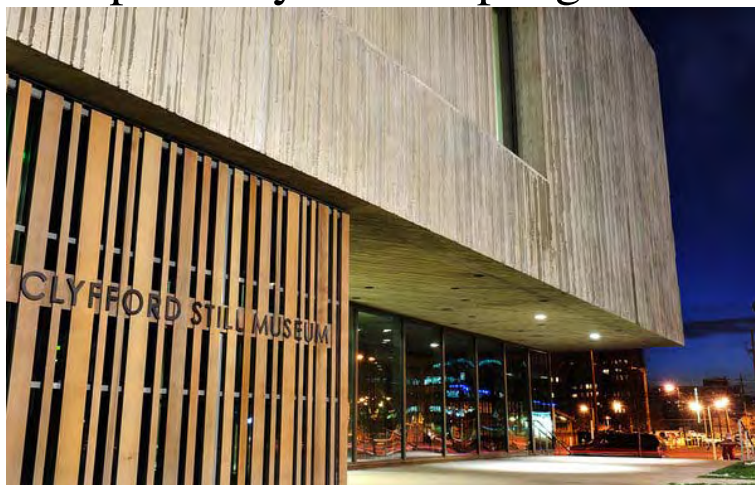


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## Art & Design

### Complacency Butts Up Against Game Changers



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THERE was a lot of painting on view in Zuccotti Park this fall, in the form of Occupy Wall Street protest posters, free for the taking. And there was a lot of painting on the walls of New York art galleries, most of it post-M.F.A. eye candy with hefty price tags. The physical distance between Lower Manhattan and the Chelsea art zone is short, but the mental and moral gap felt immeasurable. The park was about light-on-its-feet, change-the-game politics. Chelsea—leaden and inbred—was about cash and caution.

True, art-worldlings did at least adopt one thing from the Occupy Wall Street movement: a new identifying label for the source of particularly noxious vibes emanating from art fairs, V.I.P. galas and museum boardrooms: namely the 1 percent. But why, you'll ask, dis the ultrarich? Haven't they historically been the primary bankrollers of great art?

Sure, except we're not getting great art. By and large we're getting high-polish mediocrity. You had really, truly, desperately need to believe in the perpetual wondrous newness value of contemporary work to conclude that the New York gallery season just past was anything more than a long flat line, with month after month of young artists rehashing yesteryear's trends and veterans cannibalizing their own careers. Did anyone really believe, for example, that a gallery full of heavy-metal souvenirs from yet another A-list-audience-only Matthew Barney performance constituted an important event? Or that the latest line of paintings by the design-savvy Mark Grotjahn represented some kind of Ab-Ex second coming? Or that the deeply networked Larry Gagosian roundup of more half-baked, big-bucks Picassos for exhibition on West 21st Street marked the vanguard of an art-for-all revolution?

This isn't to say that galleries didn't deliver good things. Solos by the likes of David Hammons, Andrea Bowers, Bjørn Melgaard, Chris Kraus, Christian Marclay and Nicolas Guagnini, Elisabeth Subrin, **Simon Leung** [on view at CUE Art Foundation March 24 – May 7, 2011], Ben Kinmont and Rona Yefman were among shows that demonstrated otherwise, as did small surveys of the careers of Christopher D'Arcangelo (1955-79) and Mark Morrisroe (1959-89) at Artists Space, and Jean Crotti (1878-1958) at Francis M. Naumann. But considering that New York has hundreds of galleries, and hundreds upon hundreds of new shows in a year, the level of stimulation was low.

As for museums there were a few new ones. In Denver the American painter Clyfford Still (1904-80) was finally awarded the one-man shrine he insisted he deserved, while in Arkansas the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art materialized on a foundation of Wal-Mart money. And New York got the equivalent of an enlarged-and-improved museum of Islamic art with the November debut of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's luminous New Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia (which should add Sub-Saharan Africa and Indonesia to its title, along, of course, with art from both, to its title).

Overall the Met had a good run, certainly—and to its own surprise—at the box office, with its intensely theatrical Alexander McQueen retrospective, which kept admission lines long, doors open late and ideas about the line between art and fashion in a healthy state of disarray.

The Museum of Modern Art offered two classics. “De Kooning: A Retrospective” (through Jan. 9) surprised no one and thrilled everyone: we knew it would be great; it turned out to be better than that. Earlier in the season the 70 small pieces in “Picasso: Guitars 1912-1914” were not only comparably exhilarating but utterly pioneering historically.

It’s not too much to say that, in Picasso’s crazily delicate 3-D cut-and-paste ensembles the seeds of Conceptual Art’s long history were decisively sowed. And that’s a history that MoMA has in the past few years set its sights on investigating and documenting. The group exhibitions like “On Line: Drawing Through the 20th Century” found the museum probing and testing various approaches to it. The Sanja Ivekovic retrospective that opens at the museum on Sunday will surely advance this exploratory trend. Timing can mean everything with how art is received. “Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art,” at Japan Society last spring, looked, on paper, like just another Takashi Murakami spinoff. It wasn’t. It was a seriously thought through meditation on various social and metaphysical fissures spreading through 21st-century Japanese art and culture. And opening exactly a week after the earthquake and tsunami had hit northern Japan, this strong show took on the encompassing emotional pull of a psychic emergency.

“Ostalgia” at the New Museum had the same immersive effect. Filling the museum’s entire Bowery building, it was a survey of contemporary art made in Western and Eastern Europe, and in the former Soviet republics, before and after the collapse of the Communist bloc. The work by some 50 artists was passionately political to the core, but in astonishingly diverse ways. In form it ranged from painting to film to performance art; in tone from bitter hilarity to memory-haunted yearning.

The technical means used were, as often as not, modest, make do, even crude. In most cases no market rewards for the results were or could have been envisioned. This was art trying, in ways not so different from Occupy Wall Street, to come to resistant grips with the ethically embattled world around it and, by doing so, to shape history and push it in new directions. It was, in short, precisely what nearly everything in New York galleries this season was not.