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Great Art Right Now

An Unexpected Golden Age



Richard Prince, *Untitled (#130)* (2016). Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

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The exhibition of **Ad Reinhardt**'s blue paintings at [David Zwirner](#) gallery, which finished last week, (“Ad Reinhardt: Blue Paintings”) was an exquisite event that beautifully delineated the artist’s path from Geometric Constructivism to almost monochromatic paintings of perception that plumb the depths of experience through the complex simplicity of using just one color.

This museum-quality love poem of an exhibition brought meaning and presence to phases within the artist’s arc of development I had always found easy to dismiss—until now. It is especially rewarding to see things you thought you already understood with fresh appreciation and respect.



Installation view of “Ad Reinhardt: Blue Paintings” at David Zwirner, New York (12 September-21 October 2017) © 2017 Estate of Ad Reinhardt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London

There has been a lot of talk lately—deserved and overdue—about the contributions of women artists to Minimalism, a movement which has tended to be understood from a masculine perspective. Though she was hardly a “Minimalist” (though, in a sense who was? Robert Ryman rejects the label), the great postwar painter **Mira Schendel** made, at the end of her career, some of her most potent minimalistic works.

[Hauser & Wirth](#)'s recent exhibition included great, large-scale examples from two of her finest bodies of work: the chromatically slight, but physically robust “Black and White Works”—some white with just a line of black, others black in their entirety, with structured and poetic surfaces; and the “Sarrafos”—white paintings with even more uninflected surfaces to which a black wooden bar has been attached, resulting in a physical and spatial experience. Schendel made a dozen Sarrafos, fewer white paintings, and even fewer black ones, and they are amongst my favorite explorations of not only the monochrome and its complexity, but of how profoundly unknown the physical can be.

Further examples of great art whose financial value (in general) has not matched its aesthetic and historical significance that I’ve recently seen include, on a trip to Chicago, the most amazing [work](#) by **Lee Bontecou** at the Museum of Contemporary Art; a transcendent [painting](#) by **Jack Whitten**, *Khee II* (1978), at the Art Institute of Chicago; a small and beautiful **Tarsila do Amaral** [exhibition](#), also at the Art Institute (“Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil”, until 7 January 2018).



Tarsila do Amaral, *Abaporu* (1928) Collection MALBA, Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires © Tarsila do Amaral Licenciamentos

One of the most important Latin American modernists, do Amaral is little known outside of her native Brazil. With echoes in her forms of Picasso, Matisse and other foundational painters of Modern Art, Tarsila made paintings that are emphatically Latin in their imagery and palette. Though very different from her North American counterparts (from O’Keeffe to Benton and many in between) the exhibition made clear that American (in the fullest sense of the word) artists brought to the French Modernism that inspired them a sense of narrative and place that their European counterparts largely sought to expel from abstraction. The exhibition comes to [MoMA](#) in February.

In London there was much talk about the [Jasper Johns retrospective](#) at the Royal Academy, which I have not yet had the pleasure of viewing (“Jasper Johns: ‘Something Resembling Truth’”, until 10 December). Many people mentioned that it caused them to more deeply appreciate this colossally significant artist, particularly the later work.

