because it is an edgy, ambitious, or challenging show. It doesn't even win because it brought international press (finally) to a Baltimore institution. *To Build a House* is the

out, eliciting both fear and wonderment with the use of mirrors and light to create the optical illusion of an infinite abyss. (Kate Noonan)

3 Agenda: Queering Popular Media, Current Gallery

Curator Jamillah James' *Agenda* is *fun*. Self-aware in its humor, and often heavy handed, the exhibition tackles issues surrounding the impact of homosexuality and fringe lifestyles on contemporary media. With a large dose of video and installation-based work by more than 30 artists--including top dogs such as Ryan Trecartin, K8 Hardy, and Dynasty Handbag--the exhibition is big, bold, and exciting. Over three hours of looping video footage is included throughout the exhibition, with a schedule of additional screenings, including Trecartin's critically acclaimed *I Be Area* and Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning*. *Agenda* boasts a symbiotic relationship with contemporary media, finding ways to react to, mock, and reclaim it in new and seriously ballsy ways. (Alex Ebstein)

4 Sondheim Prize Finalists, Baltimore Museum of Art

This year's list topper and current exhibition on view at the BMA might make you forget that there was, in fact, another soaring work of brightly colored sculpture displayed in the Thalimer and May Galleries. Maren Hassinger's pink and inviting womblike "Love" set the tone for the rest of the show, which also featured the works of Becky Alprin, Melissa Dickenson, Dawn Gavin, Molly Springfield, and prize winner Geoff Grace. Grace's mind-boggling installation piece, "it's the linger, not the long" adeptly blended the theoretical with the everyday and proved that conceptual art really can be approachable after all. (Kate Noonan)

5 Jeffrey Kent, The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly, Creative Alliance at the Patterson

The works of local painter Jeffrey Kent find mysterious, endearing ways to combine moods and ideas that don't always cohabit so vibrantly and invitingly within in the same vocabulary, much less on the same canvas. Kent's sometimes comic-book inspired, frequently text-heavy images evoke moments of both the raw and the pristine, the muscular and the vulnerable, the life-changing and the mundane, and the unmistakable power his images exude come from such a controlled orchestration of such heavy and subdued moments. Kent's works derive power not from blunt juxtaposition, but from creating new moods, feelings, and from familiar human foibles. (Bret McCabe)

6 Habitat, Rosenberg Gallery at Goucher College

Recent Baltimore transplant Sebastian Martorana may have not come up with the idea of a "Homeland Security Blanket," but his execution of the concept gets the terror and terroir of the Bush years exactly right. Sculptured in white marble, the piece depicts a blanket, a stars and stripes-less American flag, shrouding the body of a young child. This work, which sits innocuously on the floor of the home-themed exhibit *Habitat* at Goucher College, may be the show's highlight, but the disparate pieces--from photographs of neglected houses being reclaimed by nature to hyper-real paintings of sleeping bags--collectively gather everything safe and scary about the place of home in everyday life. (Martin Johnson)

7 Cliff Evans Empyrean, the Library

Cliff Evan's five-channel video installation "Empyrean" gave Baltimore a taste of international quality: superbly crafted new media work in an equally lofty and pristine environment. Co-curated by erstwhile *City Paper* contributor Jason Hughes at the Library and Andrea Pollan of Curator's Office, "Empyrean" presented a loose narrative of appropriated and layered imagery so perfectly edited it was seamless. Relying on Renaissance painting esthetics, Evans' chaotic and beautiful piece utilized luscious texture, luminous skin, and quirky pop cultural references to examine global politics, television, fashion, and consumerism. Visually seductive, "Empyrean" is similar to and equally compelling as the Russian video sensation "Last Riot" by AES F, an outstanding work at the 2007 Venice Biennale. Luckily, we Baltimoreans only needed to travel to Federal Hill. (CO)

8 Cottage Industry, Contemporary Museum

In a year in which a Louis Vuitton store opened as part of the Brooklyn Museum of Art's Takashi Murakami exhibit, it's hard to remember when putting Van Gogh on a coaster was reason for outrage. But just when museums and megastores appear to be moving toward a merger--Warhols in Aisle 6, housewares in Gallery D--the Contemporary Museum's celebration of small-scale art entrepreneurs, aptly titled *Cottage Industry*, reminded us that art and commerce can exist in peace. In what has been a trend this year at the Contemporary, the best pieces were outside the museum's walls, particularly Fritz Haeg's "Edible Estates" lawn garden in Northwest Baltimore and Lisa Anne Auerbach's

storefront satire "The Tract House." (MLJ)

9 Ethnography of No Place, Rosenberg Gallery at Goucher College

Curator Laura Amussen's *Ethnography of No Place* dealt with psychological landscapes and imagined places. Rosenberg Gallery, a difficult space to unify, was transformed with each artist's vision of "no place," and the seven participating artists worked within the theme in a variety of dynamic ways, creating imagined spaces out of everything from mylar to maps to doll house furniture. Viewers followed the lazy waves of Kazue Taguchi's installation to the neon peaks of Aili Schmeltz's string mountains, stopping in all the invented architecture along the way. The lack of human presence within the work, much of which employed or referenced familiar materials, offered an isolating view into a beautiful but desolate set of spaces. (AE)

10 Sonya Clark, Loose Strands, Tight Knots, Walters Art Museum

As symbol and substance, human hair, whether on one's head or stored in objects, connotes both strength and weakness, virility and love. Sonya Clark--who makes historically informed, delicate objects from her own hair--made use of the Walters' collection to establish a history of art through accumulations of human hair. From wreaths of dreadlocked human hair to a print-out simulation of hair growth over the course of 100 years, *Loose Strands* reminds us of the symbolic power of our bodily excesses over the course of centuries, and accents our own intimate connection with our own hair and the hair of loved ones. (MLJ)

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