The New York Times

Smith, Roberta. "Art Books." *The New York Times*, November 12, 2010.

November 12, 2010

Art Books

Digital may be destiny, but when it comes to holiday gifts a printed book in hand is still worth a thousand e-books bobbling around in the ether. Why? The luxe factor.

Both formats give you a reading experience. But print books give you something more: sensuosity, the experience of texture, weight, size, scent, even sound (the rustle of pages turning). And when books are physical objects, as opposed to electronic impulses, you can customize them, add your own festive touches: wrap them, tie them, stack them, inscribe them and make a splashy (or conspicuously discreet) impression when the gift-giving moment arrives. So a holiday rule of thumb: Digital's fab, the future; but for sheer visual allure hard copy is hard to beat. And, as you'll see in the lists by the art critics of The New York Times that follow, there's some sensational hard copy out there this year. — *HOLLAND COTTER*

Holland Cotter

If gift size is an issue, you can be assured that every season will bring coffee-table books as big as coffee tables, and this year is no exception. There may be larger, heavier tomes around than Prestel's **ALBRECHT DÜRER** (published this month). But there can't be many.

The book's text, by the German art historian Norbert Wolf, dutifully lays out an up-to-date account of a German artist who virtually defined the term Renaissance man. But the pictures are the attraction here: all known Dürer paintings, and a few that are in dispute, are reproduced, many in crackle-magnifying close-up, along with drawings and prints. The life-size Dürer self-portrait on the cover, in which he dares us not to compare him to Jesus, is alone almost worth the $120 price.

Italian Renaissance and Baroque art are also well served with two notable books from Princeton University Press. **THE MOMENT OF CARAVAGGIO** ($49.50), by the art historian Michael Fried, based on the A. W. Mellon Lectures in Fine Arts that Mr. Fried delivered in Washington in 2004, is a knotty, episodic, infinitely erudite investigation of, among other things, the pervasiveness of violence in Caravaggio's painting.

But for sheer joy of reading, reach for **MICHELANGELO: A LIFE ON PAPER**, by Leonard Barkan ($49.50). The writer is a professor of comparative literature at Princeton, and his view of the artist usually regarded as superhuman, a Sistine-style colossus, is through the intimate, sometimes all-too-human medium of his words — private letters, poems, notes to self — as well as drawings. Personable in tone, astute in observation, Mr. Barkan's book is that rare thing, a historical study as absorbing as a novel.

Art history in the making is the subject of **LEAVING ART: WRITINGS ON PERFORMANCE, POLITICS, AND PUBLICS, 1974-2007** by the American contemporary artist Suzanne Lacy, from Duke University Press ($99.95). For nearly 40 years Ms. Lacy's collaborative, community-based art projects, some involving hundreds of people, have been grappling with matters of race, class and possible social change with a hands-on audacity that few artists can match. This book, with a persuasive introduction by the artist-historian Moira Roth, at last puts Ms. Lacy's own fluent accounts of her life and work between covers. The result is a moving and feisty document of a committed life, one that students of the art of our time will be grateful for in the years ahead.

Finally, public and private merge with a visual knockout of a book called **A SHRINE FOR TIBET: THE ALICE S. KANDELL COLLECTION** (Tibet House/Overlook Duckworth, $59.95). Ms. Kandell began

collecting Himalayan art after visiting Sikkim as a college student decades ago, and eventually installed her superb and voluminous holdings in a shrine room that she had built in her New York City apartment.

This year the contents of the shrine room were transported intact to the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, where the room was recreated for its first public showing. A smaller version is now installed at the Rubin Museum of Art in Manhattan. There you can only stand outside the shrine and peer in. With the book you are inside, virtually touching religious sculptures, ritual instruments, embroidered hangings, feeling something like the shock of wonder experienced by first-time visitors to Ms. Kandell's home. Come to think of it, this is precisely the sort of experience digital technology is so good at creating.

Maybe there's a place for it after all. Next year.

