

The Year in Galleries

The year began with hope. And ended with chickens.

By Maura Judkis

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D.C. galleries began the year flogging hope and ended it united by fear. The D.C. gallery scene's 2009 began with the World Cup of Obama art—the Shepard Fairey and Irvine Contemporary—organized mega-exhibit “Manifest Hope.” The inauguration-weekend show championed street artists and their role in the grassroots movements of the election, and included local artists such as Decoy, Lisa Marie Thalhammer, Billy Colbert and Mark Jenkins, as well as numerous celebrity guests. The effect of this show lasted well past January. One of the show's organizers, Yosi Sargent, soon became famous for his rise to communications director of the National Endowment for the Arts and later demotion, after taking a beating on conservative talk shows for purportedly encouraging artists to create propaganda. And Fairey's famous Obama poster, the one that started it all (and was acquired this year by the National Portrait Gallery), became the subject of a lawsuit between the artist and the Associated Press. Fairey appropriated the image from the wire service and later admitted to lying about the source material.

It continued downhill from there. The market for luxury purchases like art followed the same curve as much of the economy, and some galleries closed their doors while others relocated. But the plastic cup of opening-night chardonnay doesn't have to be half-empty. G Fine Art has relocated to the H Street Corridor, joining Conner Contemporary in an area previously known for novelty bars. New galleries, such as the Fridge and Gallery H, opened. Local art-scene booster the Pink Line Project chronicled openings and parties on its snazzy new Web site. There's much to be hopeful for.

1) “Koen van Mechelen: The Contemporary Chicken Project” at Conner Contemporary

Van Mechelen aims to systematically breed all of the world's chickens together to create one “mongrel” chicken, a premise that has obvious implications for the human race. The problem is, he's unable to bring chickens across many borders, due to customs laws. This installation at Conner was one of the most memorable of the year for featuring three live American chickens in a large cage in the middle of the gallery. Viewers interacted with the art in a way that blurred the line between a museum and zoo experience. Van Mechelen also displayed photographs, mixed media on paper, and taxidermied animals, but those who attended the exhibition found it hard to look away from the feature attraction: a piece of art that stared right back at you—and clucked.

2) “Terri Weifenbach: Woods” at Civilian Art Projects

Terri Weifenbach's photographs of woods can cause one to feel deeply alone. Whether that is a peaceful or a frightening experience is up to the viewer: To be surrounded by foliage with no path in sight can be a terrifying proposition, or the beginning of a 20/20 segment about missing persons. For a different type of person, it's a vacation. Either way, the loneliness of Weifenbach's woods has roots in her technique: The artist deliberately leaves elements of the photograph out of focus to disorient us, and to control our gaze, which searches in vain for a way out of the foliage.

3) “John Dreyfuss: Enigma” at Hemphill

The most striking installation of the year, Dreyfuss’ deconstructed submarine, massive and intense, emerged from each of the gallery’s rooms, causing viewers to circle it like sharks. The fin and body rose from a black, placid sea of a floor, and the nose protruded through the wall like a bullet. The black-on-black exhibit carried with it a deep sense of foreboding—after all, most of the massive ship looms below the surface.

4) “Patrick Wilson: Slow Food” at Curator’s Office

Like its namesake culinary movement, Wilson’s exhibit was about honoring the traditions of those who came before. But for Wilson, that means Josef Albers instead of small organic farmers. The minimalist’s *Homages to a Square* is an obvious antecedent to Wilson’s colorful quadrangles—bold, concentric, and textured. Most important, Wilson reminded us that art is not fast food, and that it’s high time we forgo the empty calories.

5) “Domesticated” at Transformer

To domesticate a wild animal, you train it to do a job, and that’s why Jamil Hellu’s photographs of a burly jersey-wearing man show him in the kitchen, doing dishes. Guest curator Al Miner sought works that turned societal norms around, portraying women as heads of the household and men as caregiver. The four photographers’ works evinced homoeroticism but also tenderness: Particularly memorable was Dru Donovan’s photo of a man embracing a shirtless teenager in his lap, creepily inappropriate until we learn that the pair are father and son. This show about men displayed some of the best feminist art of the year.

Some other highlights:

“Nathaniel Rogers: The Last Viking” at Conner Contemporary Spoiling all of your childhood whimsy in one fell swoop, Nathaniel Rogers’ paintings pointed out the twisted natures of Little Bunny Foo Foo, Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater, and the farmer’s wife, bane of the three blind mice. Rogers assigns other characters a host of psychological issues, indulging in prescription pills and battling depression and marital dissatisfaction. The images are like illustrations for a bedtime story you never, ever want your children to read.

“Robin Rose: Cypher” at the Katzen Gallery Gallerygoers were presented with dangerous puzzles at “Cypher”: a set of visual riddles, both mysterious and humorous, and a series of obstacles involving knives, hooks and razor blades. Rose used these visual puns to ask questions about life, death, history, politics and philosophy, and rhetorical absurdities: If you were to make a wreath of 50 connected guitar pedals, each with a different effect, what would the end result sound like?

Martin d’Orgeval: Touched by Fire at Adamson Gallery The Parisian storefront Deyrolle housed priceless works: hundreds of rare taxidermied animals. And then the Left Bank landmark was gone, destroyed in a fire that left all of the stuffed zebras, polar bears, beetles and fossils in ashes. D’Orgeval surveyed the damage, and his photographs of the charred hides capture beauty in the ruin. Though devastated, Deyrolle resurrected itself, a symbol of any institution that has beat the odds—Adamson’s former next-door neighbor, G Fine Art, included.