

The finest arts, 2010

Best of the year in the Bay Area arts world

by Sura Wood

Well, 2010 is nearly out the door, and the time has come to reflect on the year that was. An eclectic year at the museums, 2010 was also a year of milestones. SFMOMA celebrated its 75th anniversary with expansive shows that repackaged and re-examined the museum's holdings in painting, sculpture and photography, especially California photography. The anniversary shows dominated the galleries for the better part of the year. We were also treated to a sampling of late Gap founder Don Fisher's immense modern art cache that's to fill a new wing slated for 2016. The Oakland Museum opened its freshly renovated facility in May with changes that set off its art collection to brilliant effect. The de Young marked its fifth anniversary in its Herzog & de Meuron digs, where visitors flocked for blockbuster exhibitions, by now less interested in the building's controversial architecture than what they found inside.

Here, in no particular order, are some noteworthy events of the past year.

The GLBT Historical Society's reopening: After months of delays, the museum/archive finally launched in its new, larger, and much more optimal location in the Castro in December. An official opening and additional installations are promised for Jan. 13. Stay tuned.

Most outstanding show: Although it was overshadowed by the Impressionist d'Orsay hoopla at the de Young, *Impressionist Paris: City of Light at the Legion*, which transported lucky visitors to the Paris of the late 1800s and early 1900s through a series of marvelously evocative prints, drawings, photographs, paintings, books, richly informative text labels and the Legion's superb scholarship – the best seen at any museum this year – was one of the most thrilling events of the year. Bravo!

Hands-down best photography exhibitions: *Henri Cartier-Bresson* retrospective and *Exposed* at SFMOMA; *Marc Riboud Photographs* at the UCB Journalism School.

Best formal introduction: *Maira Kalman*. Artist, illustrator, diarist and inveterate New Yorker, Kalman may be Manhattan's answer to Alexis de Toqueville, but even those familiar with her witty *New Yorker* covers and her alter ego, Max the Poet Dog, the incurably romantic canine with an affinity for Paris, didn't know her name until the Contemporary Jewish Museum's entrancing retrospective arrived. An American original who followed her bliss long before it was fashionable, she makes a living and has produced an amusing body of work through her voracious intellectual curiosity, artistic eye and sly wit. Her latest project: a book on the best places in the world to have breakfast in bed. And she gets paid to do this? Where do I sign up?

Best art doc: *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, a wild ride with the wily, canny British street/graffiti artist Banksy, pulling our leg and giving a generous tug to the pretensions of the commercial art world and its wannabes.

Vive La France! We have the Musee d'Orsay's renovation project to thank for a major injection of Franco adrenaline in 2010, with their loan of over 200 masterpieces in a pair of terrific, back-to-back shows at the de Young, the only US venue to host both. If *Birth of Impressionism* was an academic wind-up, then Part 2, *Van Gogh, Cezanne and Beyond*, hit it out of the park. In an age when people experience the world virtually and are physically attached to their computers and smart phones, the impressive attendance numbers (*Birth*: 432,389; *Van Gogh, etc.*: 298,075 as of last week) attest to the power

of art and value of up-close and personal encounters with those glorious brushstrokes and colors. You had to be there and still can, if you missed Part 2. It closes Jan. 18.

Best naughty fun: *The Bodies Are Back*. In 1971, the London police shut down a solo exhibition by feminist artist Margaret Harrison, who dared to tread the fine line between "irony, sexuality, transgender, transvestism, power, masculinity, objectification and exploitation." For her show at Intersection for the Arts, she resurrected her predominantly female forms, trussed up and spilling out of scanty, sexualized outfits, and her diabolical gender-bending from that notorious exhibit, along with new works that carried forward a mischievous, transgressive spirit. Clearly, the 70-year-old Harrison, a native Brit trained at the high-brow Royal Academy, is no less of a shit-starter now than she was 40 years ago.

Biggest double-take: SFMOMA's *How Wine Became Modern* begged the question: Does an assortment of wine labels and a paean to the marketing of the elixir of the gods really belong in a modern art museum?

Artist to watch: Brent Green. For his digital video *Gravity Was Everywhere Back Then*, Green built a movie set, an enormous crescent moon that glowed, and hung wooden stars on wires. His *Perpetual and furious refrain*, also shown at the Berkeley Art Museum, was an enthralling installation whose elements recalled the battered time-traveling contraptions filmmaker Terry Gilliam is so fond of. A "choir" of 13 willowy, elongated wooden figures were linked by copper tubing to a rotating drum (actually a salvaged water tank), a creaky sound machine that emitted musical sounds. Wow!

Most dramatic back-story: *Reclaimed* at CJM tells a critically important narrative of the ongoing restitution of works owned by Dutch art-dealer Jacques Goudstikker. His collection was stolen by Herman Goring and his cabal of thieves and murderers when they entered Amsterdam, perpetuating the Nazis' pernicious program of seizing artworks belonging to deported or fleeing Jews, then hoarding the booty for their own self-aggrandizement. It was an epic crime of the 20th century without adequate resolution or punishment. Nearly 100,000 works remain unaccounted for. Returning them would seem a moral imperative.

Shanghai'd: The Asian Art Museum's much-touted showcase of art from Shanghai was a confusing mish-mash of cool stuff that didn't hang together. It was both an unusual stumble and an admirable attempt by this museum, which usually focuses on ancient masterpieces, to mount a show rooted in the modern age. The chronology and organization were difficult to follow, and surprisingly, the work by Shanghai's younger generation of artists was its weakest link. Rumors have been circulating that the museum is facing bankruptcy, but here's hoping they pull through and thrive.

Best glimpse behind the scenes, ever!: *Pixar: 25 Years of Animation* at the Oakland Museum offered a chance to see Woody and the Gang as well as other Pixar characters in their embryonic stages, and illuminated the Emeryville-based studio's ingenuity and humor. The show, like their movies, was entertaining for both kids and their parents. Hey – those Pixar folks are classically trained artists who can really draw. Who knew?