

The Best Art Books of 2017

The Times's art critics select their favorite art books (and books about art) of the year.

By HOLLAND COTTER, ROBERTA SMITH and JASON FARAGO DEC. 14, 2017

Holland Cotter

Of my favorite art books this year, some are for looking, some for reading, most for both. All are on vital, return-to subjects, which is why I keep these precious things, in no particular order, near at hand on the shelf.

‘INTIMATE GEOMETRIES: THE ART AND LIFE OF LOUISE BOURGEOIS’ By Robert Storr (The Monacelli Press). The critic and curator Robert Storr knew Louise Bourgeois personally for decades before her death in 2010 at 98. And this book, immense in every sense, is both a formal study and a critical biography, a collaborative endeavor and a tribute. Spanning Bourgeois's 75-year career as a sculptor, painter, printmaker and writer, it suggests how she paved the way to some of the 20th-century's major art trends while positioning herself outside them. Mr. Storr's writing style is as clear as his critical eye. And at 800-plus pages, with more than 1,000 reproductions, the book is ginormous, just the right size to commemorate a genius.

‘CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: KINETIC PAINTING’ Edited by Sabine Breitwieser (Museum der Moderne Salzburg/Prestel). Among museum retrospectives this season, none feels more necessary than Carolee Schneemann's at MoMA PS1 (through March 11), a survey of a six-decade career that makes most others look tame. From early figurative paintings, through collages and video installations, to her radical work in dance and performance, Ms. Schneemann has

consistently — insistently — made the personal political, bridging divides between eras and cultures, even species. The exhibition catalog, with commentary by the artist, is part history, part diary, and captures, to the degree print can, the electricity she has generated.

‘SOUTH OF PICO: AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS IN LOS ANGELES IN THE 1960S AND 1970S’ By Kellie Jones (Duke University Press). Until just a few years ago, a reference to the Los Angeles contemporary art scene in the 1960s and ’70s meant a bunch of white guys hanging out at the Ferus Gallery. In 2011, an exhibition called “Now Dig This: Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980,” organized by Kellie Jones, rewrote that blinkered history. Ms. Jones’s new book further expands on her initial account and deepens her portraits of black Angeleno artists, past and present, among them Houston Conwill, Melvin Edwards, David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, Samella Lewis, Senga Nengudi, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy and Betye Saar.

‘MICHELANGELO: DIVINE DRAFTSMAN AND DESIGNER’ By Carmen C. Bambach (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). This hefty book is both a visual souvenir of the Met’s grand exhibition of Michelangelo drawings (through Feb. 12), and something more. Years in the planning, the show was a labor of love on the part of its curator, Carmen C. Bambach. And the long, multipart essay by her that dominates the catalog has a sense of personal investment unusual in a scholarly context. The tone and pace makes you feel involved in an inquiry that turns a monumental art into the human record it was, and is. (Read the review.)

‘FRAY: ART AND TEXTILE POLITICS’ By Julia Bryan-Wilson (University of Chicago Press). Textile art, sometimes called fiber art, once occupied ambiguous terrain in a now-obsolete art vs. craft divide. Julia Bryan-Wilson’s book goes beyond arguing for fiber’s aesthetic legitimacy to demonstrating its political agency. And she does so by considering an enthralling range of hitherto untapped material: fantastic costumes designed by the 1970s queer theater troupe, the Cockettes; hand-sewn tapestries produced by Chilean artists depicting torture under the Pinochet regime; and the still-growing NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. Ms. Bryan-Wilson’s research is more than substantial, but her propulsive style makes the book a page-turner.

‘AFTER KATHY ACKER’ By Chris Kraus (Semiotext(e)). Chris Kraus, one of our most innovative art critics, who is also one of our best fiction writers, now becomes one of our more adventurous biographers in this book on the perversely inventive and invented life of the punk fiction writer Kathy Acker (1947-1997). Although Ms. Kraus, author of “I Love Dick” (1997) and “Where Art Belongs” (2011), states at the outset that she has been influenced by Acker in her own work and life, the influence is one of difference as much as of affinity, and that push-pull gives the book an exploratory under-the-knife tension. The surgery is corrective rather than cosmetic, but surgery it is.