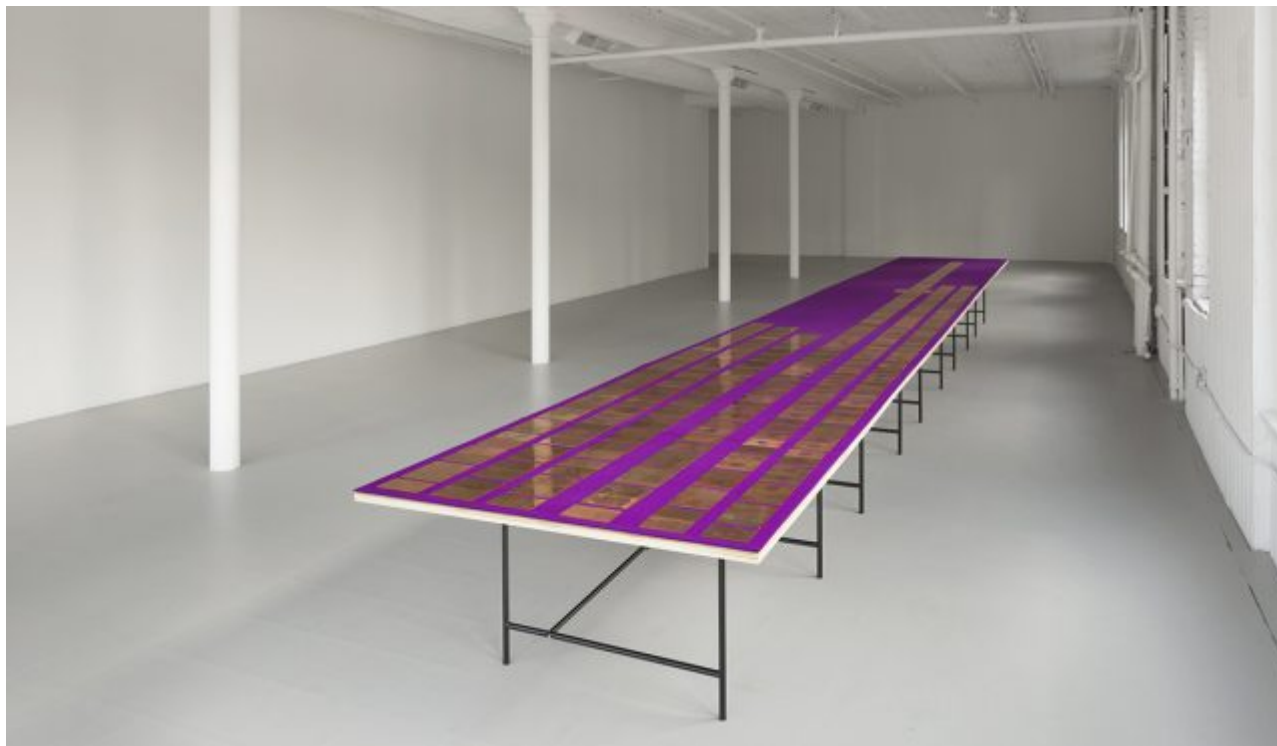
One of the museum shows that was I able to see—and loved—was the [Rachel Whiteread retrospective](#) at Tate Britain (“Rachel Whiteread”, until 21 January 2018). This was an exquisite and consistent display by an artist who has been bringing presence to absence for more than three decades, with the corporeality of clouds. The bearing she brings to her work conveys both death and the light of life, and captures a psychological sense of belonging and detachment that is both very contemporary and timeless.



Rachel Whiteread, *Untitled (One Hundred Spaces)* (1995) at Tate Britain (until 21 January 2018) © Rachel Whiteread. Photo © Tate (Seraphina Neville and Mark Heathcote)

The unexpected, profound juxtaposition of the month was in a historically staggering and deeply personal collection that I had the pleasure to view recently in Chicago, a flaming painting by **Ed Ruscha** was installed beside a beautiful 2010 canvas by **Luc Tuymans**. Who woulda thunk it?

Thank goodness I was able to spend time with **Rirkrit Tiravanija**'s epic [exhibition](#) at Gavin Brown's enterprise in Harlem of three major video and film installations ("Skip the Bruising of the Eskimos to the Exquisite Words vs If I Give You a Penny You Can Give me a Pair of Scissors", until Saturday).



Rirkrit Tiravanija, *untitled 2013 (passport to the middleworld)* (2013) © Rirkrit Tiravanija. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome

One is a personal retrospective of the Super-8 films the artist created during his first two decades of art making; another comprises two portraits, one of an old Thai farmer ritualistically toiling through the day and the other of a European artist at work; finally, and most poignantly, a frame-by-frame remake of the great German film-maker Rainer Werner Fassbinder's key film ***Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*** (1974).



Detail of Rirkrit Tiravanija, *untitled 2013 (passport to the middleworld)* (2013) © Rirkrit Tiravanija. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome

One work captures decades of the artist's work; another explores what it means to have a daily practice; and the last work, with brutal clarity, details how sentiments of race, belonging and exclusion, and the role of borders in life and cultural identity, rarely change. Each of these three works can be understood to define Rirkrit and the intersection of life and being that result in his art.

The mid-1960s through the 1970s was one of the periods of greatest rupture, inventive experimentation and formative change in art (as in society). And some of the greatest, most rigorous and poetic art of that time was made in Italy. The

artists came to be grouped within a movement that was termed Arte Povera by the critic Germano Celant, who saw it as encapsulating an international spirit that included artists as materially diverse as **Richard Serra** and **Lawrence Weiner**.

