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“Newly professionalized and academicized activities like art criticism tend to don special authority rather fast, and our developing entrenchment behind a clerky apparatus the laity do not share—knowledge of a specialized literature, access to the systematic index of this and that, the prestigious conceptual model borrowed from here or there, even the putatively trained eye—seems to me medieval, and unnecessary. Inferential criticism reduces that apparatus to the heuristic convenience it is, and restores the authority of common visual experience of a pictorial order. It is conversable and it is democratic.”

—Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*

Editorial: Regionalism as a Form of Taste

When it comes to art, there are no absolutes. There is perhaps only the absolute value of art itself. The great painting by Matisse at the Saint Louis Art Museum—the one with the turtle and those grievous nudes—isn't great because it's great absolutely. It's great because we can see forward to colorfields through its muscly fore-, middle-, and backgrounds; because we can see backwards through its figures to those that came to life atop Giotto's *lapis* blues; because it resolves the painter's early trials with color into a system of surface touches and ungraded jumps; and because there's more oomph in just one of its subjects' toes than in the whole damn *Dance* at MoMA. What makes us see all this in SLAM's Matisse is also what compels us to recognize our own regional opportunities: taste. Taste is a contingent thing, done over and over in time by anybody who has decided to cultivate it. It is something we make together, ushered by works of art and their histories. Taste is labile and entirely up for grabs.

Why is this a way to start an editorial in MAQ? What does the mutability of taste, or that fact that we forge it socially, mean for regionalism and its prospects in 2023?

Aesthetic pluralism—a fact of art through its last fifty years, dealt with in MAQ's previous editorials—has made muck of the concept of taste. True, this has had its positive effects. It did away with any residual idealism about the origins of artistic quality: art is only ever as good as we decide it is together. The detriment has been in the way pluralism has killed the “we” who decides. There's simply so much art around us, so many different traditions and conflicting strains, that we often feel we can't be bothered to build any new consensus around the good or the bad of it all. We neatly conclude that each one of us should decide what works for each of us alone, and leave it at that. Aside from being despairingly antisocial, this is a dead end. The exhaustion we all feel with art's profusion at present is proof of that much. Regionalism, we believe, could be a salve and a strategy.

There are many roadblocks to working through this, not least of all the rightful demand that Western art become less hegemonically related to the other aesthetic traditions of the world. The work which we're compelled to do towards some form of World Art History—which MAQ believes should begin at home—could very well supplant the Western tradition with which we're still preoccupied. Astonishing syntheses will doubtless occur. But they will not come semiotically, by grafting “other” iconographies onto established Western forms. Yet this is how even the most passionately decolonizing Contemporary Art has attempted it in the global period. The harsh truth is that one can no more decolonize an oil painting than a piano (or a multimedia installation, for that matter). Sooner or later, the practitioner of any art will discover that the history of that artform involves people making and

perfecting the methods and tools that comprise it. This is true of all artforms, from Haida Totem Poles to Japanese screen doors. Western mediums are no different.

Yet this is no reason for despair. All artists are equally free to reject or to embrace the models. The thing no artist can afford to do, however, is avoid studying how and why they came about. Indeed, what each artist must do (and do continually), is uncover precisely what is *universally applicable* in any chosen form. And this includes its full historical content. Though the theorists frequently tell us that “universality” could only be a lie or a bourgeois mystification, it’s still necessary to believe, against all doubts, that universality is still possible, and to behave accordingly. The spiritual dimension of art (which has been said to be its true social dimension) lies right here—in the faith required to hope against all evidence, to believe against all opposition, that something universal is still possible and could be found almost anywhere.

The first step for an artist today must be this: not to go to war over these things, nor to contribute anything more to narcissism or antisocial despair. The first step must instead be compassion, compassion in the face of the alienation we all feel. Many of the current cultural values will have to be eschewed. Boundaries will have to be raised, influences chosen, embraced, related, and perhaps cast aside. Taste, in a word, must be built up from scratch. This would entail rummaging new art histories from the globe-sized heap the last half-century has tossed in front of us. It would entail artists forming new traditions through the work they make, work that’s more concerned with whatever solipsistic history of art justifies it than with the spasms of the artworld. It would mean quietly, diligently, beginning the work of creating the new. Which is of course always a rediscovery of the very old. We have had it exactly backwards if we ever believed that we lost it, or that it abandoned us. It has always been there, and it will be again, but only if we’re foolish enough to aim for it.