Roberta Smith

Sometimes a monograph is more than a monograph. It can illuminate a cultural moment, and also convey a sense of other stories waiting to be told. Reading it, you can almost feel history expanding beneath your feet.

So it is with three new books on artists who happen to have been women. The most imposing is Christopher Lyon's impressively detailed, lavishly illustrated **NANCY SPERO: THE WORK** (Prestel, $85). It tells the story of a woman coming to grips with her art in a male-dominated art world with wide-angle scope that makes the book's relatively specific title seem modest to the point of irony. Working from extensive interviews with Spero (1926-2009), her family and friends, Mr. Lyon elucidates her development as an artist with superb clarity, placing it against the elaborate backdrop of her life, her working relationship with her husband, the artist Leon Golub, and their tumultuous milieu, the politically active, left-leaning segment of the New York art world of the 1960s and '70s.

The book reproduces more of Spero's art than will probably ever be seen in any single exhibition, including little-known early works, late-career installation pieces and the entirety of her extended collage-scrolls, "Codex Artaud," from the early 1970s. (For those of us whose French is less than fluent, the book also translates large chunks of the typewritten Antonin Artaud texts — an essential gift.) With her codex, Spero began using existing images and texts as she worked her way toward the main subject: the suffering and perseverance of women. Her subsequent efforts are detailed with similar care; the overall effect verges on panoramic.

HANNAH WILKE (Prestel, $49.95), by Nancy Princenthal, is more contained. Sadly, it omits this artist's early work, the richness of which was glimpsed in an exhibition of drawings from the 1960s and early '70s at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in SoHo this fall. Nonetheless Wilke's influential use of her body and flirtatious, flamboyant persona are vividly traced here, from her early takeoffs on pinups (in which she sometimes decorated her naked body with miniature versions of her labial-vulva sculptures) to her harrowing record of her final battle with cancer, to which she succumbed in 1993 at the age of 52.

The text is an astute balancing act. While clearly admiring her spirit and precedent-setting art, Ms. Princenthal manages to keep Wilke's self-aggrandizing and personal obsessions — for example, a conviction that Cindy Sherman had ripped her off — in perspective. The result is a book that is both reliable and revelatory.

EVA HESSE SPECTRES 1960 (Yale University Press, $40), edited by E. Luanne McKinnon, is a relatively slim volume that deals with only a slice of the career of the eminent Post-Minimalist sculptor Eva Hess (1936-1970). But it feels big, being an unknown slice of such a brief career. A catalog for an exhibition that Ms. McKinnon organized at the University of New Mexico Art Museum, Albuquerque (and currently at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, through Jan. 2), the book reproduces 21 paintings that Hesse executed in 1960 just after completing graduate school at Yale University and moving to New

York. They are elucidated in essays by Helen Molesworth, Elisabeth Bronfen and Louise S. Milne as well as Ms. McKinnon.

The paintings are very much of a piece with Hesse's sculptures. A few will be familiar, but the majority are not, and the combined force is little short of stunning. They show an already individualized artist finding her own way beyond the immovable force of Abstract Expressionism in images of semi-abstract faces and figures — mostly female — rendered in broad swaths of close-toned tans and grays. In these paintings Hesse seems to unpin the Modernist monochrome and wield it almost like clay, modeling a series of rubbery ghosts that are as tangible, or as intangible as the spaces they inhabit. They are pan-Expressionistic, reaching back to Munch and Arnold Schoenberg and forward to Brice Marden's moody monochromes. Most of all they confirm the psychological depth of Hesse's sculptures with a fullness that her subsequent reliefs of the mid 1960s, however important, do not. Dying at 34, Hesse never made art that might remotely be considered her late work. It is great to see her originality extended by these early efforts. After appearing at the University of New Mexico, the exhibition travels to the Brooklyn Museum next fall.

