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Four Exhibitions That Give Me Hope for Greatness

Rosenquist, Guston and more



James Rosenquist, *Joystick* (2002) © 2019 Estate of James Rosenquist / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photography by Christopher Stach

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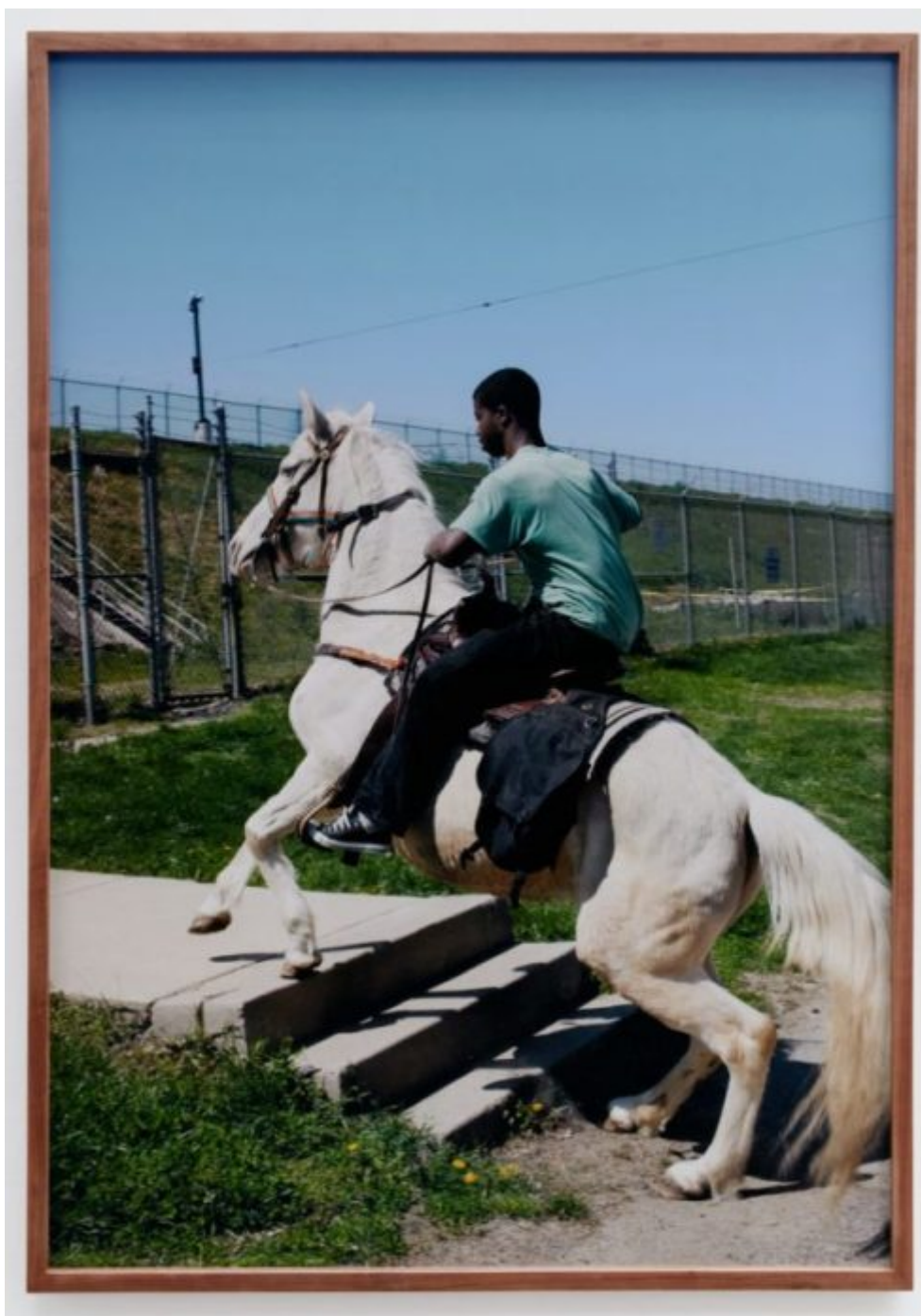
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In Other Words was always intended as a subjective, insider view of the art market and the salient issues facing the art world. I never thought that reviewing exhibitions would be critical to my introductions. And yet we are living in times in which the art market is increasingly consolidating around top-tier trophies made by a limited number of validated masters, punctuated by the occasional newcomer whose market tends to capture interest for a short period of time as a next-generation high-wire performer.

Demand for their work, more often than not, shoots up from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of dollars but—within six months or a year of such targeted hype and over-speculation—plummets. These are art market supernovas whose markets crash and burn with the same fleeting speed of their ascent, regardless of their real or imagined importance and potential.

The process of hyper-speculation followed by disintegration of faith and value is not new: every decade since the 1980s has seen various artists anointed by a consensus of market-influencers as next-generation messiahs, only to be subsequently disparaged as false prophets in a brutal Darwinian process that resembles an elite sport. But today is different in that the phenomenon takes place over months, not decades.