MAQ’s proposal, which we hope to enact through our critical work, is that establishing some kind of authentically regional sensibility for producing and experiencing art—one with its own biases and expectations, its own art history—would be a viable means of cutting through the double-bind of aesthetic pluralism. It would be a way of acknowledging that taste is far from absolute, while averring that it is possible to forge together. We want to insist on taste’s binding nature, but also on the fact that it is a democratic process. A sandbox sociality, you could call it. A local universalism. It’s probably a foolishness to try and develop such a thing in just one small outpost of our diverse and baggy global society. But it could also be a place to start towards something more cohesive than we’ve ever seen.

—S.J. and T.S.

Contemporary Art Museum Saint Louis

Dominic Chambers: Birthplace

September 8-February 11



Dominic Chambers, *Birthplace (red Classroom)*, 2023, Oil on linen.
Courtesy Elisabeth Bernstein.

This autobiographical painting exhibition by Dominic Chambers is *yet another* cloying homage to St. Louis, submitting to the myopic small-town pathos that helps prevent interesting art from developing regionally. Is there no artistic value in the provinces other than petty hometown pride?

Chambers decorates his paintings of the familiar with so many rainbows—a lazy Contemporary shortcut to getting color on canvas—streaming over recognizable St. Louis sites. Yet negating shadows lurk above and below them. The rainbow is a special wish-symbol from within a colorless reality. Were we to live in an aesthetically free society, we'd no longer have a need for rainbow paintings.

Of all his competent, large-scale pictures, Chambers' best is the most indirectly related to St. Louis: an ambiguous interior—a red room after Matisse—that could be any room in the world or in one's dormant imagination. With so much "color" these days being muddied with fake depth (blue-black, grays, black-and-white) Chambers gives us a refractive *prism of red*. It's as if we're seeing a completely new color altogether, almost taboo.

Another painting offers a glimpse—but only a glimpse—of art on a freer side of history than the one bolstered by our revised culture industry. Showing papers in chaos in an empty street, it has a nightmarish de Chirico vibe. Mostly, though, the works are uninspiring, oriented pedantically toward their viewers' conservative love of the familiar. Like so much Contemporary Art, Chambers' is desperate to display its technical pedigree and its righteous orientation. It is a social realism updated for the rebranded culture industry and its breed of charlatan aesthetes.

—B.S.

Contemporary Art Museum Saint Louis

Hajra Waheed: A Solo Exhibition

September 8-February 11



Hajra Waheed, *The Source*, Video with narration. Courtesy of Hajra Waheed.

Waheed evokes a typical Contemporary Art experience: a nascent aesthetic intuition that is simultaneously truncated by dogma. Her art is culture-industry, high-class kitsch stock. Sociopolitical pseudo-theory is smuggled in to mystify and distract from the truth that there is no clear aesthetic concept driving the work.

This is not to say that there is no aesthetic force here whatsoever. If Waheed's viewer—or listener, as she utilizes “sound,” another dogmatic metaphysic of the Contemporary—can manage to wrest her art from the curatorial (administrative) clichés she's conformed to, there is some aesthetic pleasure here. In particular, Waheed's sound installation, with its soft white carpet imitating La Monte Young's *Dream House*, attempts to liberate the form of *humming*. With multiple singers humming multichannel and combining to an evocative drone, the installation is a contradictory exhibition of inhibition—an ode to childish lalia. However, it still settles far below the standard of even a decrepit *Dream House*, and the work's statement that humming is a “means to explore radical forms of collective and sonic agency” is pretentious Contemporary Art jargon at its most laughable.

This installation is accompanied by a tunneled array of the austere kind of monochrome paintings that appear “deep” only because they are somber in tone. At best, they exude a tranquil minimalism like Agnes Martin, but lack the expansiveness and suggestive continuity that make minimalism compelling. Mostly, their designs waft the stale air of cheap sophistication.

The austere resistance to all things colorful, vibrant, and spontaneously playful articulates its calculated thesis in a concluding video installation, which monumentalizes “resistance.” Once, artists dared to say “Yes” to life by saying “Yes”

to art. In sharp contrast, the Contemporary Art Professional (formerly the artist) aestheticizes their resistance to life and art *as* their art. The product, as we see in Waheed’s exhibition, is very art-y. But what kind of human derives pleasure from gazing upon an aestheticized fear of freedom?

—B.S.

Contemporary Art Museum Saint Louis

Hajra Waheed: A Solo Exhibition

September 8-February 11



Installation view of Hajra Waheed, *Hum*, at Portikus, Frankfurt.
Courtesy Hajra Waheed.

First—don’t worry about the brochure. The texts go on very properly about post-colonialism, the Global South, and that word that by central decree must accompany all exhibitions from now until 2027: *Resistance*.

