The year in art: digital scanning promises a brave new world

Earlier this year, archaeologists—as well as every 40-year-old whose childhood dream was to be the next Indiana ( Jones)—were drawn into wild excitement when radar scans revealed that Tutankhamun’s tomb may contain another chamber. The discovery gave credence to a theory that Nefertiti—the chief consort of Tutankhamun’s father—Isis in the concealed chamber. Although a follow-up excavation drew contradictory conclusions that require further tests, investigations that could define “the discovery of the century” are possible only because Nicholas Reeves, the archaeological phenomenon who proposed the theory, had access to three-dimensional, forensically accurate imaging data obtained in high resolution. He studied the surface and shape of the walls from the comfort of his New York office some 9,400 miles away from the Valley of the Kings.

The enormous potential of applying three-dimensional imaging technology to the world’s heritage sites is not on the radar of the wider cultural community in fact, its use has increased exponentially in recent years thanks to considerable advances in scanning capabilities. Making use of this technology is particularly appropriate now as threats to heritage site are on an alarming increase due to climate change, urban encroachment and, sadly, neglect. The executive director of the UK arm of the heritage preservation organisation World Monumental Fund, John Darlington, cites the falling cost of technology as a contributing factor. “Five years ago, drones were beyond the reach of the average individual, but today they are ubiquitous,” he says. Drones, along with various types of two- and three-dimensional recording, are being used by Factum Arte to document the Cova d’Or (or Iron) monolith in eastern Nigeria.

Factum Arte is also working with the University of Basel and Egypt’s Ministry of Antiquities on creating a scanning and training centre for the Theban Necropolis. In the wider heritage community, the centre will move to the newly restored Stupelopoulos House—a 20th-century building designed by the late Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy—in March 2017. Framing is also integral to the efforts of the California-based firm CyArk, which has worked with government and non-government groups to train 15 staff from Syria as part of Project Anqa, an emergency documentation initiative focused on at-risk heritage sites in the Middle East and North Africa. Since the project’s launch in 2015, the famous Ziggurat of Ur has been in two sites in Mesopotamia—the Bamiyan Valley of Afghanistan and the Madrasa al-Jada’aya—have been recorded using light detection and ranging technology. A CyArk spokesman says that, after training, the Syrian teams were able to record the two sites “in a matter of months, despite the constant physical and political challenges they face in doing so.”

Adam Lowe, the director and founder of Factum Arte, says that while technology can “transform our understanding of cultural heritage by bringing out the dynamic nature of objects” and laying bare details suggesting how they have been cared for over the years, it must be interpreted by those who understand what they are looking at. “I don’t interpret scans, they don’t take them. We need conscious minds to read the data.”

Emily Sharpe

ART

Perhaps the must-see exhibition title of the year was that given by Jacques Villon to his São Paulo Niemeyer: Live Uncertain. These are indeed uncertain times geopolitically, not least in Brazil, but also in terms of the direction of art. While the Venice Biennale of 2015 prompted noticeable shifts, including a greater awareness to social and political factors, the critiques of art, the millennium of 2015 edition has been less noticeable, perhaps because Okwui Enwezor’s politically driven show had arguably been anticipated by numerous exhibitions, including some of Enwezor’s own, over many years. Next year might mark a new shift, since it is that unceasingly overlooked occurrence in which the Venice Biennale, Documents in Kasel and Kasper König’s Sculptural Projects. Minister citizen, among others, have seen some clear trends and noticeable developments in 2016.

CLAY GETS DAY IN THE SUN

The return of ceramics to the main-stream of contemporary art has been a slow but compelling process, and in 2016, it felt a more obvious medium than ever. Young artists such as Aaron Angell and Jesse Wine have brought irreverent energy to the table, while Betty Woodman, Lon Nagle and other relative veterans are more visible and influential than ever. In a discussion on fluorescent, Angell suggests that rise of clay in part “a reaction against the kind of fabrication fetishism that can have been seeing in a lot of work over recent years”, a return to the intimacy of making after years in which growing numbers of artists outsource their work, a process which Angell likens to “this one-to-one scale of body to material which is so inherent to clay”.

VIRTUAL REALITY

In a feature in The Art Newspaper in October, we reported that there are still many questions about how museums, galleries and collectors should deal with the increasing abundance of digital art. They will need to move quickly if ceramics offer artists an intimate and immediate form of expression, so too do the digital tools available to them, including, for the first time, affordable virtual reality (VR) headsets such as the Oculus Rift. VR is a growing presence in major galleries, and artists working predominately in digital are beginning to dominate programing at major international spaces. From the New Museum in New York to the Tate’s galleries in Britain, the Berlin Biennale, too, reflected this digital surge, although it received mixed reviews.

