

Sandow Birk

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### Exhibitions Where Moral Force Trumps Market Forces

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The most important art events of the coming season are likely to be of a kind that don't appear on lists like this, because they aren't announced far in advance. Their medium is surprise. I hope this year they'll include guerrilla actions by groups like Gulf Labor and Black Lives Matter aimed at shaking up a politically torpid art industry. I fear they'll include further assaults by ISIS on art itself. Constructive or destructive, these examples of politically motivated activism have one thing in common: They acknowledge, as our corporate-minded museums and art schools don't, that art is more than just market fodder. It is, or can be, a moral force.

Museums are valuable places, in part because they allow people to feel that force. For this reason, the arrival of a new or revised institution is always an occasion for hope, and there are several such occasions ahead. The debut this winter of a new Diller Scofidio + Renfro home for the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, followed by the reopening of an expanded San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, should inject some needed energy into the Bay Area's demoralized, gentrification-pressed art scene. In New York, the spring will find the International Center of Photography, which lost its uptown lease, taking up quarters on the Bowery and the Metropolitan Museum beginning its tenancy of the Whitney's Marcel Breuer building. Finally, on Sept. 20, the multibillionaire Eli Broad will inaugurate a public shrine to his personal collection in Los Angeles.

The Met Breuer has aroused much advance curiosity. One thing is sure: it will bow in a beautiful way with a retrospective of the South Asian artist Nasreen Mohamedi. Born in Pakistan in 1937, Mohamedi traveled widely before settling in New Delhi where, until her death in 1990, she produced abstract paintings and drawings, architectural photographs and poetry-filled diaries. Her work is both emotion-charged and empyreal. It's about how art can simultaneously get you through and lift you up.

I anticipate with pleasure surveys of four other artists who had a utopian bent. Agnes Martin, with whom Mohamedi is sometimes compared, is one, with a London retrospective at the Tate Modern through Oct. 11, an engagement at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in April 2016 and a visit to New York that fall. The great Alma Thomas, whose abstract paintings channeled pop songs and flowers from her Washington studio will have the spotlight at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College in Saratoga

Springs, N.Y. (Feb. 6). And Martin Wong, painter of New York tenements, smooching firefighters and celestial messages, will be center stage, where he belongs, at the Bronx Museum of the Arts (Nov. 5).

The new Met Breuer, which will open with a Nasreen Mohamedi retrospective. Credit Ed Lederman Wong, who came of age in the 1960s and died of AIDS in 1999, was deeply, unreconstructedly countercultural. So was the cellist Charlotte Moorman, muse to Nam June Paik and proactivist champion of all things fringe. “A Feast of Astonishments: Charlotte Moorman and the Avant-Garde, 1960s-1980s” at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill. (Jan. 15), will be a tribute to her. Elsewhere, three history-minded group exhibitions will span the era she helped shape. “Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957” at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston (Oct. 10), focuses on a school based on an ideal of communal art-making outside the direct reach of commerce. “For a New World to Come: Experiments in Japanese Art and Photography, 1968-1979” at Grey Art Gallery, N.Y.U., in progress, and at Japan Society Gallery (Oct. 9), documents the radical response of artists to social upheaval and psychic violence during and after the Vietnam War. And “Hippie Modernism: The Struggle for Utopia” at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (Oct. 24) will, with luck, suggest how such a response could include a serious attempt to redesign everyday life along spiritual lines.

As we constantly learn from the news media, spirituality, packaged as religion, is, for better and worse, potent stuff, as will be demonstrated in two of the season’s outstanding sculpture displays, “Kongo: Power and Majesty” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art starting Friday and “Kamakura: Realism and Spirituality in the Sculpture of Japan” at Asia Society Museum (Feb. 9). Both will be masterpiece shows about art’s interlocked spiritual and political functions. On this subject, though, I’m just as interested in seeing “Sandow Birk: American Qur’an” at the Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, Calif. (Nov. 7), consisting of a monumental version of the Quran as transcribed and illustrated by a contemporary Southern California artist.

The work has drawn some fire — Mr. Birk is not a Muslim; he uses a script based on urban street graffiti — but it does something that interesting art does: It rewrites the past on the page of the present so we can see it fresh. Other shows will do the same in other ways. I look forward to a rethinking of Latin American art history in “Impressionism and the Caribbean: Francisco Oller and His Transatlantic World” at Brooklyn Museum (Oct. 2); and to seeing the subject of race filtered through the distorting prism of Modernism in a 10-year survey of Adam Pendleton’s work at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans (April 1). At MoMA, the conceptualist Walid Raad will chip away at myths surrounding the so-called Arab world. In a solo show by the politically clairvoyant filmmaker Laura Poitras, at the Whitney, I expect to see the American present turn into the future before my eyes (Feb. 5).

I’d like to make it to Bamako, Mali, this fall for the Pan-African photography biennial “Rencontres de Bamako” (Bamako Encounters), a glorious event that returns after having been delayed by

political turbulence. I'll certainly be traveling to Williamstown, Mass., in January for the show called "African Art Against the State" organized by Michelle M. Apotsos at the Williams College Museum. Much of the work will be unfamiliar, which is always good. And the theme is apt. With institutional racism and economic inequality rock-solid at home and across the globe, "against the state" seems the only logical position to take.