Waheed pulls off two important things in this show. After wandering through some unremarkable works on paper, one comes to the first: the sound installation *Hum* (a pun, it also means “we” in Urdu). Sixteen voices in sixteen hanging speakers hum to you as you walk shoeless on soothing white carpet. Imagine if we had no paper, no words to tell us how to feel about it. Trying hard to forget the text, I found myself moved. The unadorned human voice will always have that effect and Waheed deserves credit for the inherent simplicity of this experience.

The second is the video installation *Spiral*. Waheed’s voiceover is mixed: half cliché, half moving poetic prose. But the dreamy video is the most compelling and hypnotic that I’ve seen in a Contemporary setting. In the dark of the room, with the voices of *Hum* still heard from the next the gallery over, Waheed leaps for a moment out of the Contemporary into the timeless. And none of us need text to tell us what that is.

—S.J.

Granite City Art and Design District

Beyond Recognition

Days of the Dog

July 1-August 12



Edo Rosenblith, *Untitled*, 2023. Courtesy of Edo Rosenblith.

Two two-person shows—one in each of two indoor galleries—comprised G-CADD’s 34th airing of art. As an exhibition, the slightly larger of these was also slightly better. This was *Beyond Recognition*, better because the affinities between its artists (Sam Slone and Todd Kunkler) were evident and somewhat productive. The other, *Days of the Dog*, was less cohesive, but it contained a few works that were, on their own, the best between the two shows.

These were sketches by Edo Rosenblith, in each of which a skein of doodled marks surrounded and started to overtake well-drafted cartoons. It detracted somewhat from my experience of these drawings to learn that they actually were scribbled-on pages from the artist’s sketchbook. Looking at them closely, though, made this make sense: the relationships between the marks and the renderings were good as conceptions but wishy-washy in their particulars. Rosenblith’s other works were in his hard-edge R. Crumb style.

Rosenblith was paired with Erik Sälgröm Peterson, whose paintings were trivial, but not so trivial as to discredit them entirely as works of art. Absent their half-baked sci-fi subject matter and framing device, some of them had a nice Vrel-vibe to their flatness and geometry. This could have been dug into more.

Slone is virtuosically talented, sometimes to her paintings’ detriment. Her ability to render seems to have subsumed her inclination to design. The best of her paintings at G-CADD (a forest fire; a tableau cut into a smoke cloud) benefited from their uncanny symbol-mashing, but were still too bright and flatly arranged.

Kunkler's paintings cultivated a post-internet sensibility by juxtaposing symbols strangely on a flat plane. His colors were nice, but one got the sense that his symbols were too "selected"; paintings like these work better when their symbology seems completely aleatory and utterly determined all at once.

—T.S.

Granite City Art and Design District

Green Noise

Bret Schneider: The Deserter's Continuous Music in the Key of Fields; A Musical Irreverie

September 23-November 4



Installation view of *The Deserter's Continuous Music in the Key of Fields; A Musical Irreverie* at Granite City Art and Design District.

Note: MAQ discloses a potential conflict of interest; the author of this review is a friend of Bret Schneider's. Schneider is also a regular contributor to MAQ.

G-CADD's 35th comprises two exhibitions that deal with sound. One, *Green Noise*, has about a half-dozen field recordings playing from knock-off iPods. Each of these inspired two photographs. None of the photographs is interesting (except maybe a sparse one with some pipes in it) and the sound-image connections are less so. Some robust theoretical scaffolding places undue significance onto the work.

The other exhibition, Bret Schneider's, is the best thing I've seen by a St. Louis artist since I've been in this town. Perhaps, since Schneider is a friend of mine, this should be taken with a grain of salt. My few criticisms should not be.

For one, Schneider's titles are overblown, and his compositions generally don't need them. Additionally, *Deserter's* suffers a bit from its presentation. Schneider's player piano, retrofitted "for the composer to spontaneously &/or algorithmically transmit live musical expressions from a bespoke composition program," is ineluctably made sculptural by the gallery context. Schneider hasn't controlled for this. Bricks holding

down the sustain pedal detract from the thing's acheiropoietic wonder; the environment might have been better "treated." Most significantly, there is a symbolic element to a lone piano playing an empty room, and this melodrama does not help *Deserter's*. Schneider's challenge seems to revolve around how to eliminate The Piano without eliminating his piano.