Merciless savaging of art is in part an enactment of dying by the sword that we have come to live by. Mohamed Bourouissa, *Untitled* (2013) © ADAGP Mohamed Bourouissa. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe.

This merciless savaging of art is in part an enactment of dying by the sword that we have come to live by. It speaks to the current and growing demand to grab the golden ring; to the relatively insignificant value of the dollar for many of the people operating within the art-collecting field; to the reality that greatness in any generation does not increase proportionately to the population of artists and the demand for great art to collect. It often leaves me wondering if we are living in a post-art period.

And so, what a relief it is to have seen, over the past month or so, a number of exhibitions that provide hope for the enterprise of greatness and thus a potential, whether sooner or later, to support and nurture it.

There is nothing like epic painting to set the bar high for big-picture thinking. Two shows of artists of very different generations, cultural backgrounds, and arcs in development have recently caught my eye. The first was an exhibition of two

of the last monumentally scaled paintings made by [James Rosenquist](#), on show at [Kasmin](#) in New York, “[James Rosenquist: Two Paintings](#)” (until 16 November). (Concurrently there is an exhibition of Pop masterworks from the 1960s, “[James Rosenquist: Visualising the Sixties](#)”, at Thaddeus Ropac in London until 22 November). The other was the work of a French artist of Algerian background, [Mohamed Bourouissa](#), which was on show at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles until the end of October (“[Mohamed Bourouissa: Pour Une Poignée de Dollars](#)”).

I have always found Rosenquist to be the most vexing of Pop artists. He works directly with “pop” imagery, but summons up so much content that his art slips into simultaneous states of contemporary urban representation and a Surrealism born of the overflow of imagery in our media-saturated world.

Rosenquist never seemed to develop a grounded art market base of support, like [Johns](#) or [Lichtenstein](#), and many savvy viewers long ago dismissed his work as being of a specific moment. But I have always revered the quality of his brushwork, the panoramic scope of his imagery, and the consistent inventiveness. Without Rosenquist, I am certain that we wouldn’t have had the sweeping fascination for how content is depicted and its meaning formed in the work of [Polke](#), [Salle](#) and many other touchstone artists of recent decades.



James Rosenquist, *The Geometry of Fire* (2011). © 2019 Estate of James Rosenquist / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photography by Christopher Stach.

It is especially wonderful to revel in the senses of hope, fascination and awe in the futures of art and consciousness of Rosenquist’s last works, with their hypnotic bending, folding, reflecting, fragmenting and peeling back of space. They depict the blindingly bright light of reflection and the cosmic light of the universe; spaces that are geometrically ordered and thematically slippery, in the way that nanoseconds of sense can flicker into abstraction.

I can’t help but think of the dramatic space of [Tintoretto](#) as processed through the immeasurable space of light and the speed of virtual reality—that Rosenquist, coming out of a representational style rooted in the imagery of Pop, is exploring color, pictorial space, and mediated experience more akin to that of much younger artists such as [Wade Guyton](#), who use instead the printer as a brush.

Urban cowboys

I hadn’t been that familiar with Bourouissa’s work, but found his assemblaged wall and floor-based pictorial sculptures energetic, compelling and innovative. They contain the voluminous image flow of daily life one associates with Rauschenberg, presented in structural forms akin to those of [John Chamberlain](#) with an occasional nod to [Cady Noland](#), artistic references which Bourouissa is comfortably emulating.

The full thrill here is not just in the fecundity of printed imagery or dynamism of sculptural form (which also includes life-size figures configured by 3-D printing), but in the world from which the imagery derives. Bourouissa’s work, mostly rooted in the immigrant community of his youth in the outskirts of Paris, is here focused on a very particular community, that of Philadelphia’s [Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club](#). The group, which is more than 100 years old, was created by African American cowboys, and today trains and gives focus and refuge to young people in a community that struggles with economic and social conditions. Bourouissa creates works that are both epic and heroic.



Bourouissa creates works that are both epic and heroic. His exhibition “Mohamed Bourouissa: Pour une poignée de Dollars” is showing at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles © ADAGP Mohamed Bourouissa. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe

Ocean view

At another end of the artistic spectrum are two exhibitions of work by artists who focus on a few details that they explore from countless perspectives. These artists explore an infinite range through the most narrowed approach to imagery.

I am still savoring every morsel of drawing and paintings on paper by [Maureen Gallace](#) shown at [Gladstone Gallery](#) last month (“[Maureen Gallace](#)”). It took me years to grasp the greatness of Gallace. Like many, I had initially corralled her paintings of the ocean, flora, and lone houses of rural New England into the realm of the old-fashioned, but I couldn’t discount that curators for which I have the greatest respect had been her earliest and steadfast supporters.

