San Francisco Chronicle

The year 2017 was a fiery one, in art as in life

By Charles Desmarais | December 21, 2017 | Updated: December 29, 2017 7:02pm



Photo: Copyright Isaac Julien

IMAGE 1 OF 14
Isaac Julien, "Midnight Sun (Playtime)" (2013), production still

The year 2017 was the fieriest in memory for the visual arts. It opened with Oakland's December 2016 Ghost Ship Fire and the deaths of 36 artists, musicians and others freshly branded on our hearts. The Wine Country fires of October displaced thousands of people, many of them artists, and destroyed 8,889 structures — including the homes and studios of an untold number of celebrated professionals, promising novices and dedicated amateurs. And we exit this cursed calendar as fires on the Southern California coast blaze close by the J. Paul Getty Museum on their way to new state records of devastation.

A struggle to control culture: Incendiary comments, made by leaders who might otherwise have been expected to guide intelligent discussion, fueled the flames of cultural resentment. Thus, we have had furious arguments over whether to celebrate, destroy or reinterpret Civil War sculptural monuments, as if the art might grant us some talismanic control over history. And we have endured raging demands for the removal from the Whitney, the Metropolitan, the Walker and other museums, nuanced works of art that touch, however lightly, on inflamed nerves of race, sexuality and power.

The art world says #MeToo: The blaze of indignation kindled by a recording of our now-president bragging of sexual assault, then spread west to one of Hollywood's most powerful producers, finally reached the art world. Accusations now seem to have toppled, among others, Knight Landesman, publisher of the

influential Artforum magazine, and Jens Hoffmann, one-time director of San Francisco's CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts.

Art we thought we knew: Bay Area museums were at the top of their form this year, bringing new insights to historical objects. A particular surprise was the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's "Edvard Munch: Between the Clock and the Bed," which put flesh on the bones of the artist known around the world for a single painting, "The Scream." The show brought 44 original, mournful paintings, rarely, if ever, seen on the West Coast. Munch's mastery of form, it turns out, gives his art an authenticity that cannot be read in reproduction. Meanwhile, the Legion of Honor enlivened the centennial of the death of Auguste Rodin by dramatically contrasting the museum's great sculpture collection with two exhibitions of cheeky works by living artists Sarah Lucas and Urs Fischer.

Art that won't sit still: William Kentridge, who started with short, hand-drawn filmic works in the early 1990s, has steadily expanded his territory in size and technique. His "The Refusal of Time," a large installation combining film and sculpture, is owned jointly by SFMOMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It had its West Coast premiere through March. Then, the American Conservatory Theater presented "Refuse the Hour" for three performances in November. The stirring "multimedia chamber opera" starred the artist himself, narrating a trip through the fourth dimension that featured photographic film and animation, live music and dance. It was a physical experience of what I imagine to be an Albert Einstein dream.

Ragnar Kjartansson's 2012 installation "The Visitors," also at SFMOMA, and Isaac Julien's "Playtime" (2014), at Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture, are equally immersive, if apparently more straightforward in narrative. Both demand to be seen and are still on view, "The Visitors" only through Monday, Jan. 1, "Playtime" through Feb. 11.



IMAGE 1 OF 8
Carla Shen's self-portrait at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, February 2017, in front of a painting by Cy Twombly. Her Instagram postings combine her love of fashion and of art.

Art in the age of the social media selfie: Carla Shen is a lively woman with a closetful of great clothes, a love of art and, apparently, a fair amount of disposable time and income. She also has a great eye, which she has turned on herself in an ongoing series on Instagram, where she posts as @carlapshen. Shen (a trustee of the Brooklyn Museum and, full disclosure, a personal acquaintance) finds uncanny visual parallels between apparel in her closet and works of art on public view. They are guileless and celebratory, if not high art — not even self-portraits, she said in an email. “They are just snap shots or even records of my matching hobby.”

New Faces: Erica Deeman burst into public consciousness with an expansive show of innovative portraits of black women at the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, and a simultaneous exhibition of new work at the the tiny-but-influential gallery Anthony Meier Fine Arts. Marcela Pardo Ariza brought a refreshing comic approach to photography at a new space in the Tenderloin, R/SF Projects. And Alicia McCarthy, hardly a neophyte after some 20 years on the alternative scene, found a broader public with a solo show at Berggruen Gallery and a featured spot in the 2017 SECA Art Award exhibition at SFMOMA.

Art that has it both ways: Avidly crossing supposed boundaries between object and image, the thought-driven (conceptual art) and the emotion-laden (abstract expressionism), the public and the private, Robert Rauschenberg cleared a new path for himself and all who have come after. “Robert Rauschenberg: Erasing the Rules,” at SFMOMA through March 25, is a superb guide to the career of one of the 20th century’s most influential figures.

Art that made us laugh: Nina Katchadourian’s exhibition “Curiouser” is running through Jan. 7 at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University. It is a rare opportunity to laugh out loud at serious art that questions assumptions about identity and authenticity, with a warmth and caring that is a blessing at this crucial moment in American history.

Art to make us cry: If I were to choose a Best Exhibition of 2017, it would have to be the French artist Sophie Calle’s “Missing.” Presented this summer at the Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture, which has turned itself in two years into a vital center for contemporary exhibitions, it was less a show than a series of deeply intimate encounters with one woman’s life, and our own fears of absence and longing.

