

The Guardian

Top 20 art exhibitions of 2019

Egypt's golden boy and Bridget Riley's dazzling arcs of colour join a towering indictment of empire - this year's stunning art shows hit like a bomb

More on the best culture of 2019
by Adrian Searle and Jonathan Jones

Main image: Kara Walker's Fons Americanus in the Tate Modern Turbine Hall, London. Composite: David Levene

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20

Hogarth, Sir John Soane's Museum, London

The hilarity and horror of William Hogarth's art is shoved in your face in the gothic setting of Soane's Museum, bringing out the darkness of his pictorial fictions. Hogarth's Bedlam inspired Goya's paintings of madhouses and, in this gathering of every single one of his narrative cycles, it's powerfully clear how modern, uneasy and pointed Hogarth's vision is. Let this great satirist and social observer take you through the streets of London, and show you something that'll make you change your mind. On until 5 January. Read the full review. **JJ**

19

Frank Bowling, Tate Britain, London



Middle Passage by Frank Bowling, 1970. Photograph: Courtesy the Artist/© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017

It's taken this brilliant painter until the age of 85 to get the recognition he deserves, but there was no hint of bitterness in his epic retrospective. On the contrary, it glowed with the sheer pleasure and freedom of a life messing about with paint. Electrifying, acidic splurges and stains of unlikely, jarring colours - orange and magenta, crimson and emerald - blaze in his abstract walls of pigment. Yet the vibrancy is shadowed in his 1970s paintings by maps of global injustice. Read the full review. **JJ**

18

Troy, British Museum, London

Cy Twombly's vision of the doomed hero Achilles as a smear of red blood on a white plain greets you in this rollicking journey through artistic visions of the first war in history to be preserved in literature. Whatever the truth behind Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, they have inspired artists from ancient Greek vase painters to Cranach and Caro. Highlights include frescoes from Pompeii that show tender moments in the tale, but it's the grandeur of a story shared across time that makes this a powerful experience. On until 8 March. Read the full review. **JJ**

17

Julie Mehretu, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge

Abstract expressionism lives. This American art of the free painted mark has for a long time now been slighted as macho or even imperialist - but Ethiopia-born Mehretu makes it new and makes it urgent. It's time we saw one of her really big paintings in the Tate Turbine Hall but, meanwhile, this powerful display of intensely knotted and spiralling monoprints was a moving evocation of modern history's violence and tragedy. A great artist of this century. Read the full review. **JJ**

16

Glenn Ligon, Istanbul Biennial



A film about James Baldwin by Glenn Ligon at the 16th Istanbul Biennial. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

This installation hosted Istanbul born film-maker Sedat Pakay's 1970 documentary *From Another Place*, which followed US writer James Baldwin. We see him wandering the streets, asking what it means to be a black American, a gay man, a writer stalled in Istanbul, where he lived, on and off, for about a decade from 1961. This intimate portrait, the truest and most memorable work in the biennial, was brought here by Ligon, another African-American gay man, who has had Turkish subtitles added to Pakay's film. He presents it along with his own neon and light works, and two further films he shot himself, following Baldwin's footsteps around the city. "I am a kind of witness, I suppose," says Baldwin. At their best, that is what artists are too, however fanciful their inventions. Read the full Biennial review. **AS**

15

Kiss My Genders, Hayward Gallery, London

From Candy Darling on her deathbed to the portraits of Catherine Opie, this exhibition was full of moving and subversive images that revealed the history and importance of transgender art. Luciano Castelli's self-portraits created in the early 1970s are the visual equivalent of Bowie and Lou Reed. Even earlier, Pierre Molinier shot fantastical self-images in sensual black and white. Their legacy is electric today in video, photography, painting and installation. Art, this proved, is all about ch-ch-changes. Read the full review. **JJ**

14

Tracey Emin: A Fortnight of Tears, White Cube Bermondsey, London

Ghosts walked the echoing spaces of White Cube in Emin's moving farewell to her mother that mushroomed into a bravura artistic performance. An array of enlarged selfies taken in the insomniac depths of loneliness proved exactly how honest her art is. But what she loves is to paint and mould clay. This show blazed with the power and originality of her gory canvases and colossal bronze bodies enlarged from figures shaped in her hands, their flesh pockmarked with gigantic thumb-marks. Read the full review. **JJ**

13**The Renaissance Nude, Royal Academy, London**

Christ on the Cold Stone by Jan Gossaert. Photograph: PvE/Alamy Stock Photo/Alamy Stock Photo