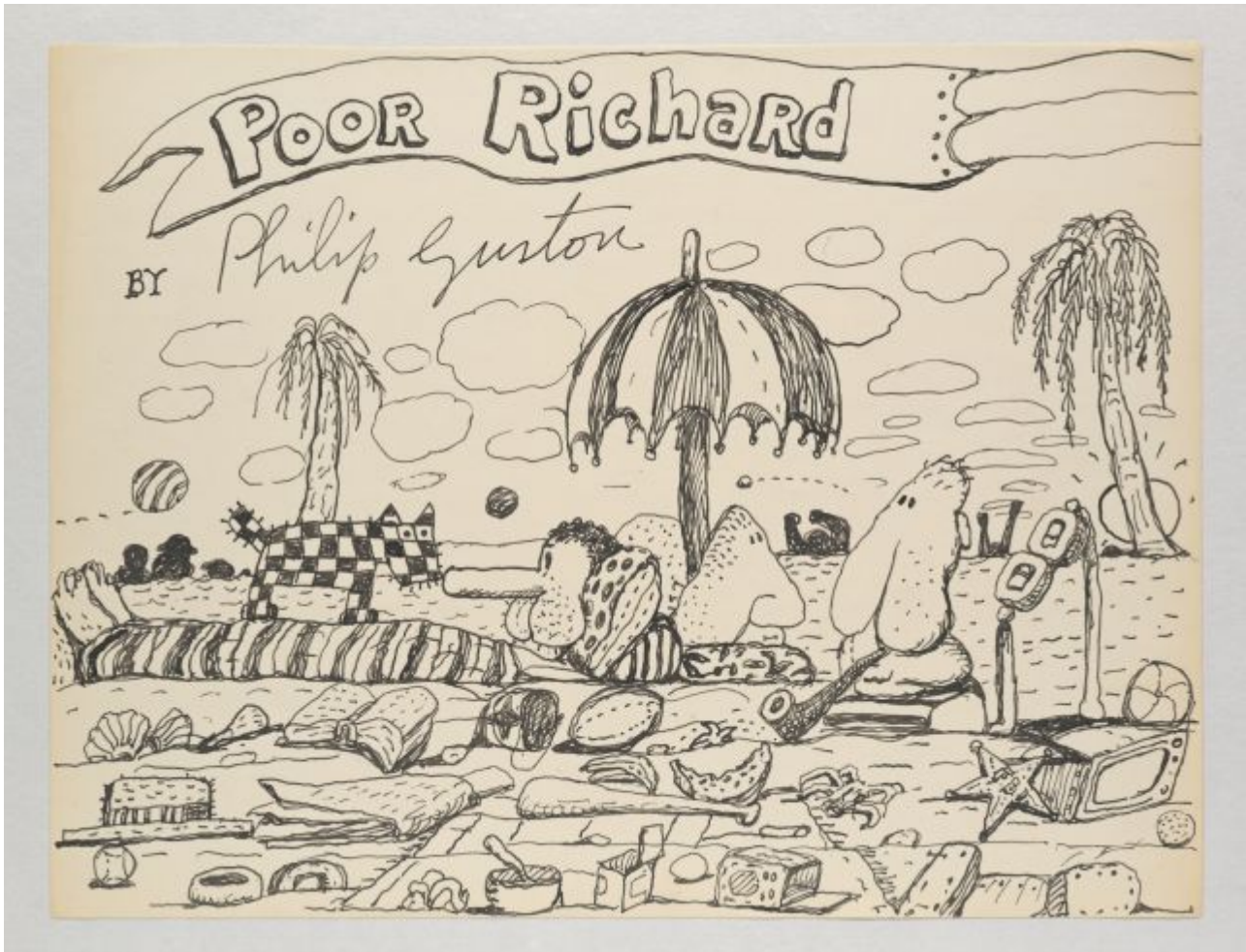


Maureen Gallace, *Beach Shack, Door* (2019). Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Several decades ago I had an hour to kill in London, so went to see new work of hers. I got the bug, discovering what others had long seen. She is one of the greatest gestural painters of our time. She spends a lifetime focusing on the same limited visual language and—like [Morandi](#), [Ryman](#) or [Martin](#)—each time re-creates painting as if for the first time.

Gallace rarely exhibits her works on paper, and so this was an especially delightful treat. There is a freedom of gesture and stylistic range to the drawings that are a fresh experience for a Gallace devotee. There is such love of gesture, touch, nuance and tone in these works that one begins to gain insight into how much goes into making those paintings of the seashore seem so natural and spontaneous, but it is the result of a lifetime of observation and experimentation.

Small wonders



The focus of this exhibition is the dozens of small paintings Guston made in Rome. Here, his 1971 work *Untitled (Poor Richard)*

And last but certainly not least, is the amazing [Philip Guston](#) show at [Hauser & Wirth](#) in Los Angeles ("[Resilience: Philip Guston in 1971](#)", until 5 January). To today's market, which tends to see bigger as best, and often overlooks amazing moments in favor of big-bang trophies, this exhibition revels in the masterfulness of the morsel. The focus of this exhibition is the dozens of small paintings Guston made in Rome after studying the Renaissance masters. The paintings depict almost primal subjects, examined from numerous perspectives: paintings of hooded heads, trees, towers, walls, tablets, feet, books, and shoes. It is Guston heaven.