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Don't look back: Art in 2008 recedes like nobody's business, and it might be time to come home

By Glen Helfand (a&eletters@sfbg.com)

Twelve months ago, as I sat down to write a year-end appraisal of 2007, I was still in awe of "© Murakami," the Takashi Murakami show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. It brilliantly captured the crass apex of global capitalism, mostly through celebrity-studded receptions and the appropriated — call it sculptural — form of a Louis Vuitton boutique. What a difference a year makes. At the close of 2008, the whole art world is watching as the highly regarded MOCA teeters precariously on a financial abyss, while Vuitton maven Marc Jacobs recently canceled his extravagantly performance-arty holiday party in the name of "recessionista" austerity.

Suddenly, commentaries on luxury goods seem so '07, as evidenced by the critical response to a Chanel-sponsored, Zaha Hadid-designed quilted handbag exhibition that landed in Central Park this fall. "If devoting so much intellectual effort to such a dubious undertaking might have seemed indulgent a year ago, today it looks delusional," architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff opined in *The New York Times*. At this particular moment, it's as difficult to summon up the flush feeling of the recent past as it is to contemplate a belt-tightening future.

To look forward is to confront anxious uncertainty. Optimists, however, anticipate a period in which art is tempered by a sense of hopefulness and focus rather than being driven by auction reports. Contemporary art will become more thoughtful, they predict. A good percentage of San Francisco art dealers jetted off to Miami for the recent spate of fairs, fingers crossed, expectations lowered. Word on the street said the outcome wasn't as bad as expected, though sales were slow. Collectors actually had time to look and think about the art they were interested in, in contrast to automatically joining the grab-and-go sellers' market of years past. Like everything else in our culture, the art world appears poised to embrace a more manageable scale. I wonder if this also means that art activities will become more homegrown.

This fall, the Bay Area saw a whole lot of contemporary art from China, with big shows at the Berkeley Art Museum ("Mahjong: Contemporary Chinese Art From the Sigg Collection") and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art ("Half Life of a Dream: Contemporary Chinese Art") providing a welcome crash course in Far East art production. It seems unlikely, though, that either will have a lasting impact on community consciousness. Interest in Chinese art mirrors an American preoccupation with economic miracles. Numerous Western galleries opened Beijing outposts this year, positioning for anticipated new markets, but fantasies of financial success have been exposed as illusion — much like the sounds and images from Zhang Yimou's over-the-top opening of Beijing Olympics.

The Bay Area museum scene was robust in the summer. Unsurprisingly, "Frida" gave SFMOMA a summer blockbuster, albeit one outsold by "Chihuly at the de Young." The latter presented a problematic expression of the tensions between art, craft, and design — Kenneth Baker's slam review in the *San Francisco Chronicle* incited a welcome, if contentious, flurry of public online dialogue. The Contemporary Jewish Museum opened its new building in June with solid shows and events, making that institution a more prominent cultural resource (albeit one that still needs to prove itself through upcoming programming). There were lower budget alternative visions to be found. A plethora of apartment and hallway galleries popped up around town. "Kiki: The Proof is in the Pudding," Ratio 3's summer show honoring a now-legendary mid-1990s gallery in the Mission, generated a surprisingly broad buzz, thanks to its range of notable artists with SF roots.

And then there was "Bay Area Now 5," a show that people, unfortunately, weren't really talking about. Ambitious in intent, this edition of the regional survey hoped to offer a spin on international biennials. It included artists who recently moved to the area from distant countries, some

guest-curated shows-within-the-show, and off-site events. But the result felt unfocused. Its off-kilter array of bizarre inclusions — such as Edmundo de Marchena's jaw-dropper of a sculpture, a jiggling prosthetic genital homage to SF's history of sexual compulsion — failed to please artists (both in and out of the show), appease local galleries whose artists were not represented, or register with a public looking for the current pulse of San Francisco art. Challenges to the market-based art world and programs that avoid the usual suspects are welcome strategies. But in this case, the quality of individual projects was subsumed by the muddled institutional vision of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. What is the point of "Bay Area Now" again?