Christian martyrs are impaled on trees. Jan Gossaert's Christ, stripped, awaits his fate, sitting on the cold stone, and wracked with palpable terror. Several Saint Sebastians stand about, pin-up boys oblivious to the arrows that pierce them. A procession of flagellants in a Netherlandish Book of Hours prepare themselves for their hooded tormentors in a scene as erotic as it is devotional. Focusing on 1400-1530, and with works from France, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands, this exhibition showed us multiple approaches to the naked human body, bodies as various as the artists who depicted them. In extremis, in flagrante, inflammatory, indecent, idealised, implausible, pagan, mythological, Christian, humanist and abject, this was a jolt to the system. Read the full review. **JJ**

12**Leonardo: A Life in Drawing, various venues**

The Royal Collection put on the year's most democratic blockbuster, starting as a national festival before its home gig and providing a perfectly chosen banquet of the Queen's unique array of Leonardo da Vinci's drawings of the dissected human body, designs for battles, studies of galloping horses, landscapes, caricatures, deluges ... just an unbeatable survey of the most mind-boggling genius in the story of art. Leonardo has never looked more mysterious, complex and

sublime. At Queen's Galleries at Buckingham Palace and Holyroodhouse (until 15 March), and 10 regional museums. Read the full review. **JJ**

11

Lee Krasner, Barbican, London

This retrospective took us from Krasner's earliest, highly accomplished student works to the very end, in an elegantly designed exhibition that was filled with surprises and troubles. A chapter-by-chapter retelling of her development opened up in the downstairs spaces at the Barbican where huge canvases, wild scabbings, flexings and flurries, spatterings and spirallings and draggings upped the ante. Krasner destroyed as much as she made along the way. It was tough to be a woman artist amid the first generation of abstract expressionists, especially one suspicious of a signature style. Krasner kept going, still finding her way, in this exhilarating, indomitable show. Read the full review. **AS**

10

George Shaw, Holburne Museum, Bath



George Shaw: A Corner of a Foreign Field. Photograph: © George Shaw courtesy Anthony Wilkinson Gallery, London

Britain is a run-down estate on the edge of a litter-bin forest in Shaw's exquisitely melancholic art. Yet his paintings are arrestingly beautiful, perhaps because they feel so true. The watery skies, dark windows and spring buds he records with modeller's paints have lethal emotional weight. It is always a sad Sunday afternoon in this empty land. He is the unique offspring of Thomas Gainsborough and Giorgio de Chirico. Read the full review. **JJ**

9

Paula Rego, Milton Keynes Gallery

Throughout her career, Rego has drawn from her own life, becoming a storyteller and chronicler in paint, pastel, etching needle and words. Her art is filled with coded messages, jealousies and affairs, adulteries and betrayals, longings and losses. Here's Rego dancing, not once but many times. Here are tragic men and knowing women. Here is repression, here is freedom, the stupid

and the unafraid. The women in her art always know more. Her work is all an exorcism. Life, ours as well as hers, courses through it. Read the full review. **AS**

8

Kara Walker, Tate Modern, London

A miserable monument to the slave trade and colonialism, Walker's *Fons Americanus* is a 13-metre-high mock-Victorian fountain. Installed in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, its subject is imperial ambition, the profiting from misery at the heart of empire, and Walker has filled it with figures and sea creatures, as well as sharks sporting in the spume. Allusions and references abound in this work that's topped by Venus, throwing her head back and spurting water from her nipples and slashed throat. JMW Turner's abolitionist 1840 painting *The Slave Ship*, rendered as a bath-toy frigate, nods to Damien Hirst's shark in formaldehyde. *Fons Americanus* is the best Turbine Hall commission in years. *Until April*. Read the full review. **AS**

7

Franz West, Tate Modern, London

This retrospective took us from dirty drawings rife with sexual encounters to room after room of sculptures, posters, installations and collaborative works West made with friends and accomplices. The heavy emphasis on the Viennese artist's life was inevitable, given the degree to which personal relationships and collaborations were at the heart of his work. Lumps of polystyrene, old flip-flops, a pile of hats, even his childhood bed and his mother's old washing machine, which he remade into a kind of love-seat, punctuated this uproarious show. Sometimes his sculptures leant against the wall like drunks, or stood on plinths devised for the exhibition by West's friend Sarah Lucas, whose contribution enlivened the show no end. West had a real feel for shape, for the lump, for the eccentric. Filled with jokes, visual slapstick, alarming twists and absurd confrontations, this was a show that was as celebratory as it was bleak. Read the full review. **AS**