‘JILL FREEDMAN: RESURRECTION CITY, 1968’ (Grafiche Damiani). In the spring of 1968, answering a summons by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for a Poor People’s Campaign, more than 3,000 Americans, mostly African-American, traveled from various points across the country to Washington, D.C. There they built wood shacks on the National Mall and settled in to protest social and economic inequities in America. They called the encampment Resurrection City, and stayed for six rain-soaked weeks before being driven out by the police. The photographer Jill Freedman lived with them and took pictures of the event. Her powerful documentary book first appeared in 1971; the current reissue includes many of the original photographs, along with previously unpublished ones, all supplemented by Ms. Freedman’s street-wise annotations. The reissue is timely. Inequity is starker than ever. A new Poor People’s Campaign makes sense. (An exhibition of photographs from the book is on view at Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea through Dec. 22.)

‘SMALL WONDERS: LATE-GOTHIC BOXWOOD MICROCARVINGS FROM THE LOW COUNTRIES’ Edited by Frits Scholten (Rijksmuseum). William Blake wrote of seeing “a world in a grain of sand,” and New Yorkers had a glimpse of something like that in a display of supernaturally delicate boxwood micro-sculptures, from the Late Gothic Netherlands, at the Cloisters last winter. Many were in the form of carved, hinged globes, none larger than an apple, some as small as a walnut. All were both technical tours de force and repositories of entire realms of spiritual belief. The show’s exquisite catalog is, appropriately, prayer book-size.

‘WILLIAM BLAKE AND THE AGE OF AQUARIUS’ By Stephen F. Eisenman (Block Museum of Art and Princeton University Press). Blake (1757-1827) is in the air these days, as he has been in other culturally inflamed times. In 1948, in a Spanish Harlem apartment, the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg had an auditory hallucination of Blake reciting “Ah Sun-flower!” and other mind-altering verses. That vision changed Ginsberg’s life, and Blake became a touchstone figure for many radical American artists of the 1950s and his destroy-all-tyrants radar continued to burn through the 1960s. It would certainly find appropriate targets today, as is confirmed by this excellent book, the catalog for an exhibition at the Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, through March 18.

Roberta Smith

Not for nothing are booksellers also called bookhandlers. All books are objects, intimate ones in fact, made to be held and loved. Exhibition catalogs and art books can really bring on the love. They have more room for the imagination and more images (hugely important) and they also invite greater expectations. They rise or fall on cover design and material; proportions and heft; paper stock and fonts; the way images and text combine on the pages — all of which we start to comprehend the moment we take hold of an art book. We expect whole worlds; many deliver. Below, in no particular order, are some art books that I love as objects, and as worlds.

‘ITEMS: IS FASHION MODERN?’ By Paola Antonelli and Michelle Millar Fisher (The Museum of Modern Art, New York). The Modern’s second-ever fashion exhibition (through Jan. 28) proposes a global canon of 111 emblematic widely used items including saris, pearls, hijabs and yoga pants. Its catalog is a compact mine of information, rather like a handbook, arranged A to Z with in-depth entries and a pleasing combination of matte and glossy pages. The latter are devoted to photo essays, which introduce the volume’s five sections by Catherine Losing, Monika Mogi, Omar Victor Diop, Bobby Doherty and Kristin-Lee Moolman. (Read the review.)

‘LAURA OWENS’ Edited by Scott Rothkopf (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York and Yale University Press). Each copy of the bar-raising catalog for Laura Owens’s midcareer survey at the Whitney Museum (through Feb. 4) has a

unique silk-screen cover by the painter. (All 8,500 can be seen on the museum's home page.) Inside awaits a glossy-paged scrapbook documenting Ms. Owens's life, work and community with snapshots, letters, sketches and emails; oral histories from friends, family and collaborators; and samplings of admired painting and writing by Mary Heilmann, Elizabeth Murray, bell hooks and David Foster Wallace. (Read the review.)