Perhaps the misfired attempt would be forgivable if it hadn't been bracketed by equally undercooked exhibitions ("The Way That We Rhyme," "The Gatherers: Greening Our Urban Spheres," and the cryptic "transPop: Korea Vietnam Remix" — a show in dire need of contextualizing wall labels). YBCA has a new visual arts director, former San Diego Museum of Art curator Betti-Sue Hertz, who will take the helm in early 2009. She has her work cut out for her.

As resources become more precious, frugal ingenuity is likely to take precedence in local art offerings. To cut costs, museums will be having fewer exhibitions with longer runs (some extending beyond six months). These time frames offer opportunities for deeper scrutiny — or heavier bouts of boredom. Something like SFMOMA's current "The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now," even if it doesn't live up to its promised scope, reflects an interest in collaborative involvement and the appeal of low-rent materials — rubber bands, anyone? Audiences are enjoying themselves, maybe even making repeat visits.

Perhaps homespun critical fantasy is the order of the day. The Wattis Institute's "The Wizard of Oz," for example, fused a ragtag collection of contemporary art and historical artifacts into an amber-hued vision of the crumbling American dream. I wish I'd been able to see the Jeff Koons sculpture installed in the Château de Versailles, a more extravagant example of a visually and conceptually pointed spectacle — Koons' mash-up of European and American relics forms another kind of dreamy Oz. Click your heels three times and repeat after me: there's no place like home.

GLEN HELFAND'S 2008 TOP 10

1. "Oranges and Sardines," Hammer Museum

Returning SFMOMA curator Gary Garrels' current "conversations on abstract painting" exhibition in Los Angeles is one of the most satisfying, artist-friendly shows ever.

2. Philippe Vergne, lecture at San Francisco Art Institute

The recently-appointed director of the Dia Art Foundation offered incisive, inspirational, and witty takes on the melancholic state of the arts.

3. *Speed Racer: The IMAX Experience* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, USA, 2008)

This color-drenched amusement park ride of a movie lacks

coherence and features the world's most irritating child actor, but two-plus hours of nonstop electric rainbow CGI at IMAX scale turns eye-tickling into an endurance sport.

4. *Seven Days in the Art World*, by Sarah Thornton (Norton, 256 pages, \$24.95)

As economies tank everywhere, there is no better time to get Thornton's insider view of art fairs, auctions, art schools, and the like — it already seems like glam art history. Plus it's great fodder for art opening chitchat.

5. Brendan Lott, at SF Art Commission Gallery and San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art

Lott's paintings — farmed out to painting towns in China and based on appropriated culturally revealing Flickr images of American teens — provided a remarkably concise picture of globalization.

6. Fritz Haeg, lecture at SFMOMA

Though the notion of garden-as-participatory-eco-artwork is beginning to seem rote, Haeg, a key figure in this movement, convinced skeptics with his self-aware and pleasurable take on social sculpture.

7. *You Don't Mess with the Zohan* (Dennis Dugan, USA, 2008)

Adam Sandler's crude, sure, but in this under-appreciated lark he joyfully takes on Arab-Palestinian conflict, the joys of intergenerational sex, the mall-ization of Manhattan, and vintage Paul Mitchell unisex cuts.

8. Park Life and Electric Works

These two relatively new gallery-bookstore entities, Park Life in the Richmond District and Electric Works in SoMa, have made good art seem accessible — in the collector sense — to everyone. If you can't afford the originals or prints (Electric Works makes 'em), then you can buy into the highly selective inventory of art books at either place.

9. *Love Songs* (Christophe Honoré, France 2007)

This down-tempo spin on Jean-Luc Godard's 1961's *A Woman Is a Woman* and Jacques Demy's 1964 *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* restored my faith in French cinema, not to mention musical melancholy.

10. "Josephine Taylor: Bomb Landscape," Catherine Clark Gallery

Taylor first made a splash with delicately rendered, almost wispy epics of extreme family dysfunction and abuse. Her latest show is startling in its visual darkness and more dreamlike but still frightening surrealistic imagery.