6

Tutankhamun, Saatchi Gallery, London



Wooden Guardian Statue of the Ka of the King from Tutankhamun at the Saatchi Gallery. Photograph: IMG

This exhibition has haunted my dreams - it is almost beyond belief to see so many of the wonders from Tutankhamun's unspoiled tomb in London, from his wooden picnic boxes for afterlife eating to an array of amulets that protected his mummified body. The glitter of gold is just part of their wonder - along with the blue sheen of faience and the translucent whiteness of calcite. These are finely wrought artistic masterpieces of amazing delicacy and tenderness. You leave not so much awed by the boy king as loving him. On until 3 May. Read the full review. **JJ**

5 Danh Vo, South London Gallery

Accidents of history, chance encounters and collaborations all played their part in the largest UK exhibition to date by the Vietnam-born Danish artist. The relationships Vo developed with the family of Robert McNamara (US Secretary of Defense in the lead up to the Vietnam War) and with photographs surreptitiously shot by Dr Joseph M Carrier (an American counter-insurgency specialist in Vietnam) all play their part. There are lines taken from William Friedkin's 1973 demonic possession movie *The Exorcist*, as well as the last letter of a Jesuit missionary written on the day of his execution in Vietnam in 1861. It all contributes to the feeling that there is an ongoing narrative at work. What an engaging, disarming and thoughtful artist Vo is. Read the full review.

AS

4 Edvard Munch, British Museum, London

The images that Munch dredged from his heart are symbols that lodge themselves deep. This exhibition of his prints plumbed his suffering. It made it horribly clear how his memories were haunted by the deaths of his mother and sister when he was a child and how fraught his relationships with women were - but above all it surrounded you with his penetrating crystallisations of feeling from vampires and jealous lovers to drowning, mourning, and the great *Scream* convulsing nature. Read the full review. **JJ**

3 Bridget Riley, Hayward, London



Rajasthan by Bridget Riley, 2012. Photograph: Bridget Riley 2019. All rights reserved. Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner Photo by Tim Nighswander

The largest retrospective of her work to be held to date, this still-running exhibition is full of surprises as well as familiar works. Riley's art is as often dazzling and disorientating as it is spectacular. Some of her paintings are stately in their visual rhythms, while others quiver and flicker as though electrified. The experience of a Riley is never static. All this with a few repeated intervals of black and white, some circles or stripes or blocks and arcs of colour. Travelling to the Hayward from the National Galleries of Scotland, and spanning the artist's entire career, from drawings she made as a schoolgirl at Cheltenham Ladies College in the 1940s to works completed this year, this is a wonder. *Until 26 January*. Read the full review. **AS**

2

Sun & Sea (Marina), Lithuanian Pavilion, Venice Biennale

This was the big surprise at Venice and it rightly won a Golden Lion. We looked down from a minstrel's gallery in an old naval warehouse in the Arsenale on to an indoor beach where kids built sandcastles, tourists sunned themselves, while couples argued and failed to relax. Threat slowly seeps in, like suntan oil, during this almost hour-long opera - the work of theatre director Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, playwright Vaiva Grainytė, and composer Lina Lapelytė. Beautifully sung by the lounging tourists, this was a lament to the eclipse of the world, as the sky and sea change colour, the reefs bleach and nature dies. Read the full Biennale review. **AS**

1

Nan Goldin, Marian Goodman Gallery, London



Nan Goldin's Greer modelling jewellery, NYC, 1985 Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery New York, Paris and London

This, the first large show of Goldin's work in the UK in almost two decades, might have been accused of going over old ground. But then Goldin often returns to the past, reincorporating older images in new work, adding previously unseen photographs, or presenting what started out as mechanical carousel slideshows, in now digitised and soundtracked narrative sequences.

Threaded through the exhibition are loving photographs of Goldin's friends and lovers, of drag queens, cross-dressers, transsexuals and third sexers. The composer and performer Mica Levi provides the soundtrack for *Memory Lost*, a new digital slideshow that charts Goldin's life through her addictions. Levi's trembling, elegiac music is shot through with phone conversations and snippets of gut-wrenching monologue.

Innocent super-8 footage of good times collapses into shots of barking dogs, roads and buildings and blurred passages where memory, it seems, is slurred by dope and booze. Goldin's addiction to Oxycontin - and her campaign against the branch of the Sackler family whose arts philanthropy has relied on the profits made from mass pharmaceutical addiction - is more than a sub-plot, too. This was an exhibition that mined Goldin's own life, her desires and troubles, in a way that was as ferocious and unflinching as it was tender and elegiac. Read the full review. **AS**