'DESIGNING DREAMS: A CELEBRATION OF LÉON BAKST' Edited by Célia Bernasconi, John E. Bowlt and Nick Mauss (Nouveau Musée National de Monaco and Mousse Publishing). Celebration is right. While famous for his sets and costumes for Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, Bakst was also an inspired textile designer and fashion-forward thinker. This exhibition presents the totality, including Bakst's madly beautiful gouache textile studies. Its fabulous softbound catalog records the show's own superb design, by the artist Nick Mauss, who also made all the unique stenciled-cloth covers. With its matte paper and vintage photographs, the catalog feels sweetly interwar yet ahead of its time. All catalogs should document their exhibitions' installations.

'NINA CHANEL ABNEY: ROYAL FLUSH' Edited by Marshall N. Price (Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University). Although captions are poorly placed, this is otherwise an exemplary catalog from a small museum. Its plentiful reproductions vividly trace the headlong first decade of the work of Nina Chanel Abney, a promising painter whose bright, stenciled surfaces draw equally from dire current events and modernist art. (Her shows are on view at Jack Shainman Gallery, through Dec. 20, and Mary Boone Gallery, through Dec. 22.) Mr. Price dissects the works' iconography; the curator Jamillah James interviews the artist; and "Social Insurrection and Racial Justice in the Twilight of the Obama Years," an essay by the accomplished journalist Natalie Y. Moore, adds painful context, ending with James Baldwin's exhortation that artists should disturb the peace. (Read the review.)

'WARTIME QUILTS: APPLIQUÉS AND GEOMETRIC MASTERPIECES FROM MILITARY FABRICS' By Annette Gero (The Beagle Press). Brilliantly colored quilts from the 18th and 19th centuries made by soldiers and tailors alike using military fabrics were not well known in this country. Then the American Folk Art Museum opened "War and Pieced," a splendid exhibition

(through Jan. 7) drawn mostly from the collection of Annette Gero, an Australian textile scholar, collector and author of this volume. Covering more ground than the exhibition, it should appeal to anyone even mildly obsessed with quilts, or the history of geometric abstraction outside painting. (Read the review.)

‘BLACK DADA READER’ By Adam Pendleton (Koenig Books). In 2011 the artist Adam Pendleton began producing “Black Dada Reader,” a photocopied spiral-bound selection of essays, and circulated them among friends and interested parties a little like samizdat. Now a handsome, more permanent version has arrived, 16 essays, poems and artist’s statements, one interview and one screenplay, sandwiched between introductions by five writers and curators and two manifestoes by Mr. Pendleton. The writers are unlikely bookmates — Hugo Ball, W.E.B. Du Bois, Adrian Piper, Gertrude Stein, Sun Ra, Joan Jonas — who give the collection its own shape and urgency. The subtitle asks “what can black dada do for me?” It behooves the entire art world to find out.

‘JASPER JOHNS: PICTURES WITHIN PICTURES, 1980-2015’ By Fiona Donovan (Thames & Hudson, New York). It’s hard to believe that this simple but encompassing idea is not already a book. The artist, who began making paintings of flat, easily identified motifs (the American flag, targets), moved in the 1980s to trompe l’oeil collagelike compositions of images from other art and his personal mementos. This turn toward the autobiographical continues, whether explicitly as with the floor plan of his grandfather’s house, or implicitly, with such surrogates as renderings of photographs of suffering young men or a damaged painting by Manet. The richness of the subject is demonstrated by lavish color photographs, and a text that provides new access to Mr. Johns’s often hermetic themes.

