

FALL PREVIEW

New Shows That Widen the Beaten Path

Roberta Smith, co-chief art critic, on fall exhibitions that capture a period during which art and art history have been in flux, including the New Museum's survey of the polymathic Theaster Gates.

By Roberta Smith

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There is no time like the present — ever. In terms of art, this moment has been distinguished by startling fluidity, rapid change and thrilling expansion both in terms of what constitutes art and who makes it. (Or who has made it, since art's past is expanding too.) The fall exhibitions that intrigue me most continue this expansion. The latest cracks in the barriers between art and craft include a show of 19th-century African American stoneware jars at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a survey of some of the most outrageous costumes of this century at the Museum of Arts and Design. Overdue retrospectives will occur at the American Folk Art Museum and the Museum of Modern Art. And three museums have given midcareer artists the run of their galleries.

With “**Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield, South Carolina,**” the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in concert with the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, ventures into the expanding study of 19th-century African American visual culture (Sept. 9-Feb. 5 at the Met). It focuses on the Black potters who worked in the Old Edgefield District of South Carolina before, during and after the Civil War. The point of departure is the work of a literate enslaved artisan formerly known as Dave the Potter, and now as David Drake. Skilled at throwing and glazing large stoneware storage jars, Drake signed his vessels and sometimes incised them with poems and abolitionist messages. At the Met Drake's jars are joined by expressive face jugs by potters and clay artists whose names are as yet unrecovered.

“**Threads of Power: Lace from the Textilmuseum St. Gallen,**” at the Bard Graduate Center, will give New York its first in-depth look in nearly 40 years at the history of this intricate, fragile and costly textile (Sept. 16-Jan. 1). Organized in collaboration with the Textilmuseum in St. Gallen, Switzerland, the show presents scores of examples from the 16th to 21st centuries, including bobbin-lace and needle-lace borders, bonnets, mantelets and samplers. Lace's modern allure is reflected in dresses by designers like Dior, Givenchy, Saint Laurent and Prada, and in the lemony felted lace and silk radzimir ensemble that Isabel Toledo designed in 2009 for Inauguration Day in January 2009 when Michelle Obama officially became first lady.

“Morris Hirshfield Rediscovered” at the American Folk Art Museum examines the life and art of Hirshfield (1872-1946), who retired from shoe manufacturing in 1935, began painting in 1937 and soon found his flattened, toylike figures and animals and weird, slightly tight textures lauded by folk art advocates and Surrealists alike. Then in 1943, an exhibition of Hirshfield’s paintings at the Museum of Modern Art set off a prolonged furor in the press (too clumsy, too risqué and — horrors — no right feet). It became the last showdown between Alfred H. Barr Jr., the museum’s founding director, and its trustees, who dismissed him. The first major Hirshfield exhibition in a New York museum since, this show (Sept. 23-Jan. 29) presents 40 of the 77 paintings the artist completed, along with remakes of his shoe designs.

In 1936, the German-born Swiss artist Meret Oppenheim (1913-1985) made what is arguably the most notorious Surrealist artwork of all time. An icon of sexual innuendo and disturbing physical contrasts, it is officially titled “Object,” but is known the world over as “the fur-lined teacup.” The teacup promptly traveled to the Museum of Modern Art to assume, some months later, a prominent place in its historic “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” exhibition of 1936-1937. It drew the ire of the press and some trustees, but became hugely popular. Still, MoMA never granted Oppenheim even a small solo show. This changes with **“Meret Oppenheim: My Exhibition”** (Oct. 30-March 4), the largest Oppenheim survey yet in this country, organized with the Kunstmuseum Bern and the Menil Collection, Houston. It sets Oppenheim’s masterpiece among 180 of her objects, paintings and drawings.

“A Splendid Land: Paintings From Royal Udaipur” at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Asian Art, organized by the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, could well be the most beautiful painting exhibition of the season, handily upending Western views of Indian painting as small portrayals of the carryings-on of gods and kings (Nov. 19–May 14). Many of its 80 works have never been exhibited in this country. Most are big, and were made by Udaipur court artists in the 1700s. The increased size encouraged more complex narratives — both urban and natural — grounded in real life. Yes, Udaipur’s extraordinary palaces and gardens are present, but so are expansive views of modest neighborhoods in proto-Cubist array and lush landscapes.

“Queer Maximalism x Machine Dazzle” will honor the Museum of Arts and Design’s acronym — MAD. It is surely among its wildest, most ambitious exhibitions (Sept. 10-Feb. 19). With 80 costumes on two floors, it pays tribute to the genius of Matthew Flower (b. 1972), better known as Machine Dazzle. His ensembles are models of excess that are living sculpture, if not walking assemblages, initially worn to clubs, street events and parades, and in performance (his first, in 1996, was at Exit Art).

The show includes environments, photographs and videos and more than two dozen costumes that the artist created for himself and his longtime collaborator, the singer-songwriter-queer performer Taylor Mac, for “A 24-Decade History of Popular Music” (2016). MAD’s larger mission, presented with unusual clarity in the show’s catalog, is to examine queer excess as a survival tactic, aesthetic stance and political resistance.

“Xaviera Simmons: Crisis Makes a Book Club” at the Queens Museum (Oct. 2 -March 5) is the largest exhibition so far devoted to one of the most talented artists of her generation. Simmons (b. 1974) has tackled the issue of Blackness both head-on and in oblique, lyrical ways. Her art ranges, with almost unfailing success, from text-based paintings to figurative sculptures, staged photographs, videos and video installations and interactive, socially oriented pieces. It touches on cultural difference, the fusion of aural and visual experience and the sustaining effect of community and nature. This sprawling show will occupy much of the museum’s interior, and not a little of its exterior. And Simmons will distribute around 4,000 copies of books that figured in her own development, spawning the club of the show’s title.

Similarly, **“Theaster Gates: Young Lords and Their Traces”** will fill most of the New Museum with this artist’s first institutional survey in New York and largest anywhere (Nov. 10-Feb. 5, 2023). Gates’s activities cover a tremendous range, encompassing painting, sculpture, ceramics, video and installation, propelled by his activities as an archivist, collector, preservationist historian and salvager. Central to Gate’s art is the remembrance and reclamation of Black history and culture on Chicago’s South Side. several recent reliefs have a more local source: discarded floorboards from the Park Avenue Armory.

Finally, I look forward to **“Abigail DeVille: Bronx Heavens”** at the Bronx Museum of the Arts (Oct. 12-April 9). DeVille (b. 1981) is known for physically imaginative, symbolically fraught forms of assemblage. Her latest installation will touch on her Bronx-based family’s history, incorporating pieces from the living room of her grandmother, who came north during the Great Migration. And in the lobby, visitors will be able to record their own Bronx tales.