

## Around Town: New York, USA

Time was, you knew winter was over in New York when corpses would start bobbing to the surface of the warming Hudson River. But in today's quiescent city, where the murder rate is at its lowest since records began in 1963, we need new ways to mark the seasons; when your rent gets hiked 20 percent, say, you can be sure that spring has come. Also, exhibitions: timed with Armory Week in March, New York's museums and galleries bring out their heavy artillery. Our larger museums had a mixed record this spring: the New Museum beat expectations with its less-techy-than-feared third triennial ('Surround Audience'), and the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened its largest ever show of Native American art ('The Plains Indians'), but The Museum of Modern Art, with the historic disaster of 'Björk', lost much of the goodwill it had accrued the previous year. More than one critic has grumbled that 'Björk' would have worked better at MoMA PS1, MoMA's trendier younger sibling, but I'm not so sure. PS1 works best not when it's in arty-party mode, but when it turns its gaze to those artists our larger institutions overlook.

Egyptian artist Wael Shawky filled PS1's largest galleries this winter with dozens of marionettes representing figures of the Crusades, crafted out of glass and fabric in French and Italian ateliers, and displayed like heirlooms in lustrous vitrines. The artisans' marionettes have rich detailing and individuated features, down to their pleated pantaloons and multicoloured glass toes, and their sensitivity reminds you of the importance of 18th-century puppet theatre. However, Shawky's associated films don't, I'm afraid, relying far too heavily on deadpan humour and cod-Brechtian narration to bring medieval holy war to the present day. It is revealing that Shawky places his puppets before a camera and not on stage – the 'theatrical' here is a mere synonym for 'false' or 'unfinished'. Far better videos were just up the road from PS1 at SculptureCenter – recently renovated and doing better than ever under curator



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Ruba Katrib. She mounted the best show of the season: a retrospective of Thai artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, whose mortality-obsessed but even-tempered work earns the overused compliment 'haunting'.

Rasdjarmrearnsook transformed SculptureCenter into a thanatorium: she lectures corpses, records wailing mental patients, bottles her dogs' hair. And, yet, death is not the end – her corpse students speak back to her – nor does its omnipresence preclude piercing, almost-indecous humour. In a video from her series 'Village and Elsewhere' (2011), she sits with children in rural Thailand while a saffron-clad monk tries to explain two artistic reproductions: a photograph of Jeff Koons with two women in bikinis on the left, and, on the right, an image of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (c. 1612). If you were expecting Heinrich Wolfflin-style compare and contrast, that is not how art history is taught in rural Thailand: the monk links the images into a morality play, as his charges gleefully imagine an adulterous Koons having his head lopped off.

In the commercial sector this spring, David Zwirner gave us a solid, truly museum-quality, showcase of outsider art ('System and Vision'), while two of Gagosian's New York spaces were turned over to MoMA curating veterans: painting supremo John Elderfield and photo doyen Peter Galassi, each of them looking at artists' depictions of the studio. The pairing felt imbalanced. Galassi's show was better and wittier, mixing 19th-century self-portraits with bodily experiments by Charles Ray and Hannah Wilke. (It also included Jeff Wall's indelible *Picture for Women, 1979*: still one of the densest and most satisfying art works of the last 40 years.) Elderfield's, by contrast, was a looser affair. For every major work by Jasper Johns or Pablo Picasso, the show also included as many minor studio pictures, and the selections from before 1900 (Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, Thomas Eakins, Jean-Léon Gérôme) were notably small bore. More impressive was a two-hander at Dominique Lévy, pairing the *informel* ceramics of Satoru Hoshino with killer paintings by Gutai champion Kazuo Shiraga, the blood-dark paint slathered across canvases with his

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Monir Shahroudy  
Farmanfarmaian, *Square*,  
2014, stainless steel,  
wooden base and motor  
83 × 117 × 117 cm

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Jeff Wall  
*Picture for Women, 1979*,  
silver dye bleach  
transparency, aluminium  
lightbox, 1.4 × 2 m

feet. It was one of three Shiraga shows this spring (the others at Fergus McCaffrey and Mnuchin) and was accompanied by a scholarly two-volume catalogue.

At times, New York galleries can seem hospitable only to the young and the very old. After Etel Adnan and Carmen Herrera, the latest nonagenarian superstars are Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian – whose Guggenheim retrospective featured impressive geometric drawings and mirrored sculptures – and the polymath Rosalyn Drexler (only 88, to be fair), whose pop tableaux featuring fields of solid colour were paired with more recent Technicolor compositions at Garth Greenan. Mid-career artists have it harder – which is why I've grown to admire the scrappy Lynch Tham, a storefront space on the Lower East Side. Its latest exhibition went to Cuban-born Quisqueya Henríquez, whose photos-inside-photos throw the history of postwar abstraction down a rabbit hole. As for the kids, they're getting smarter about the game they have no choice but to play. At K., successor to the sharp gallery P1, the inaugural exhibition 'Real Flow', by four young artists whose collective bears the same name, proposed an art that exists purely as financial speculation. The four paintings were not for sale; what was offered were derivatives, to be traded and flipped at your leisure without the bother of shipping a canvas. 'Beyond capital is our future,' the artists proclaimed. In New York, everyone got the irony.

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