‘40 YEARS NEW’ By Lisa Phillips (Phaidon and New Museum). The New Museum reviews its history in this thick if slightly too tall book, from its founding in 1977 by Marcia Tucker to the white Sanaa-designed building on the Bowery it moved to in 2007, growing up if not old while maintaining its run of provocative exhibitions, performances and lectures. The tale is told in essays by curators past and present, myriad photographs and a well-annotated chronology. A valiant story and an excellent reference book.

‘MONOGRAPH’ By Chris Ware (Rizzoli, New York). The great cartoon artist, MacArthur genius and Omaha-born Chicagoan tells the story of his life in comic form, accompanied by family photographs, New Yorker covers, his toylike wood sculpture, and the wonderful dollhouse-like models he builds of some of his characters’ homes. There’s also a class syllabus full of self-deprecating asides and useful artistic advice. The book is not without challenges. It has neither a table of contents nor page numbers; it’s bigger than the tops of most side tables and the print is small. But Mr. Ware has always written as well as he draws, especially here, when he knows his subject well.

‘POSTMODERN DESIGN COMPLETE’ By Judith Gura (Thames & Hudson, New York). Whether you love or hate postmodern architecture and design this book — the heaviest on my list — will remind you why. The introduction is by Charles Jencks, a pioneer of postmodernism, and devotes a full spread to his 2011 chart, “Evolutionary Tree of Postmodernisms,” which makes its masses of tiny names legible. Over 480 pages it covers architecture, design, graphic design and edited design in the work of more than 60 adherents. It includes a section on living with postmodernism and another on its aftermath. As a very infrequent admirer, I was surprised by how much I liked.

Jason Farago

I always read the catalogs of exhibitions I see, but just as important are the catalogs of shows I miss. If it’s done right, these books can be every bit as engrossing as a museum presentation — and these days, in a global art world where none of us can catch every show, they offer an essential guide to cities and institutions abroad. Here are the art books I’ve spent the most time with this year, with art from Mexico to Russia, West Africa to East Asia — plus, if you’ll indulge me, one novel.

‘POSTWAR: ART BETWEEN THE PACIFIC AND THE ATLANTIC, 1945-1965’ Edited by Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel and Ulrich Wilmes (Prestel). To the end of my days I will curse myself for missing this epochal exhibition at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, which offered a true global history of art from 1945 to 1965. The 800-page catalog is its own monument, weighing in at more than 10 pounds, and its dozens of contributors reground postwar art in the cataclysm of the

Holocaust, the rise of the Iron Curtain, African decolonization movements, and nationalist reforms from Latin America to **Southeast Asia**. In “Postwar,” Jackson Pollock, Frank Stella and other American all-stars have no more or less prominence than Socialist Realist painters from the Soviet Union and the new People’s Republic of China, or than artists from beyond the great powers, like the ghoulishly brilliant Mozambican muralist Malangatana Valente Ngwenya. More important, this titanic book grounds these artists within the circumstances that shaped them. As Ms. Siegel writes, globalism is no good if it “occludes history itself — the relations and conflicts among nations and cultures that shaped the postwar world.”

‘PAINTED IN MEXICO, 1700–1790: PINXIT MEXICI’ Edited by Ilona Katzew (Prestel). This blindsiding show travels to the Met in April, but whether you see it at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (where it is on view through March 18) or catch it in New York, the catalog for this extravagant showcase of 18th-century Mexican painting has its own allure. (One of the most valuable features of **Pacific Standard Time**, which is showcasing this exhibition, is its funding for catalogs of this quality.) Along with superlative essays on the force of religion, the authority of portraiture, the use of ornament and the circulation of paintings between Mexico and Spain, the book details more than 130 masterpieces from an age of opulence.