But, in recent decades, the term has come to be used strictly in connection with the Italian artists whose work triggered the term. Of those artists, **Alighiero Boetti** has engaged the interest of the American art market for quite some time; the works of **Michelangelo Pistoletto** have experienced a spike in interest in the past couple of years; and one of the most amazing artists of the batch, 91-year old **Marisa Merz**—who is currently making some of the greatest works of her career—was, finally, the subject of her first major museum show in the United States this year (at the Met Breuer and the Hammer). But the markets for the work of **Mario Merz**, **Jannis Kounellis**, **Giulio Paolini**, **Giovanni Anselmo**, **Luciano Fabro**, **Pino Pascali**, and **Giuseppe Penone**, who are all artistic giants of the past half century and the subjects of the some of the most inspired museum surveys of the 1980s, have for the most part been stagnant and their works wrenched from the international context in which they are most fully appreciated. (To mention just one example, has anyone in the postwar period made a carved sculpture as exquisite, poignant and sensual as Fabro?)

While museums and collectors have in recent years begun to catch on to the significance of art made in the postwar period in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, several of the most savvy New York galleries are just now attempting to wake us up to the neglected Italian grandees whose work has always been in our scope: there are four different exhibitions of work from this period on show in New York this season including “Arte Povera, curated by Ingvild Goetz” at [Hauser & Wirth](#) until Saturday). Meanwhile, Germano Celant has been instrumental in organizing three different exhibitions: “Contingencies: Arte Povera and After” at [Luxembourg & Dayan](#) (until 16 December), “Nuvolo and the Post-War Materiality 1950-65”, opening tomorrow at [Di Donna](#) gallery (until 26 January) and “Ileana Sonnabend and Arte Povera” at [Lévy Gorvy](#) (opening 2 November until 23 December).



Richard Prince, *Untitled (#130)* (2016). Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Painting for **Richard Prince** has always been a source of ambivalence. He came into his own as an artist in the age of Watergate, after painting had been declared dead, the object superfluous and originality a privilege of the past—at a time

when just about everything that used to define what great art could be now provoked distrust for the artist and many of his generation.

Prince's standards for what and how to communicate have been so rigorous that (like Sherrie Levine), while he has been one of the most prescient and significant artists of his generation, the commercial success that greeted his peers and spiritual cousins Cindy Sherman, David Salle and Jeff Koons, evaded him for nearly a decade.

That was until, after a decade of re-photographing photographs to make statements about image and object making, he decided it was time to make a painting. The joke paintings that resulted (appropriated jokes stenciled on a flat monochrome field) challenged the fundamentals of painting and its capacity to transcend, by reducing it to an esthetic container for what could be called an enemy of painting—a one-liner. Though, in the case of Prince, the jokes did transcend precisely because, when it comes to Prince's painting, what things appear to be, and what they can be, is rarely as clear as it may seem.

It would be fair to say that Prince has retained much of his ambivalence towards painting (ambivalence often being the mother of rigor), his critics and his collectors. I am not confident that the market has always been right about Richard's work because the balance of gesture and imagery by which painting are typically valued doesn't apply to his work. The market has sometimes placed less financial value in certain bodies of Prince's work that are critically significant, and which I believe will be proven historically to be so.



Richard Prince, *Untitled (#130)* (2016-17). Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Some of his finest bodies of work, in my opinion, have remained relative bargains while, on occasion, some of his less powerful work have become most coveted by the market. (This is similar to the ways in which the market for Picasso in recent years has placed so much more value in the decoratively beautiful portraits of the 1930s over the revolutionary analytic Cubist paintings made between 1910 and 1912.)

Prince's new paintings, which go on [view](#) at Gladstone Gallery on 3 November ("Richard Prince: Ripple Paintings", until 22 December), are to my eye the greatest paintings he has made since he first started to paint car hoods and jokes.

In a sense, they fuse the two critical formats of his career—appropriated photography and painting in the form of a joke. The new paintings combine a monochromatic painted blob atop, and often greatly obscuring, the bawdy cartoons and punchlines of Playboy magazine from 1967 to 1970. They are jokes with received imagery and pure painting splatted one atop the other, though in truth—and true to Prince—the paintings aren't painted at all, but rather inkjet prints of painted collages of the original cartoons. They are funny, beautiful, profound—and very smart, in that sly way that this leading figure of this generation of ambivalence can simultaneously giveth and taketh away.

And, **Cecily Brown** at Paula Cooper Gallery: WOW! Her new [exhibition](#) "A Day! Help! Help! Another Day!" represents a new level of achievement and complexity that, for me, confirm this painter as a truly great artist (opening 27 October - 2 December).