Ken Johnson

Why were there no great female Pop artists? That is the question fruitfully explored by the curator and art historian Sid Sachs in **SEDUCTIVE SUBVERSION: WOMEN POP ARTISTS, 1958-1968** (Abbeville Press, $50), the catalog for an exhibition he organized that is on view (through Jan. 9) at the Brooklyn Museum. Rich in anecdotal detail about the lives of female artists before feminism altered the field of play, Mr. Sachs's essay is a must for anyone interested in the sociology of contemporary art.

Today's young artists might be amazed at how widely accepted the supposed inferiority of female artists was. The book does not prove that Pop Art created by women would have a more enduring impact than the work of Warhol, Lichtenstein and Rosenquist, but it tells the stories of many interesting painters and sculptors who happened to be women and gives an eye-opening account of their efforts to contend with and succeed in an egregiously male-dominated art world.

Why did art become so vividly colorful in the 1960s? David S. Rubin, a curator at the San Antonio Museum of Art, organized an exhibition based on the idea that synergistic combinations of influences, from color television to psychedelic drugs, inspired artists as various as Judy Chicago, Al Held, Ed Paschke and Fred Tomaselli to create works of mind-expanding optical intensity. The lavishly illustrated catalog, **PSYCHEDELIC: OPTICAL AND VISIONARY ART SINCE THE 1960S** (MIT Press, $29.95), edited by Mr. Rubin, is a treasure trove of visionary delights, and his essay provides a convincing analysis of the altered state of art since the '60s.

Karen Rosenberg

If a portrait is a kind of conversation, then the artist normally has the last word. But in **MAN WITH A BLUE SCARF: ON SITTING FOR A PORTRAIT BY LUCIAN FREUD**, the chief art critic for Bloomberg News, Martin Gayford, talks back. Over the course of nearly a year Mr. Gayford and his royal-blue scarf appear at Mr. Freud's studio to be observed, dissected and, eventually, depicted by Britain's pre-eminent portraitist in a painting and an etching. During these sessions (and ensuing dinners at the Wolseley restaurant and his other favorite London haunts) Mr. Freud shares remembrances of Picasso and Francis Bacon, opines on contemporary artists like Damien Hirst and reveals wonderfully peculiar details of his rigorous working process. The author, meanwhile, grapples with the strange, endurance- and vanity-testing experience of becoming a Freud subject. The book is also generously illustrated, with images of Mr. Freud's paintings and many others mentioned in passing. (Thames & Hudson, $40).

A photography book that seems to question the continued relevance of photography books, **FROM HERE TO THERE: ALEC SOTH'S AMERICA** accompanies Mr. Soth's current survey (through Jan. 2) at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. The pictures, from his breakout series "Sleeping by the Mississippi," up

through the more recent bodies of work “Single Goth Seeks Same” and “Broken Manual” show deep affinities with Eggleston, Frank et al., while speaking to very contemporary modes of alienation.

An essay by the novelist Geoff Dyer and a poem by August Kleinzahler hint at the literary sensibility of Mr. Soth’s sequences, while his own insistent, ambitious, occasionally self-doubting voice comes across in reprinted blog entries and an interview. And there’s a surprise tucked inside the back cover: a pamphlet-size photo essay titled “The Loneliest Man in Missouri.” The editor is Siri Engberg. (Walker Art Center, $60).

The hefty, 512-page **MODERN WOMEN: WOMEN ARTISTS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART** caps off MoMA’s Modern Women’s Project, five years of programming designed to celebrate the female artists in its collection. It will be a valuable resource for years to come. The editors — the museum’s chief drawings curator, Cornelia H. Butler, and a curatorial assistant, Alexandra Schwartz — have marshaled 200 artists, architects and designers and, it seems, nearly as many scholarly voices into a text that is as energetic as it is encyclopedic. They neatly skim gaps in the collection with a mix of single-artist profiles and topical essays both broad (“Women on Paper”) and narrow (“Riot on the Page: Thirty Years of Zines by Women”). And the pictures, 400 in all, should seed enough curators’ imaginations to keep this overdue project going beyond MoMA and well into the 21st century. (Museum of Modern Art, $65).