HYPERALLERGIC

A FEW THOUGHTS ABOUT 2016

BY John Yau, January 1, 2017

I decided to look at what I wrote about in 2016 because I was curious. The weeks came and went, reviews got written, shows got seen and there was always more than the eye and mind could take in. What had I looked at, read, and written about? Did I have anything to say about it? I counted 86 reviews, almost all about art, with one on a reprint of a book of short stories, and eight about poetry books. I decided that I should do better in that department since I seldom go a day without reading poetry. There are poets I didn't write about in 2016 that I wish I did. Here are nine of the books I kept returning to, but never wrote about: Night by Etel Adnan; The Poems by Basil Bunting, edited by Don Share; The City Keeps: Selected and New Poems 1966 – 2014 by John Godfrey; Voyage of the Sable Venus and other poems by Robin Coste Lewis; Blue Fasa by Nathaniel Mackey, The Blue Edges by Fred Moten; Certain Magical Acts by Alice Notley; The Laughter of the Sphinx by Michael Palmer; and More Flowers Than You Could Possibly Carry — Selected Poems 1989-2012 by Simon Smith, edited by Barry Schwabsky. In many cases, rereading these writers meant that I looked at other books of theirs on my shelf.

I don't know whether I had a favorite exhibition or if there is one that I thought was the best. I am not sure whether that kind of thinking is useful. Once again, I am reminded of a line by the poet Paul Hannigan: "An ox is winning the ox race."

Some exhibitions stayed with me longer than others, some pushed me hard in unexpected ways, and others made me want to jump up and down, which is something you are not supposed to do at an exhibition. Under the category of jumping up and down I would include the following exhibitions: Kerry James Marshall: Mastry at The Met Breuer; The Keeper at the New Museum, which included a large selection of work by Hilma af Klint, the installation "Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)," conceived by Ydessa Handeles, the collection of symbols put together by Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn (1881–1962), and the scrapbooks made by Shinro Ohtake; Tony Oursler: The Imponderable Archive at the Hessel Museum of Art at the Bard Center of Curatorial Studies: Nicole Eisenman: Al-Ugh-Ories at the New Museum and her show at Anton Kern.

There were artists I have written about more than once whose work inspired me to write about them again. Here are 26: Katherine Bradford: Allison Miller; Lois Dodd; Sylvia Plimack-Mangold; Angela Dufresne; Eleanor Ray; Kyle Staver; Melissa Meyer; Steve DiBenedetto; Andrea Belag; Richard Van Buren; Marilyn Lerner; Jessica Stockholder; Greg Smith; David Reed, Gary Stephan; Martha Clippinger; Judy Ledgerwood; Mark Greenwold; Jasper Johns, Juan Usle; Martin Puryear, Bruce Conner, Joyce Robins, Diane Simpson, and Lee Krasner.

Other standouts are the 14 artists whose work I wrote about for the first time: Lui Shtini; Matt Bollinger; Brandi Twilley: Elisa D'Arrigo: Cecily Brown: Elliot Green: Sophia al-Maria; Margot Berman; Brian Lucas; Deb Sokolow; Gary Peterson; Roy McMakin; Nahum Tevet.

I would like to call attention to three photographers: Louis Draper (1935–2002), Anthony Barboza, and Chris Killip. I have heard a lot about the death of photography in the past few years. For me, this death, like the death of painting, seems to be a way for white art historians teaching at Ivy League schools to end the story while they still can. Kerry James Marshall does not just challenge that narrative with regard to painting: he proves it decisively wrong. But none of the art historians who wrote about the death of painting have revised their view, have they? Why is that?

Isn't it time for MoMA to stop treating artists such as Draper, Roy DeCarava, Wifredo Lam, Norman Lewis, Ruth Asawa, and Alma Thomas as if they are second-class citizens? Sure, things are changing, but am I supposed to be happy when they toss out a few crumbs?

This is how I'd like to end my reflection on 2016. It is from my review of Draper:

Soon after arriving in New York, and perhaps feeling a safe distance from the South, Draper took a photograph, "Congressional Gathering" (1959), which shows a row of bed sheets hanging from a clothesline, seemingly at night. Five years earlier, the United States Supreme Court made its landmark decision in Brown vs. Board of Education to end segregation in public education. Four years earlier, Emmett Till, a fourteen year old boy, was lynched and brutally — and, I would add, gleefully — murdered in Mississippi, where the perpetrators were later acquitted. Robert Frank's photograph of the New Orleans trolley says a lot about the state of America in the 1950s, but so does Draper's.

Draper's photograph still disturbs, and it should send a shock of recognition through anyone who cares to look. Its title speaks volumes. Despite the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, which declared segregation in public schools "inherently unequal," Draper knew that he lived in a segregated world where members of Congress belonged to the Ku Klux Klan. The sheets, which he photographed in the dark, sag so loosely off the line that the light hitting their top corners evokes the Klan's conical masks. Draper's image summons the deep fear that must have been felt by every black person in America; this was what it meant to exist in a lawless society. Till's murder and the acquittal of his killers confirmed it. As much as I love's Frank's photograph, Draper's speaks to another, deeper part of us

— the one where the fear of faceless authority churns. As recent events again make clear, no matter how minor the supposed crime, some people don't get out of jail alive.

These words were published on February 7, 2016. The fact that Frank's photograph of the New Orleans trolley is so well known and that Draper's photograph of a row of bed sheets remains almost unknown is not an aesthetic issue, but a social one. It is time to think about that.