‘CANDIDA HÖFER IN MÉXICO’ Edited by Uta Grosenick and Herbert Burkert (Gestalten). A more contemporary vision of Mexico appears in this handsomely printed overview of an exhibition I saw this summer at the **Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso in Mexico City**. The German photographer Candida Höfer, best known for her exacting images of libraries, traveled across the country to shoot these stately photographs of colonial, neoclassical and contemporary architecture. Her glacial gaze and precise framing give an added force to five views of the Teatro Degollado in Guadalajara, whose carmine stalls are topped by a fresco of religious ecstasy, or the spectacular Iglesia de San Jerónimo Tlacoahuaya in Oaxaca, with a barrel-vault ceiling festooned with flowers.

‘MALICK SIDIBÉ: MALI TWIST’ Edited by André Magnin and Brigitte Ollier (Éditions Xavier Barral). It’s hard not to look with envy at the party photographs of this great Malian photographer, where the dancing goes on until dawn and everyone is dressed to kill. This catalog for his first-ever retrospective, now at the **Fondation**

Cartier in Paris, includes hundreds of Sidibé's elegant portraits and more candid snapshots, plus a reminiscence by the Malian scholar Manthia Diawara of nights on the Bamako dance floors. (Read more about the retrospective.)

'REVOLIUTSIIA! DEMONSTRATSIIA! SOVIET ART PUT TO THE TEST' Edited by Matthew S. Witkovsky and Devin Fore (Yale University Press). Up now at the Art Institute of Chicago is the largest of many American exhibitions timed to the centenary of the Russian Revolution, and its catalog pays particular attention to the photographers, graphic designers and architects who aimed to model a new society they really did think was coming. My favorite discovery was a suite of colorful bar graphs charting women's labor productivity, souped up with photocollages of climbing high-rises and satisfied workers: a rather more inventive kind of data journalism.

'DAIDO MORIYAMA: RECORD' Edited by Mark Holborn (Thames & Hudson). Between 1972 and 1973, the tenacious Tokyo photographer Daido Moriyama published five issues of his own magazine, which featured indistinct, gloomy images of motorcycles, subway grates and Tokyo at night. Unexpectedly, Mr. Moriyama revived the zine in 2006, and this striking book collates the early black-and-white images, shot with his trademark graininess, with new street photography from New York, Morocco and a Tokyo transformed.

'CHINESE PAINTING AND ITS AUDIENCES' By Craig Clunas (Princeton University Press). In this engaging and finely illustrated study, which began as a series of A.W. Mellon lectures at the National Gallery of Art, the art historian Craig Clunas veers from a formalist view of Chinese painting to look at how paintings were viewed — by solitary aristocratic scholars, by merchants plugged into global trade networks, by new Nationalist and Communist governments, and by western curators and collectors. This is magnificent scholarship, and a model of how art history can provide us new tools to understand a new power's place in the world.

'THE BLIND MAN: 100TH ANNIVERSARY FACSIMILE EDITION' Edited by Sophie Seita (Ugly Duckling Presse). In 1917, Marcel Duchamp submitted a new work to an open-call exhibition: a urinal, turned on one side and signed with a pseudonym. "Fountain" was rejected, but Alfred Stieglitz photographed it for this

short-lived Dada magazine, which mixed nonsense verse with editorials that asked, “Where Art is concerned is New York satisfied to be like a provincial town?” This carefully crafted reproduction, an absolute must for fellow Duchamp geeks, includes all two issues of “The Blind Man”; an associated Dada publication, “Rongwrong”; and an invitation to a Dada party I’d have killed to go to.

‘AUTUMN’ By Ali Smith (Anchor). This Scottish novelist’s post-Brexit, climate-addled fugue won a spot on the Booker shortlist and acclaim from my colleagues on the Book Review, who also named it one of the 10 best books of 2017. Less commented: The book’s main character is an art historian, Ms. Smith’s poetic gaze on political and ecological decline intertwines with moving passages on the power of painting and the place of women in the art world. Some feelings images cannot capture; we need words like hers. (Read the review.)

A version of this article appears in print on December 15, 2017, on Page C20 of the New York edition with the headline: The Best Art Books (and Books About Art) of 2017.