

Year in Review: Visual Arts

Mapplethorpe, James Brown, North American Indians: Cincinnati visual-arts highlights

BY STEVEN ROSEN · DECEMBER 23RD, 2015 · YEAR IN REVIEW



James Brown is immortalized in Jenny Ustick's "Mr. Dynamite," located at 1437 Main St. - Photo: J. Miles Wolf

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Of all the things that occurred in the visual arts here during 2015, the one that stands out the most for me isn't a museum exhibition or gallery show, but rather a statistic.

In November of this year, the **Contemporary Arts Center** sold 100 new memberships, compared to just 40 for the same month in 2014. That's a 150-percent increase, and a sizeable portion of it is due to Andres Serrano.

He gave a slideshow lecture exclusively for members at the Nov. 6 opening of *After the Moment: Reflections on Robert Mapplethorpe*. The CAC sold 54 memberships the week before and 10 the night of his appearance.

That's right, the same Serrano who so riled religious conservatives and anti-pornography extremists — the kind of people who once thought they could dictate Cincinnati's cultural standards — back in the 1980s with his "Piss Christ" photograph of a plastic crucifix submerged in a glass of his own urine.

Serrano has become what he himself has called a bad boy of the art world, with subsequent provocative series devoted to the Ku Klux Klan, menstrual blood, the morgue and feces. Those were all the subjects of his presentation — slides accompanied with a droll, deadpan wit that was more appreciated than some of the images (although "Piss Christ" will always be eerily beautiful).

But what's important here is the demand for tickets — memberships! — just to see him. Overall, the CAC's attendance is up over last year. November alone brought 6,504 people to galleries or to participate in any program, event or performance. That's versus 3,134 in November 2014.

In a city where too often in the past an arts institution's programming decisions have been made with a certain caution, the CAC embraced the sometimes-outrageous edginess of contemporary art and found a pent-up craving. (The Mark Mothersbaugh show was also an attendance draw, and the CAC believes its new lobby café was a prime lure.)

The CAC also — with a huge assist from FotoFocus — fiercely embraced the 25th anniversary of having shown Mapplethorpe's *The Perfect Moment* in 1990 (and, in doing so, beating obscenity charges brought by censorious county officials). Although I had to miss the October *Mapplethorpe +25* symposium the museum co-sponsored with FotoFocus, by all reports it was consistently packed with the curious and full of insights.

Cincinnati clearly now has a new generation of art lovers who view Mapplethorpe, Serrano and other artists who break the rules as patron saints.

And the CAC benefited from that greatly in 2015.

Meanwhile, the two other major art museums had good if quieter years, too. The **Cincinnati Art Museum** is on track to top its attendance of the last calendar year (176,530) and thus reverse a two-year decline. Already, its 2014-2015 fiscal year attendance (September to July) of 179,099 was higher than the previous one.

The Art Museum in 2015 opened a series of first-rate, beautifully installed and intellectually substantial exhibitions — some traveling, some curated in-house. Several still are up and should be seen by all, including *High Style: 20th Century Masterworks from the Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection*, *Field Guide: Photographs by Jochen Lempert* and *Masterpieces of Japanese Art*.

Add to those several newly renovated (or newly created) galleries, and this is a place working well.

I do wish the Schmidlapp Gallery — displaying "iconic" pieces from all collections — were instead used to showcase new contemporary acquisitions. It would complement existing contemporary art on the just-reopened third floor. But all things in time.

Meanwhile, the **Taft Museum of Art** is projecting an increase in total attendance (54,600), special exhibition attendance (23,500) and memberships (2,200) from the previous calendar year. This is especially heartening because even though the Taft's roots give it a patrician aura, it stressed inclusiveness and diversity in two fine special exhibitions this year — *Enduring Spirit: Edward Curtis and the North American Indians* and the current *Heroism in Paint: A Master Series by Jacob Lawrence*.

Moving outside the museums, it was good to see Michael Solway — director of the Carl Solway Gallery — continue to make an impact here. Not just at his own space, but also as a guest curator. At the nonprofit **Weston Gallery**, he not only put together an excellent multi-artist show called *By This River*, but arranged for one of its participants — the Fluxus pioneer Benjamin Patterson — to come to Cincinnati to perform on opening night. (His 1962 installation "Pond" was in the show.)

I wish I could say it's been a great year for everyone in the arts, but **semantics** departed from its Brighton District space of 18 years. The co-op gallery had been a constant there while so many other alternative art spaces have come and gone from the area. While Andy Marko of semantics says to expect future pop-up shows and maybe something more permanent in 2016, right now there's a hole in the heart of Cincinnati's arts scene.

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And yet, the alternative arts are staying alive. Camp Washington's **Wave Pool** had a number of good shows and events in 2015, including summer walking trips led by Bay Area artists Stairwell's and a May show, *Heirloom*, organized by Cincinnati's Near*by Collective, in which artists chose an object from their childhood home that meaningfully affected them.

Elsewhere, C. Jacqueline Wood's microcinema at **People's Liberty Globe Gallery** woke up many to the need here to take film more seriously as art.

On the public mural front, **ArtWorks** has really found its groove with the Cincinnati Heritage/Local Legends outdoor wall murals that have a boldly graphic Pop Art sensibility and pop culture subject matter.

That breakthrough came last year with designer/lead artist Jason Snell's "The Cincinnati Strong Man: Henry Holtgrewe" in Over-the-Rhine. It continued this year with two more in OTR — Snell's "The Cincinnati Cobra" tribute to boxer Ezzard Charles, and Jenny Ustick's tribute to King Records hit-maker James Brown, "Mr. Dynamite."

From what I hear, ArtWorks is being deluged with ideas for other cultural and "people's history" murals. How about Mapplethorpe?

