

Best of 2019: Our Top NYC Art Shows (and more)

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Kia LaBeija's *(Untitled)*, *The Black Act* (2019) at Performance Space New York (image courtesy Performance Space New York; photo by Julieta Cervantes)

What a year it's been. All over New York, new spaces have opened, beloved ones have closed or changed shape, and through it all, the city's museums, galleries, cinema houses, and artist-run spaces have mounted stunning presentations of art which have pushed us to think deeply and critically about whose voices we elevate and which narratives we privilege. This year, our favorites were exhibitions, film series, and the occasional performance that celebrated the under-recognized, maligned, or forgotten, or otherwise shed new light on topics and subjects more familiar.

This year, our favorites included the Guggenheim's record-breaking Hilma af Klint exhibition — a highlight for us last year, so much so that it takes the top slot this year after many more months of deliberation — along with deep dives into the work of under-celebrated artists such as Alvin Baltrop at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, and T.C. Cannon at the National Museum of the American Indian. Interdisciplinary, collaborative presentations of recent work by artists like Kevin Beasley at the Whitney Museum, and Kia LaBeija at Performance Space New York were also particularly memorable, along with many others. Here are our favorite exhibitions, film series, and more from 2019, brought to you by the writers and editors of Hyperallergic.

Honorable Mentions:

***Wangechi Mutu: The NewOnes, will free us* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art**

September 9, 2019–June 8, 2020

Commission organized by Kelly Baum

The installation of Mutu's *The NewOnes, will free Us* (2019) marks the first time in 177 years that the sculpture niches of the Met's Richard Morris Hunt-designed façade have been occupied. The deftness and nuance of Mutu's project, taken in this light, becomes particularly provocative. The works do something else too, which is perhaps the most powerful aspect of this commission. Their heft and intensity, particularly in the blast of morning light, makes the limestone façade fade into a shimmer. While many have noted that these figures are reminiscent of the famed Erechtheion caryatids at the Acropolis in Athens, the coiled bronze garments of *The NewOnes* take both the fluted robes of the Erechtheion caryatids and the exteriors of the flanking Corinthian columns and turn them inside out. Further, Mutu's figures are seated, where caryatids must stand, typically supporting architecture with their heads. Mutu's choice reads as a distinct defiance this norm. Formal references hew more closely to Yoruba and Congolese iconography but are not replications of these either. Wangechi Mutu's four figures on the Met's façade come from a different spirit; these seated figures hold their own strength within. –Laura Raicovich

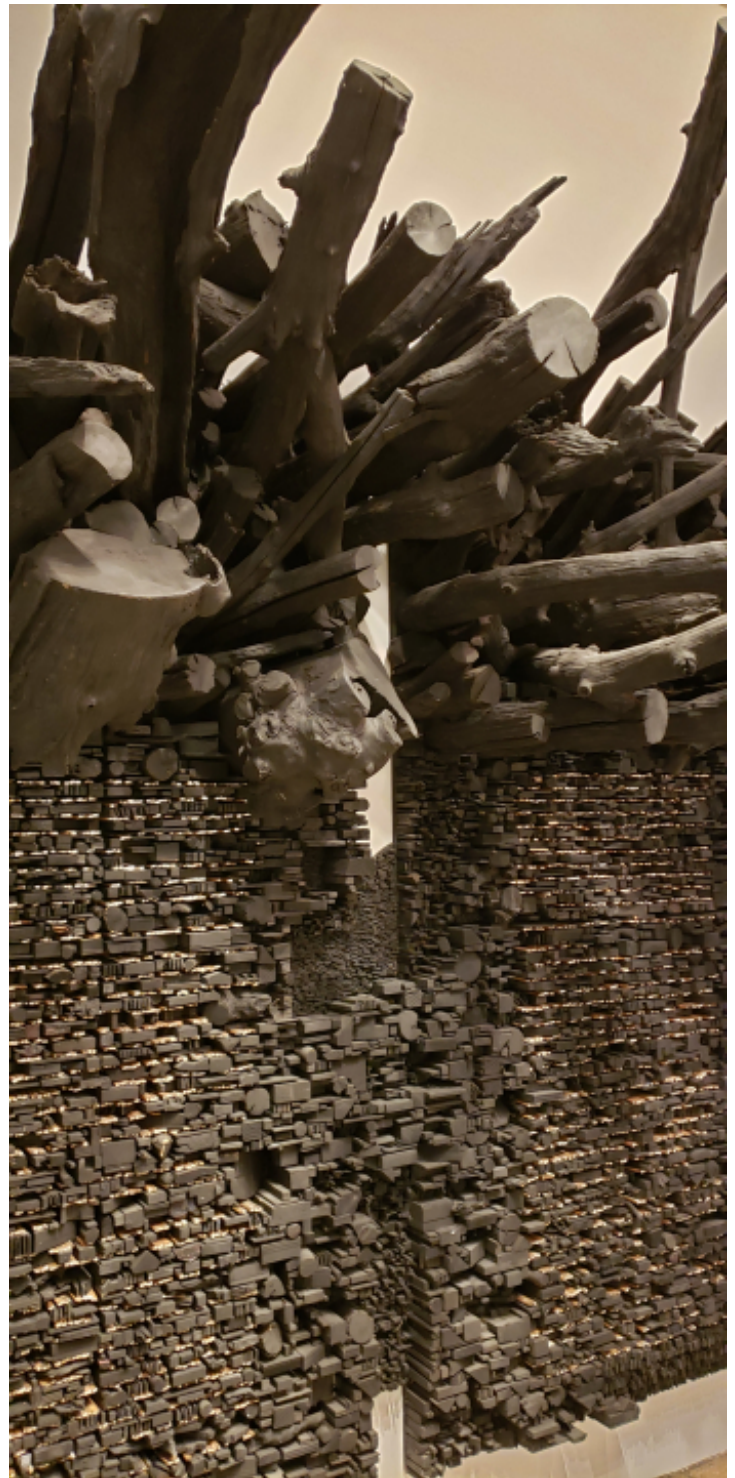
God Made my Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin at David Zwirner

"Troubled times get the tyrants and prophets they deserve." So begins Hilton Als's introduction to *God Made my Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin*, the exhibition he curated for David Zwirner earlier this year. In our particularly troubled age, it feels fitting that Als would revisit the titular author, artist, and queer icon, who among his many indelible marks on twentieth-century culture, radically reshaped discourses around power and identity. *God Made my Face* pays tribute to Baldwin — whose work has rightly witnessed a resurgence — through a presentation of artworks marked by his image, politics, and intellectual legacy. Yet what was most important about the exhibition was that it moved beyond elegy, offering instead a complex and thoroughly contemporary portrait of a figure whose words and ideas continue to resonate. –Dessane Lopez Cassell

Leonardo Drew at Galerie Lelong

May 16–August 2, 2019

Leonardo Drew's first solo exhibition at Galerie Lelong was one of the most successful examples this year of an "all-over" installation. The entire back half of the gallery looked like the eruption of a wild, animistic force come to reclaim the land back from its colonization by modernity. There were branches, wood shards, and painted surfaces that together looked like a ruction suddenly, surprisingly manifested in the austere provinces of an A-list gallery in Chelsea. –Seph Rodney



Leonardo Drew "Number 212" 2018, wood and paint, 125 x 132 x 56 inches (photo by Seph Rodney)