But these problems are peripheral—residue of display, not markers of substance. *Deserter's* succeeds insofar as it is not sound art or sculpture, but adamantly music. Schneider has devised a permutational scheme for composing which is simultaneously strictured and supple. It is an artistic conception that allows him to transmute the historical impossibility of anything's newness at present into a material for experimentation. This has produced a work that is experientially full-bodied and unflaggingly beautiful—a bounded infinity of sound, distant and bright. That is cause for hope.

—T.S.

Kemper Art Museum

Adam Pendleton: To Divide By

September 22-January 15



Adam Pendleton, detail of *Untitled (WE ARE NOT)*, 2021, Silkscreen ink on canvas. Courtesy of the Forman Family Collection.

Pendleton's exhibition is perfect in the desiccating way that Contemporary Art exhibitions can be perfect. There is very little that's impeachable about his art—its conceits, its finish, its presentation. But there is also very little that feels substantial, and much that is academic. (His concept of "Black Dada," subversive enough to have inspired a book featuring essays by curators from MoMA and the Whitney, is a case in point.) In *To Divide By*, everything's tight and hardly anything's that good.

It occurred to me while I was grazing this show that it might be better for art to fail outright than to succeed astonishingly on the terms it sets for itself while failing to produce much of an effect. The flat silkscreened surfaces in a lot of Pendleton's work might as well be a metaphor for the superficiality of the experiences he produces. Even the best-designed of his silkscreened paintings—they feature hard-edged black shapes and sometimes letters, all besieged by diffuse and splattered ink—lack the deep integration with their ideas that art as conceptual as Pendleton's requires. His repetitions are perfunctory, his handling too expressive, his texts too resolved, his ideas sort of hovering.

A solemn nod to Minimalism, by way of an actual Black Box, is rote and easy, but the video work it contains is the best thing in the show, if still not particularly challenging.

Perhaps this is all traceable to the unoriginality of Pendleton's conceptual framework. Many of the most interesting thoughts about Black Art had been had by the turn of the millennium. The past decade or so has been somewhat static by comparison, if not regressive. One glance at the Glenn Ligon print that's on view downstairs at the Kemper suggests this. It is more savvy and sparing and deftly visual than anything in Pendleton's show.

—T.S.

Laumeier Sculpture Park

Vaughn Davis Jr.: The Fabric of Our Time

August 26-December 17



Vaughn Davis Jr., *Horizontal, A Moment for Contemplation*, 2023. Unprimed canvas, acrylic dye, pigment, aerosol. Courtesy of Vaughn Davis Jr. and Laumeier Sculpture Park.

Davis is among this city's better artists. *Fabric* shows that he is both in need of development and primed for it. The main challenge to this development will come

from how readily Davis's technique permits him to repeat himself without at first appearing to. The uniform power, and the occasional quality, of the works on view at Laumeier have me hoping that Davis does not hold an arbitrary commitment to the approach he has devised. This would bog him down.

The exhibition consists of nine cut and torn unstretched abstract canvases pinned to the walls, three more that are draped over large hung box structures, and two ceramics. The ceramics are negligible, and the draped canvases are a mostly failed attempt at necessitating the sometimes arbitrary structures of the unstretched paintings. (The draped works' colors are a little strained and the boxes they're strung upon mostly overpower them. Plus, they're presented as a single artwork—*Sanguine Structures for the Empathy of Humanity*—but they hardly correlate where it counts. Titles are one of Davis's problems.) Of the unstretched canvases, two seem close to unqualifiedly good, a few more strike out in promising ways, and none are unredeemable.

Davis's biggest issue is that he's sometimes lazy with his paintings as paintings, trusting that cuts and tears will salvage undifferentiating abstractions. This works out with *Regret* and *Step Sister*, which manage to accentuate forms on the canvas (which are either too diaphanous or too scratchy by themselves) with forms created by how the canvas has been shaped. It is a nonissue with the two best works, *Orange Yellow Square* and *Horizontal, A Moment for Contemplation*. *Square* bucks painting almost completely by making its front and back monochromes; *Horizontal*, with its well-weighted colors and measured rips, is the only work to succeed together as painting and sculpture. Even this piece, though, is pretty unjustifiably expressionistic in its facture, as if Davis is just trying to paint hard. A subtler brush and solidier colors could do him well.

—T.S.

Monaco

John Knight: Emerging Leftwing Artist

Brittany Boynton Mosier: Mark Twain Cave Rave

September 9-September 24



Brittany Boynton Mosier, *Mark Twain Cave Rave*, 2023, Multimedia installation. Courtesy of Monaco.

