



Green Purple Cross (top), Blue Cross

The best (and worst) of 2009

THE BEST

Howard Halle, editor-at-large

1 Jenny Holzer, "Protect Protect" at the Whitney

Holzer's survey grabbed viewers by the eyeballs, and refused to let go. A look back at a decade and a half of Holzer's production, the exhibition juxtaposed the freneticism of her LED extravaganzas with the slower take of oil-on-linen paintings based on redacted government documents about the Iraq War. The resulting tour de force was a testament to Holzer's stature as one of the most important artists working today.

2 "James Ensor" at MoMA

The 19th-century master of the macabre brought his parade of creepy carnival revelers and ironic skeletons to MoMA in a show guaranteed to make an impression on young painters. But the big surprise of this survey of the Belgian artist—whose most creative period lasted only from 1880 to the mid-1890s—was how startlingly contemporary his work seemed to be.

3 Alice Neel, "Selected Works" at David Zwirner + "Nudes of the 1930s" at Zwirner & Wirth

It had been nine years since the paintings of Alice Neel (1900–1984) last received a retrospective in New York, and with a 2010 Neel tour bypassing the

city altogether, these concurrent shows offered a tasty and much needed sampling of her art. Both featured plenty of Neel's signature portraits, in which sitters were psychologically x-rayed in a sometimes brutal fashion, even as their essential humanity was left intact. But the nudes from Neel's early career were particularly demonstrative of her raw style and willingness to strip both herself and her subjects bare.

4 Mike Kelley and Michael Smith, "A Voyage of Growth and Discovery" at SculptureCenter

Kelley and Smith's video installation took aim at Burning Man, centering the action on Smith's long-standing character, Baby Ikki, an overgrown man-toddler in giant diapers. Wandering through the festival and across a vast desert landscape, Smith's baby took in, but barely comprehended, such sights as a gigantic flame-throwing penis, a tent full of vampire goth chicks and a strange procession of masked figures emerging out of a dust storm. In the process, Smith hilariously transformed himself into an everytype representative of an America in thrall to late capitalism's sensory overloads.

5 "The Generational: Younger than Jesus" at the New Museum

Granted, the decision to limit the participants to artists aged 33 or under smacked of *Logan's Run*, but "Younger

than Jesus" proved to be the Toyota Prius to the Whitney Biennial's GM Hummer: a nimble vehicle that crackled with electricity.

T.J. Carlin, art writer

1 "Dan Graham: Beyond" at the Whitney

With a program of bands chosen by Graham performing during the show's run, and an excellent sampling of work on view including a selection of his interactive pavilions, this exhibition revealed this music-critic-turned-artist to be the populist, rule-breaking renegade that he is.

2 Lisa Yuskavage at David Zwirner Gallery

Yuskavage's sumptuous, self-aware canvases, which are increasingly laden with narrative detail, took a 360-degree perspective on the cultural structures of desire, realizing the simultaneously enticing and potentially repulsive nature of sexual attraction. Color was an especially strong suit of this show; some of the paintings seemed to fairly glow on the walls.

3 "Kandinsky" at the Guggenheim

One of the ground-layers of abstract painting, Kandinsky mastered visual rhythms that were in fact among the inspirations for the undulating forms of the Guggenheim itself. The dynamism he brought to his writings, which addressed

the spiritual potential of artwork, came through loud and clear in this show.

4 "Dorothy Iannone: Lioness" at the New Museum

The artist's romantic relationship with German powerhouse Dieter Roth informed much of the imagery (sometimes explicit) in this show; however, larger questions of love, both platonic and sexual in nature, as well as the relationship between emotional exuberance and the production of artwork, were all at stake.

THE WORST

Howard Halle, editor-at-large

1 "Urs Fischer: Marguerite de Ponty" at the New Museum

This building-wide show by the Swiss bad-boy superstar never prompts you to ask yourself, What is the artist up to? Rather, it makes you wonder, What was the New Museum thinking in giving this guy the run of the place?

2 "The Hugo Boss Prize 2008: Emily Jacir" at the Guggenheim

Unconstrained by intellectual honesty, Jacir's show built a case for the martyrdom of Wael Zuaiter, a PLO representative who was assassinated by Mossad agents in retaliation for the killings of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics by the Black September organization. A man of letters, Zuaiter was believed to be one of the planners of the attack. Never proving his innocence or even bothering to, Jacir chose instead to create a metaphorical act of revenge on his behalf—making it little more than a high-cultural addition to the unending cycle of Middle Eastern violence.

T.J. Carlin, art writer

"Yinka Shonibare, MBE" at the Brooklyn Museum

Shonibare wields identity politics as a sword against an encroaching army, but the longer one sat with the show, the more the Nigerian artist's strategy seemed to rely on misplaced aggression and aggrandized theatrics. While the issues that he addresses have hardly disappeared, his approach seems to have fallen behind the times.

Report card: Remarkably, given the economy, the art world managed to stay in business this year, and in the case of the fall auctions for contemporary art, even showed a slight uptick. However, there was little in the way of radical innovation in '09, as artists and gallerists alike seemed to eschew risk for safe choices.

FINAL GRADE: B