

Worth the Galleries: The Best Contemporary Art of 2014

By Kriston Capps
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“Earth on Grand Canyon” by William Newman (2013)

For the major art museums in D.C., 2014 was a throwback year. The National Gallery of Art mounted a big retrospective of Andrew Wyeth and a minor survey of El Greco. The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden mounted an all-new permanent-collection hanging for its 40th anniversary. Meanwhile, the Corcoran Gallery of Art,

following a long and fateful struggle, finally shuttered. To their credit, the Phillips Collection and the Kreeger Museum, both modernist museums, expanded on their record of showing relevant contemporary art with sculpture shows of Bernardi Roig and Emilie Brzezinski, respectively.

To find the very best new work in D.C., though, viewers had to stray far and wide from the National Mall. Whereas the 14th Street NW corridor used to be the reliable hub for the city's art scene, now its galleries are spread out among all four quadrants. The following list is by no means an encyclopedic compilation of great art shows from 2015. But these exhibitions proved that, despite the loss of a few commercial galleries, the city's art ecosystem is still alive and relevant.

“A Layered History,” Dean Kessmann Furthermore

In the most academic work of the year, Kessmann, an art professor at George Washington University, scanned an entire 1,184-page tome of Western art history, H.W. Janson's *History of Art*, into his computer to assemble his raw materials. He then applied these pages to a curving 40-foot wall to make a literal history at a glance. As a print, it transcends a pointy-headed discussion about the construction of art history, instead bending art history itself to serve as his own artwork.

“War Paint,” Jason Gubbiotti Civilian Art Projects

Any exhibit by Gubbiotti promises pure pleasure for painting partisans, and his fourth solo show for D.C. did not fail to deliver. As with past exhibits, “War Paint” stressed the artist's hand while seemingly burying it in layer after layer of symmetrical, mechanical, hard-edged painting. Up close, however, quiet moments—a dapple of gestural abstraction here, a frayed edge of canvas there—proved how human even these robotic paintings can be.

“Participant,” Vesna Pavlović G Fine Art

One of the finest art shows of the year didn't need to be an art show at all: Vesna Pavlović might have done “Participant” as a PowerPoint. In fact, the exhibit, which drew from both her childhood experience growing up in Yugoslavia under Josip Broz Tito as well as research into the so-called benevolent dictator's cult of personality, included a slideshow—one that screened black-and-white images from Tito's travels onto a darkened curtain. With this work, personal photos, and a video of a youth demonstration from the height of Tito's powers, Pavlović claimed the past as present—and as her medium.

“Syzygy,” William Newman American University Museum

I'm still dwelling on this puzzler of a painting show long after the fact: always a good sign. For “Syzygy,” a mysterious title in its own right, Newman produced his own personal zodiac, something having to do with various spheres and orbs and landscapes that he loves. The paintings are mythic in a sense, bearing the

compositional austerity of paintings by Mark Rothko or Josef Albers, but their sensibility is pure pop. The pieces follow a template: “Orange on Grand Canyon,” “Saturn on Yellowstone,” “Tennis Ball on Great Falls/Potomac River.” It was a show that didn’t yield any easy answers.

“Total Art: Contemporary Video,” various National Museum of Women in the Arts

Video was big in 2014. For its 40th birthday, the Hirshhorn mounted “Days of Endless Time,” a series of video works mulling nature and its representation. “Total Art” was another important video show, and for the too-often-staid National Museum of Women in the Arts, a real coup. The show was direct in its ambitions: It was simply a show of recent video artworks made by women. That might sound mundane or safe, but shows of contemporary art by women that do not try to make overarching claims about feminism are both rare and valuable. This one was a show of artworks, plain and simple, not a feat of curatorial strength. Sometimes the best thing to do is to get the hell out of the way.

“Perspectives: Chiharu Shiota” Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

One of the best contemporary-art installations of the year can in fact be found on the National Mall, although in a place that’s as underground as any DIY art venue. The Sackler Gallery is one of four Smithsonian Institution facilities that’s destined to be transformed by a master plan by Danish architect Bjarke Ingels. Until that happens, though, the Sackler will continue to be one of the lesser-known spaces treasured by D.C. viewers—in part for the “Perspectives” series, which invites major Asian artists to transform its lobby. For “Over the Continents,” Chiharu Shiota installed an array of laser-like red thread connecting used shoes from her native Japan. Each shoe’s donor tied a tag to the shoe telling its story; from a kiosk, via an innovative Google Maps array, viewers can click on the shoe-tags and read (in translation) stories of shoes as unique as their owners. While it’s obviously a playful installation, something you might find tucked away in one corner of a Hirshhorn gallery, the Sackler platform gives the piece room to breathe.

“Folk’Lore,” Sheldon Scott (e)merge art fair

I am sorry to say that I can finish the racist nursery rhyme that artist Sheldon Scott alludes to in “Folk’Lore,” the exhibition of multi-media pieces and performance he brought to the (e)merge Art Fair. “Eeny meeny miny mo,” he spelled out in neon curlicue lights. (“Catch a nigger by his toes,” the rhyme ends.) These he complimented with a few hundred pounds of Brazil nuts, which were once known colloquially as “nigger toes” in the South (and probably still are). I’m sadder still to say that I missed the performance that attended Scott’s ambitious project, so it’s hard for me to judge the full register of his work. Even still, it’s plain that he’s making big work—in any medium that he can get his hands on—that pierces the tired tropes of nostalgia and lost innocence that sometimes surface in the so-called national conversation about race. It’s a project that’s as important now as ever.