I don't want to be misunderstood for saying that the way forward for regionalism has to have something to do with turning regional points-of-pride into the subject matter of art. But if all provincial art managed to take up its place as cannily as Mosier's Monaco installation, I'd start singing a different tune. *Mark Twain Cave Rave* was among the funniest, strangest, least pretentious, most honest, most exciting works of art I've seen in this town. It ran earnest circles around much brainier, more official current art, proving that serious effects can come from the jokiest of places.

A lot of *Cave Rave's* success stemmed from the fact that Mosier is flat out great at making an installation—she seems to understand installation as a medium. *Cave Rave* placed cheeky paintings and drawings alongside concocted ephemera, coy texts, and stupid visual gags. These all played perfectly on the compositional fact that things accrue meaning based on their contexts. A kiddish portrait of Mark Twain in Dayglo blues and pinks came off as great, since it was presented as the ridiculously corny lynchpin of an immersively corny experience. Mosier was bold or silly enough to believe there's something aesthetically salvageable in postmodern roadside Americana. Every bit of it she could find was preserved, transformed, and presented in *Cave Rave*.

I might have liked Knight's pairings of photos with phrases better had they not come alongside Mosier's goofy tour de force. Against *Cave Rave*, though, they couldn't help but seem sort of staid. They were tonally balanced and conceptually suggestive.

—T.S.

Parapet/Real Humans

Kurt Beers: *Animal Trainer*

September 14–October 14



Installation view of Kurt Beers: *Animal Trainer* at Parapet/Real Humans.

Note: MAQ discloses a potential conflict of interest; the author of this review is a friend of and collaborator with Parapet's gallerist.

Beers' show consists of walnuts, pedestals, a poem, paper planes, a hand-carved urn, a painting, a Charlie Chaplin song, and a work by Francis Picabia. (The latter two are not present at Parapet.) It participates in a current installational vogue, whereby disparate things are cleanly but ambiguously arranged throughout a largely blank gallery. This sort of work lives or dies by how well it balances the perceived cohesion of its object-symbols with their ultimate incoherence as an ensemble. Beers' exhibition is sparse. In certain spots it strikes this balance reasonably well.

One such spot is Parapet's north wall, on which hangs a painting. The painting is bad, but it hangs there like it's the only thing for miles, which makes it seem more like the notion of a painting in an exhibition than a painting itself. This contributes to the show's loose relational effect. One wonders whether a picture worth looking at on its own terms would have complicated the show's dynamic (which is a bit too slick) for better or for worse.

Another good spot is the gallery's back corner, where three pedestals of decreasing height are all crowded up. On the tallest is a vessel spilling with walnuts, but the other two are empty. Their crowding cuts against the show's lightness, and they have a nice geometry together. But the walnuts—which spill from here all across the gallery—feel a bit too symbolically potent for the show's otherwise vanishing meanings. This is one of its big problems. A littler problem is the paper planes, which are unobtrusive but don't seem to add much visually, spatially, or semiotically to the show.

It is tough to tell whether the present absences of the works by Chaplin and Picabia (both called “Animal Trainer”) cage up Beers’ symbolic menagerie or else crack his meanings open.

—T.S.

Pulitzer Arts Foundation

Sarah Crowner: Around Orange

September 8-February 4



Installation view of *Sarah Crowner: Around Orange*. Courtesy of the Pulitzer Arts Foundation.

Pulitzer exhibitions are often at their best when they respond to Ellsworth Kelly’s permanently installed painting, *Blue Black*. What this offers artists is a rare opportunity to learn—in practice—from the history of art. To my knowledge, the last Pulitzer show to pursue this art historical education was Glenn Ligon’s *Blue Black* in 2017, at once a beautiful exhibition and a missed opportunity.

Crowner has opted for blue’s complementary—orange—by way of a direct response to Kelly. Hers are ambitious, vibrant paintings in the post-painterly tradition. Crowner’s paintings would be immersive like Rothkos or Frankenthalers were it not for the austere calculatedness that plagues much art today. Their vibrancy is also somewhat cheaply won via low-contrast shifts in hue—a cheap trick reminiscent of Ad Reinhardt—and the color patches impeccably sewing their surfaces together compromise them with craftiness.

Kelly’s *Blue Black* is a testament to the hard-won autonomy of painting, forcing architecture to adapt to painting—as it should be! Crowner’s postmodern aesthetics try and fail to revert this. Considering that her paintings are supposed to be extra-sensitive to site, they are awkwardly installed. Ultimately, I do enjoy Crowner’s paintings more than I do *Blue Black*—I’ve always felt the tone of blue in Kelly’s piece to be dull, almost canned, and too much is made of its site-specificity. Crowner’s

deep blues are by contrast luxuriant, and her paintings could be installed anywhere and enjoyed—as the Pulitzer’s display proves.