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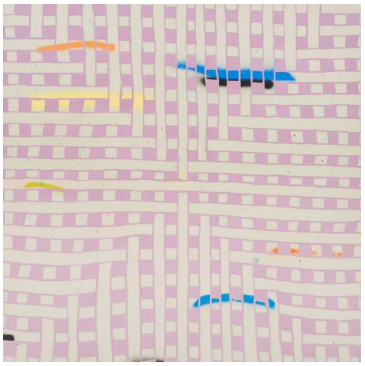


Photo: Berggruen Gallery

IMAGE 2 OF 14
Alicia McCarthy, Untitled (2017)



Photo: Nicole Boliaux, The Chronicle

IMAGE 3 OF 14
Alicia McCarthy works on her exhibit, a large piece on Plexiglas, in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Photo: Cantor Arts Center At Stanford University

IMAGE 4 OF 14
Nina Katchadourian, "Lavatory Self-Portrait in the Flemish Style #12" (2011)



Photo: Courtesy R/SF Projects

IMAGE 5 OF 14
Marcela Pardo Ariza, "I'm too sad to tell you (after Bas Jan Ader, in different times)" (2017), as installed on a colored wall in the gallery.



Photo: ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION, NYT

IMAGE 6 OF 14
Robert Rauschenberg, "Collection" (1954-55)

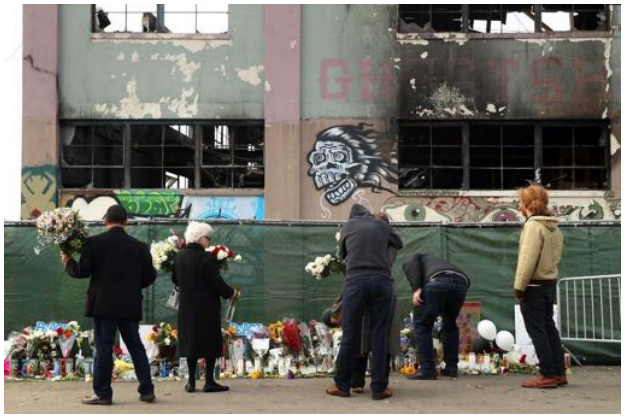


Photo: Scott Strazzante, The Chronicle

IMAGE 7 OF 14
Family members of a Ghost Ship warehouse fire victim lay flowers at the scene on 31st Avenue in Oakland, Calif., on Monday, Dec. 12, 2016.



Photo: Munch Museum, Oslo, Edvard Munch

IMAGE 8 OF 14
Edvard Munch, “The Dance of Life” (1925)



Photo: Courtesy Fine Arts Museums Of San Francisco

IMAGE 9 OF 14
Sarah Lucas, “Pauline” (2015), installed at the Legion of Honor through Sept. 17.



Photo: Courtesy Fine Arts Museums Of San Francisco

IMAGE 10 OF 14
Installation view of “Urs Fischer: The Public & the Private” in the Court of Honor at the Legion of Honor



Photo: Elizabet Davids, Courtesy Of The Artist

IMAGE 11 OF 14
From Ragnar Kjartansson's "The Visitors" (2012)



Photo: © Sophie Calle / ADAGP, Paris & ARS, New York, 2017, Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, Fraenkel Gallery And Galerie Perrotin

IMAGE 12 OF 14
Sophie Calle, "Take care of yourself. Laurie Anderson" (2007, video detail)



Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

IMAGE 13 OF 14
Artist Sophie Calle in her gallery space at Fort Mason on Thursday, June 22, 2017, in San Francisco, Calif.



Photo: Anthony Meier Fine Arts, BAMPFA

IMAGE 14 OF 14
Erica Deeman, untitled

San Francisco Chronicle Shen Slideshow



Photo: Carla Shen

IMAGE 2 OF 8
Carla Shen's Instagram postings combine her love of fashion and of art. Shown here at artist Thaddeus Wolfe's exhibition at R & Company, New York.

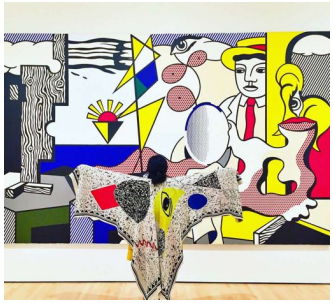


Photo: Carla Shen

IMAGE 3 OF 8
Carla Shen's self-portrait at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, February 2017, in front of a painting by Roy Lichtenstein. Her Instagram postings combine her love of fashion and of art.



Photo: Carla Shen

IMAGE 4 OF 8
Carla Shen's Instagram postings combine her love of fashion and of art. Shown here at artist Shara Hughes' exhibition at Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York.



Photo: Carla Shen

IMAGE 5 OF 8
Carla Shen's Instagram postings combine her love of fashion and of art. Shown here at artist John O'Connor's exhibition at Pierogi Gallery, New York.



Photo: Carla Shen

IMAGE 6 OF 8
Carla Shen's Instagram postings combine her love of fashion and of art. Shown here at a Stanley Whitney exhibition at Lisson Gallery, New York.



Photo: Carla Shen

IMAGE 7 OF 8
Carla Shen's Instagram postings combine her love of fashion and of art. Shown here at artist Olafur Eliasson's exhibition at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.



Photo: Carla Shen

IMAGE 8 OF 8
Carla Shen's Instagram postings combine her love of fashion and of art. Shown here at artist Anoli Perera's exhibition at Aicon Gallery, New York.