



## The Star-Ledger

### Best of 2006: ART Slightly off the wall

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Today The Star-Ledger's art and classical music critics present their roundup of the top 10 events of the year in those fields. Tomorrow: The year's best in pop music and jazz

YOU CAN STILL see four of the art shows on this year's 10 best list -- two in New York and two in Jersey, including Newark's "Masters of American Comics." It would be three in Jersey if 10 were not so iconic a number, because the Hunterdon Museum of Art's "War in the World: Artists Respond to the Last Five Years," showing with "Tom Nussbaum: New Work," really should be on the list, and it is up until March 25.

The common thread this year? A gallows humor, perhaps. Every show on this year's list was LOL at some point, even if unintentionally. But then, it was a grinning-past-the-graveyard sort of year in general.

#### NEW YORK

From the minute you enter "Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, still up through Feb. 19, you know you are seeing something special. In this case, the life-size cartoon, in charcoal and pencil, of Otto Dix's "Metropolis" triptych, with some 25 figures (plus one ravenous guard dog and at least three disfigured soldiers, each counting for less than one full figure for sure). The cartoon looks to be done on grocery bag paper, yet it traveled across the ocean all the same, along with a creamy froth of the best Weimar painters, from Christian Schad and Max Beckmann to George Grosz and Ludwig Meidner. This all feels so like us today.

"Kiki Smith: A Gathering, 1980-2005" at the Whitney Museum of American Art through Feb. 11 is the perfect showcase for the Boomer child of South Orange. This rambling show starts with her early tin foil and paper constructions of internal organs, moves on through her often earthy representations of the female body, and walks you out with her twisted images of popular fairy tales. Along the way, the floor and walls are scattered with her sculptures and prints like factory debris, even when the works are delicately representational -- like her spiral of giant human sperm made of Schott crystal and laid out on a black rubber mat in the middle of the floor. Or the six beautifully cast bronze crows, representing Jersey bird flu victims. One of the finest shows of any year.

You'd probably never heard of "Jean-Étienne Liotard, 1702-1789" before the Frick Collection mounted his mini-retrospective in its downstairs galleries last summer. But if you saw this exquisite show of pastels and a few oils, you probably cannot forget the cunning little portraits of Empress Marie-Therese of Austria's children, done on tracing paper with the color added on the back, so that you looked through the paper at the most sensitive blush of any hue. One of those kids was Marie Antoinette, her skin as translucent as her gaze is hard. Given this was the year of Sofia Coppola's controversial movie, how's that for timing?

"Edvard Munch: The Modern Life of the Soul" at the Museum of Modern Art, the first full-scale retrospective of the Norwegian artist in an American museum for three decades, was a wonderful show, and morose as he was you can't forget the guy. There was more to Munch than those bop-'em dolls of "The Scream" would lead you to believe. Not so much a great painter as a great feeler, he meant

everything he put on canvas, even when he put it badly. Think of him as painting's Bob Dylan, playing a dozen instruments and all of them poorly -- but, somehow, it all works.

## NEW JERSEY

This was the year we finally got to see "Anxious Objects: Willie Cole's Favorite Brands" at the Montclair Art Museum, the retrospective of one of New Jersey's best-loved and most inimitably expressive artists. Cole was born in Somerville in 1955, and he was raised in Newark by his mother, who made ends meet by working as a domestic. Cole comes out of the found object assemblage movement that swept Jersey in the 1970s, and this exhibit showcased his gift for making images out of commercial products, like his signature "slave ship" print that looks like a scorch mark made by a steam iron (a reference to his mom's work) or his "Portrait of Hattie McDaniels" made out of high-heeled shoes. Wonderful.

"Masters of American Comics" through Jan. 7 at the Newark Museum and the Jewish Museum in New York stirred controversy when one of its chief proponents, Art Spiegelman of "Maus" fame, pulled out because he didn't like splitting the show into two parts for the two museums. (Spiegelman's own work had been lumped in with Will Eisner and Harvey Kurtzman at the Jewish Museum, making Spiegelman feel comics were being somehow pigeonholed as "ethnic.") But the Newark Museum's half of the show, focused on classic strips like "Nemo in Slumberland," "Krazy Kat," "Terry and the Pirates," "Dick Tracy," "Popeye the Sailor" and many others, is transporting. And it makes you contemplate pre-World War II America, so archetypal and yet so refreshing, before the imperial drop.

If they gave awards for funny museum shows, "Tropicalisms" through Jan. 14 at the Jersey City Museum would win one for cheekiness. The largest single show yet at the new museum, it calls on a wide range of work by contemporary artists and even some 100 years or more old from the collection to contemplate the tropics as a state of mind, especially one you can enter from a New Jersey street. Like, what about a video game control box made entirely of pressed sugar? Oooh, that hot Jersey rhythm.

Every year Aljira, A Center for Contemporary Art in Newark, mounts a group show drawn from the work of students in its career-shaping program called "Emerge" (as in "emerging artists"), and this year's was the seventh generation of the alternative gallery program. Fine as these shows usually are, "Emerge 7" was something special: Crowded, aggressive, funny, it really stayed in your head. Especially the little video called "Live at Red Square" by Steve Lamb, in which Mikhail Gorbachev says the Beatles brought down the Soviet Union (really), and a cartoon John Lennon floats like Banquo's ghost while Paul McCartney's current band plays Red Square. Just so eerie.

"Newark Between Us," which closed Dec. 17, was the second big downtown art show curated by Rupert Ravens, this year set up on an abandoned floor of the National Newark Building on Broad Street. Like last year's show, it had this great buzz -- different art worlds, from Newark to Brooklyn to Germany, all colliding in an Art Deco building at the center of Jersey's largest city. There were 100 artists this year, including Yoko Ono, Robert Watts, Grace Graupe-Pillard, Carl Hazlewood, Anker West, Chakaia Booker, Willie Cole, German Pitre -- everybody was there. These shows are becoming mandatory for Jersey art lovers.

It was probably Zhang Honghu's Happy Meal boxes cast in bronze, with ancient Chinese reliefs on the cover -- the little fries box, made of bronze cast almost as thin as paper, really sticks in the mind -- that made the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey's "Travelers Between Cultures" unforgettable. Or maybe it was his huge, traditional-looking Chinese landscapes, but done in oils and in the style of a European Impressionist, like Van Gogh or Renoir. Anyway, this five-person show of Chinese-born artists who now work in the U.S. was a reward to the senses as well as a challenge to the categorizing mind, and everywhere a delight.

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