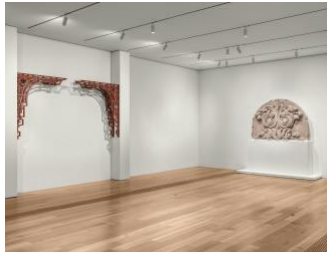
Here’s to the artist who aims to move culture forward by more deeply understanding the latent force of art history! Crouner doesn’t achieve this goal, but at least she attempts to, in the way a good essayist would write through a subject so as to crack it wide open, exposing all its faults and latent possibilities.

—B.S.

Pulitzer Arts Foundation

Urban Archaeology: Lost Buildings of St. Louis

September 8-February 4



Installation view of *Urban Archaeology: Lost Buildings of St. Louis*. Courtesy of the Pulitzer Arts Foundation.

Note: MAQ discloses a potential conflict of interest; Urban Archaeology was co-curated by a contributor to the current issue, Michael R. Allen.

Urban Archaeology presents a few dozen pieces of architectural salvage from the collection of the National Building Arts Center. These have been arranged in the Pulitzer’s sparse curatorial idiom. This works well enough for certain individual objects; it is nice to see some pieces of ornament presented in the round, or backside-forward. But there is a fundamental issue with the Pulitzer’s house style as it relates to this material.

It feels as though the intention of this show was to promote these objects from chunks of buildings to works of art. This misses the aesthetic point. Furthering the separation of these artifacts from their context by means of such a sparse arrangement precludes our appreciation of their beauty. These are not works of art—they are *pieces* of buildings—and they often don’t work very well when presented as works of art. Not because they’re not beautiful, but simply because their beauty is inseparable from their original context. The NBAC campus itself replaces this

context with a convincing new one for their appreciation; this Pulitzer show does not.

We need to be able to dream with these artifacts, to imagine them as integral aesthetic parts of whole buildings that rise above us from the street and surround us as we occupy them. The show's single video, along with informational shadow boxes throughout the exhibition, helps us along here. But, as a whole, the slightness of *Urban Archaeology* prompts an unnecessarily shallow experience.

A more wholehearted integration of the Tadao Ando building into this display—namely, a busier curatorial language—could have both cultivated this sort of experience and created a conversation between lost buildings and those that replace them. This show might have challenged the Ando building, expressing the formal and historical conflict that it contains.

—J.C.

Saint Louis Art Museum

Action/Abstraction Redefined: Modern Native Art, 1940s-1970s

June 24-September 3



Installation view of *Action/Abstraction Redefined: Modern Native Art, 1940s-1970s*. Courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Of the approximately 90 modernist works by Native American artists included in this exhibition, about 30 were strong. The exhibition was effectively arranged through several galleries, and it provided the public with an intellectual survey of a little-known movement in North American modern art.

The exhibition's first galleries contained text about the Institute of American Indian Arts—a midcentury school that merged American Indian tradition with a Bauhaus approach—as well as a handful of strong works. These works, as with all of the show's highlights, merged New York abstraction with Indigenous visual language,

challenging a dominant influence. Works in the Minimalist idiom, instead of leaving the viewer “nowhere to go,” connected us to a rich graphic tradition.

But, if this show was to be taken as a definitive statement on midcentury modern Native art, we were left wanting. Too many works appeared to be unresolved imitations of the artists of the original *Action/Abstraction* show, held at SLAM in 2008. Satisfactory work from a student, but out of place in a museum. Instead of directly challenging the 2008 show, *Redefined* should have highlighted the best works, across styles, of midcentury Native American artists. The curators may not have been able to justify the same art historical critique, but a stronger case for excellence in Native American art would have been made.

Fortunately, there is something worth seeing in each gallery. This is due, in part, to the diversity of media presented. Bookending the exhibition with its strongest artist, George Morrison, was a wise choice. For these reasons, the show holds together.

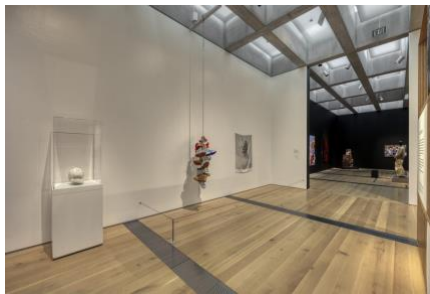
Yet, the exhibition’s glib title reveals a political agenda attempting to trump an artistic one. For my money, the titular “redefinition” occurring here is not in the works’ expression of modernism, but in a museum’s commitment to presenting exceptional art.