LARGEST GREY PANTHER

In a depressingly American news cycle dominated by the racist rhetoric of Donald Trump, repeated police brutality by people of colour and the resulting Black Lives Matter movement, no painter’s work feels more vital or more urgent than Kerry James Marshall’s. In an essay for his hugely acclaimed exhibition Muster, which opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago this summer before travelling to its current incarnation at the Met Breuer in New York, after which it will open at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Marshall writes: “I am trying to make a very specific, phemonomenal body of work that is unequivocally black and beautiful. It is my conviction that the most instrumental, transformative painting for this moment must be of figures, and those figures must be black, unapologetically so.”

INFINITE POSSIBILITIES

Two of London’s best shows this year reflected the enduring potential and the increasing variety of video art, from the dizzying pace of those who demine video as the exclusive preserve of a dry curatorial echo-chamber. Surveys of video art can be problematic, since they inevitably demand too much of an audience’s time if they are to be properly seen. But The Infinite Mix, a Hayward Gallery offshore project, makes a good case for video being the most creative of all 21st-century media, with mostly short but punch-packing works from artists working in Europe and North America, all linked by their use of music. Meanwhile, the Barbican’s retrospective of the Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson, including his nine-screen masterpiece The Visitation (2012), was one of the most critically acclaimed, spellbinding and publicly adopted shows of the year.

Ben Luke

The year in heritage: digital scanning promises a brave new world

MELISSA CHIU
DIRECTOR, THE
HIRSHHORN
MUSEUM,
WASHINGTON, DC

2016 has been a momentous year for art. In June, I had the privilege of attending the opening of the new Tate Modern and the unveiling of their permanent collection, which comprises works by over 100 artists from more than 50 countries, signifying an important shift in recent decades in international and emerging artists as part of the collection. Another highlight was theaster Gates’s immersive solo exhibition How to Build a House Museum at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Theaster’s unique practice, which engages social justice and urbanism as art forms, transforms cultural narratives by reimagining and recontextualizing historically disenfranchised spaces. Theaster joined the Hirshhorn board as an artist in residence last fall, and we are thrilled to have his guidance and expertise as part of our institution.

FRANCIS OUTRED
PRESIDENT, CONTEMPORARY,
CHRISTIE’S

A standout moment for me in 2016 was the opening of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, a building constructed with the primary purpose of looking at art, an art museum in today’s museum world. It is more than a museum on that promise—not only in the fabric of the building but also the quality of work. The superb Fisher Collection as well as works from over 200 global collectors have created an institution that rivals the best in the world. This was just one of the many things that stood out from an inspiring trip to the West Coast of the US that I took in the spring of this year. Other highlights included San Francisco’s jaw-dropping art scene as well as witnessing the continued evolution of LA as an art capital with the Broad, LACMA’s new gallery, and the proliferation of artist studios—all of which are recreating the art landscape on the West Coast right now which has always had the distinct honour of driving John Lauter’s Crescent Imagery, one of the great mid-century buildings.

NAYZI VASSEGH
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, MASTERPIECE LONDON

Masterpiece 2016 took place a few days after Brexit. At the time I remember wondering whether anyone would come and was particularly nervous about how the uncertainty might impact the success of the fair. I needn’t have worried—in fact, in many cases it had a surprisingly positive impact. Collectors acquired works for more quickly than in previous years, encouraged by the exchange rate, and exhibitors reported a high level of engagement. Thinking about this rationally, I believe that lessons of turmoil in the financial markets collectors are often drawn to more tangible assets, as presented at Masterpiece.

LUCY MITCHELL-INNES
PRINCIPAL, CO-OWNER, MITCHELL-INNES & NASH, NEW YORK

Two memorable events come to mind in thinking about 2016. The first was Pop’s Legacy: The Problem at Art Basel in June. The performance culminated with its protégé, a huge white gorilla, finding thousands of fake Basquiats and shredded Pop’s paintings on view at Art Basel. The gorilla stuffed the head into a big bag and ran off. The second is the Abstract Expressionism show at the Royal Academy in London. I made a dedicated trip to London to see the show, and it was absolutely worth it.

* Touring the responses is full at: bit.ly/newspaper.com