—J.C.

Saint Louis Art Museum

The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century

August 19-January 1



Installation view of *The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century*. Courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

The Culture is an exhibition with no skips. I arrived at SLAM’s celebration of 50 years of hip-hop with doubts: multimedia shows frequently feel spread too thin, and—let’s be real—who hasn’t been bored by the 50th anniversary of... literally anything? This

exhibition, though, renders visual the *feel* of hip-hop music. Of course, the show features works of graffiti and freestyle dance (the two visual elements of hip-hop’s classic “five pillars”). But *The Culture* makes an expansive visual argument by linking more artworks than you could imagine to hip-hop’s sonic ingredients.

A Great Day in Hip Hop serves as a first view for the show. In this 1998 photo of 177 artists crowded onto three Harlem stoops, the “sun is folding” (as Amiri Baraka wrote), and encroaching shadows cast from buildings across the street frame the subjects’ faces. The shadow line is just under the chins of those in front, which means the image is nearly untenable: the participants couldn’t have been packed any more densely, and evening is fast approaching. The golden age of music at the golden hour’s close. Gordon Parks’ razor-sharp attunement to time is what makes this shot exquisite. If hip-hop turns words into instruments, then it binds ideas to rhythm—to time. This is not just a photo of rappers; it’s a photo whose shutter was released on beat.

After you’re greeted by Parks’ image (and, naturally, some cool Basquiats), beats meet your ears. The music ensures that hip-hop’s quintessential multimodality is retained and visually amplified. The curators have developed a formal language that lends both gravity and momentum: Language, Brand, Adornment, Tribute, Ascension, and Pose are hip-hop’s elements, no matter the medium. While one might expect an anniversary exhibition to recapitulate the past, *The Culture* remains distinctly interested in the words we will use to describe future artworks.

—S.S.

Saint Louis University Museum of Art

Divergent Paths

August 25-December 30



Jean Dubuffet, *Untitled*, 1946. Etching and Aquatint.

If you've been to the top floor of SLUMA and seen its bonkers Collection of the Western Jesuit Missions, you might be surprised to know that the museum also houses a permanent collection of minor works by serious artists. In the current first-floor exhibition, arranged in two large rooms without any real sense of purpose, historical or critical, one is treated to an unstructured tour of the Modernist avant-garde. *Der Blaue Reiter*, Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, etc. etc. Kandinsky, Magritte, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Mitchell, Motherwell—all the heavy-hitters are here, with almost no context except for wall texts that read like Wikipedia entries and feature wonderfully literal variations on the exhibition's vague theme, like "this artist took a separate path when..." or "such painter diverged from such school when..."

What's clear is just how fresh so much of the work of the early-to-mid-20th century still seems, and how desperately we're working to catch up to those artists' furious output. Any modern audience ought to be chastened by the fact that a merely decent hodgepodge at a small private university still testifies to that fact. It's a critical cliché to say something like: Where's the *Nude Descending a Staircase* for the 21st Century? Why don't we have our *Guernica*? *WHO WILL PAINT, SCULPT, DRAPE, OR DESIGN THE OBVIOUS MASTERPIECE FOR OUR TIME?* Certainly SLUMA isn't trying to provide an answer to such a huge question, only to give us a chance to see an underappreciated Magritte, or an etching by Jean Dubuffet, and that is perfectly fine.

Besides, one could very well argue that the question can't be asked. Yet there remains the stubborn reality that many masterpieces of the 20th century were instantly recognized to be masterpieces by the more discerning eyes of their time. Whether the masterpiece or the discernment comes first, likely no one can know. But it's probable that they go together. And until we rediscover both, our own century is going to continue to go without its *Guernica*.

—S.J.

David Adjaye, *Asaase III*, 2023, Rammed earth sculpture

On view at the Griot Museum of Black History



David Adjaye, *Asaase III*, 2023. Courtesy of Counterpublic.

There often is a conflict between the intentions of patrons and the self-evident properties of art, and works of public art seem most prone to falling into the chasm in between. Such is the case with the rammed earth sculpture *Asaase III*, installed at the Griot Museum of Black History as part of the Counterpublic triennial. The fault is not inherent in the work, nor necessarily in the recent scandal tarnishing the reputation of its attributed designer, David Adjaye. Rather, there is an unresolved question of context.

The rammed earth building technique dates to neolithic times and tracks across cultures, including several in West Africa; Adjaye's sculpture derives its name from the Twi word for "earth" (*asaase*). The serpentine form of its walls meanders from the entrance of the Griot along a lawn, and breaks at the alley before continuing again across a vacant lot. These breaks in form frame views of the surrounding city, which bears the battle scars of acute and lingering white supremacist control: erasure, vacancy, disinvestment. The sculpture's sturdy, seemingly-ancient walls, enriched with the tint of crushed red brick sourced from local demolitions, offer a visual foil striking in certain moments.

Yet the work relates very little to its specific site, which is just a block north of the 100-acre campus of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. The NGA represents the most hideous act of racialized dispossession in fifty years. Like many prestige public art projects, the visual commentary of *Asaase III* seems less specific and more generalized. It would read the same on many sites in St. Louis. Perhaps that is the point, but if so, it is a point left to the under-resourced Griot to explain—along with the blowback against Adjaye. The balance seems off, as the Griot has the greater capacity for explaining this place and its history.

—M.R.A.

George Caleb Bingham, *Jolly Flatboatmen in Port*, 1857, Oil on canvas

On view at the Saint Louis Art Museum



George Caleb Bingham, *Jolly Flatboatmen in Port*, 1857, Oil on canvas.
Courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

In search of things thoroughly American, I took myself back to the second floor of SLAM and was charmed by George Caleb Bingham's *Jolly Flatboatmen in Port*. It's hokey, and sincere. It's completely aspirational. It rejoices in quintessentially American attitudes, picturesque visions of festivity which paradoxically try to mix pure, clear-minded repose with active virility. On the left side of the pyramidal structure of the flatboatmen, a man leans against a stack of crates. As a friend once remarked to me, it's all in that lean—the characteristic American stance, one of the dearest of giveaways to any non-American. Swaggering and leaning, these are central to the American Myth, in which white men stride across the continent and commit terrible sins in search of a final rest, free from the cares of the world. Our contemporary obsession is of course with puncturing this myth, which was always inevitable. Yet what the mythmakers—from Bingham to John Ford—did is still worth paying attention to. Yes, they wove an idea of America that was just as beautiful as it is false. But it *was* beautiful, and if this causes us some discomfort, there's still something to learn from it.

—S.J.

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *I See Red: Migration*, 1995, Mixed media on canvas

On view at the Saint Louis Art Museum



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *I See Red: Migration*, 1995, Mixed media on canvas. Courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

This is not a corrective to my negative review, in MAQ's last issue, of Smith's Counterpublic painting. Rather, it's an acknowledgement that people who make bad paintings often make paintings that are better than bad, too. *Migration*, like the Counterpublic piece, is a critique of colonialism by way of abstraction. It gets at this through Hofmann, the Counterpublic piece through Johns. Its symbolic-critical component—stenciled glyphs and a caricatured Indian visage strung just above the painting's midriff—is less hokey than Smith can get with her maps. There's some visual bite to these symbols, too: the fact that they play out in a slash across the painting, rather than busying its whole surface, does much to correlate them (negatively) to the abstract stains and massings that lie a plane beneath them. And these stains and massings, more than stereotyped post-war tics, combine to a composition, complete with foreground and back-. A scratched block of red down low, for instance, offsets a row of the same up top; one errant yellow soak provides color for the whole picture. Smith's drips are mostly horrid, but they're located and deliberate—almost justified—in *Migration*. The painting, as a painting, provides a charged but ambiguous ground for Smith's symbols to do political work on. Decolonial critique is less a product than a property of this artwork.

—T.S.

The Max Beckmann Gallery at the Saint Louis Art Museum



Max Beckmann, *Valentine Tessier*, 1929-30, Oil on canvas.
Courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

No one needs me to expound on the brilliance of Max Beckmann. The giant room where SLAM houses most of their collection, one of the most well-trafficked spots in the museum, even announces that Beckmann is “arguably the greatest German painter of the 20th century.” But next time you find yourself there, consider taking a closer look at the arrangement of his works and the story they tell. Ordered chronologically, they testify to the progression of a style further into expressionism, clearly influenced by the change wrought by two world wars, the latter of which Beckmann had to flee. We begin with a somewhat straightforward portrait of his wife from 1910 and end with a self-portrait from 1950, by which time he had developed a style that could never be mistaken for anyone else’s. In between, we have scenes of social consciousness giving way to symbology and deeper, interior concerns. In the middle of it all we have *Valentine Tessier*: this was the “degenerate” Beckmann, the Weimar Beckmann. Then we have the increasingly religious-seeming portraits following it, and finally the fully-achieved and synthesized late style. Could there be a better mirror for his time, or for that tumultuous half-century?

—S.J.

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