

The Best Underrated Artists

We asked experts to name underrated and overlooked artists, from Old Masters to avant-garde innovators, who deserve more attention

BY ANN LANDI

EVERY FEW YEARS, *ARTnews* conducts a poll of artists, critics, curators, and art historians to find worthy figures who have fallen off the map or failed to receive their due attention from audiences and museum professionals. The whys and wherefores of the vanishing artist are mysterious. “Careers of artists are as unpredictable as life itself,” notes Julián Zugazagoitia, the new director of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri. “Very few careers are sustained on a constant level, and sometimes artists need time off to refocus. There are also interesting artists who just somehow never connect—with a dealer, with the public—but they accumulate a large body of work.”

Artist Pat Steir points out that there are also big differences between the ways notable artists reach the mainstream in America and in Europe. “Here the market discovers the artists, then they get discovered by museums,” she says, “whereas in Europe museums discover lesser-known artists all the time, and then galleries may or may not pick them up. We’re a high consumerist culture, although Europe isn’t far behind.”

Our picks this year are a diverse lot, from a 17th-century Dutch master of still life to a contemporary of the Impressionists, from a Turkish installation artist to a Congolese sculptor, and from underknown masters of every stripe, based in performance, portraiture, photography, or politics.



Bradley Walker Tomlin, *Number 2-1950*, oil on canvas.

Norman Kleeblatt *Susan and Elihu Rose Chief Curator* **Jewish Museum, New York**

Given the renewed interest in the sculpture of Lee Bontecou and Louise Nevelson, I think it may be time to look at Nancy Grossman, particularly the works from the '60s and '70s. I first encountered her art when I was in high school. I still find the sculpture powerful and provocative.

Hans Haacke is an important voice. Partially because of the highly political and polemical nature of his work, he is not as much a part of mainstream consciousness at the moment. He did have a show at X Initiative in Chelsea last year, but it didn't represent the range and depth of his practice.

Pattern and Decoration has certainly disappeared from the

map, but it's time to reexamine the movement, especially because certain attitudes developed around painting in the '70s are again current. What's interesting here is the permeable boundary between women's invention and men's embrace of the movement.

Aaron Siskind's abstract works deserve more attention, especially because there's a lot of interest in his more narrative, pictorial photography.

Though his career was short, Bradley Walker Tomlin, who died in 1953, is worth a serious look. Is there enough work for a survey? The late paintings are glorious.

Elizabeth Armstrong
 Curator of Contemporary Art
 Minneapolis Institute of Arts

Peter Saul has been active for over half a century and is still going strong today. He was a radical innovator and iconoclast when he started painting, in the '50s, and his newest canvases



Two by Peter Saul:
 Beckmann's *The Night*, 2009, acrylic on canvas (top);
Communist Hideout, 1963, oil on canvas (above).

haven't lost their edge. His Vietnam paintings are still shocking and devastatingly vehement. Generations of artists have been influenced by his dark cartoonlike paintings since the '60s, but they are rarely on view in museums.

Arthur Wheelock
 Curator of Northern Baroque Painting
 National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

We're doing a show in 2012 of Willem van Aelst, a Dutch painter of the 17th century, whose *Still Life with Dead Game* was the first painting I acquired as a curator for the museum. Van Aelst was born in Delft around the same time as Ver-

meer, but he left the Netherlands in the mid-1640s and went to France and then to Florence, where he worked for about six or seven years at the Medici court. When he came back to the Netherlands he went to Amsterdam, where he specialized in beautiful flower paintings and still lifes with dead animals and rifles and hunting pouches. Obviously there were a lot of painters who did game pieces, but what makes van Aelst's work so spectacular is the refinement of the details—the fur, feathers, cock's combs, and the like. You can feel the shimmering quality of the materials, of the leathers and metals. He had a very bold compositional style, and the objects often seem so real they have a trompe l'oeil effect—for instance, in the National Gallery picture there is a fly that has just landed on the rooster's comb that plays into an illusionistic heritage going back to antiquity.



Willem van Aelst,
Still Life with Dead Game, 1661,
 oil on canvas.

Nari Ward
 Artist, New York

My mentor and former instructor, William T. Williams, has worked in his studio for years, creating powerful works sensitively choreographing the personal and the formal. He was a founding member of the Studio Museum in Harlem artist-in-residency program, and his generosity has proved to be a major contribution to the art world. The aspect of his work that seems most relevant for contemporary art is figuring out how to become more universal, how to take a formal language and push it as much as possible. Now his work should be appreciated for its timeless intensity and power.



William T. Williams,
Crystal Dreams, 2008,
 acrylic on paper.

Deborah Cullen

Director of Curatorial Programs

El Museo del Barrio, New York

This summer we did a retrospective of the work of Rafael Ferrer, as part of a series that looks at mature but underrecognized artists. Ferrer was born in Puerto Rico in 1933 and relocated to



Rafael Ferrer, *Conquista de la soledad (Conquering Solitude)*, 1990–91, oil on canvas.

the mainland United States in 1966. He has been integral to many movements. He built his reputation on guerrilla actions at the Leo Castelli Gallery and moved into installations in the early '70s, participating in shows at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney. He showed at Nancy Hoffman for years. By the late '70s, Ferrer was making intensely colored paintings and sculptures with a Caribbean perspective. He was part of so many things and yet no one had a full grasp of his contributions.

Lynne Cooke

Chief Curator

Reina Sofía Museum, Madrid

Mateo Maté is well regarded in his own country, Spain, but neglected outside it. He recently did an installation at the Matadero contemporary-art space in Madrid in which he took



Mateo Maté, *Viajo para conocer mi geografía (I Travel to Learn My Geography)*, 2010, video of an installation.

the contents of an apartment—everything from furniture to the boxes for computers to books—and turned it into a kind of sprawling landscape, the way children might play with furniture to create their own world. A video camera on a minia-

ture cart traversed this landscape, showing the work on a screen in grainy black and white, and it was like taking you into the past, into another historical moment. It was captivating to both people who knew about art and those who didn't.

Dara Birnbaum is a pioneering feminist video and installation artist who has had recognition at various points in her career and just had a big retrospective in Europe that didn't travel to the States. A backlash against certain forms of feminism may partly account for her eclipse, and her work is quintessentially feminist.

Sarah Lees

Associate Curator of European Art

Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts

We recently did a show of Giovanni Boldini, who is best known as a society portraitist in late-19th-century Paris, but the works owned by the Clark are in quite a different vein.



Giovanni Boldini, *The Return of the Fishing Boats, Étretat*, 1879, oil on panel.

Some of them, such as *The Return of the Fishing Boats*, are small and incredibly detailed. Boldini also did scenes of Parisian nightlife in the same vein as Degas and wonderful landscapes and interiors. Part of the question for us was how one artist in this period could make such wildly different things. By the 1890s, Boldini was very successful as a kind of portraitist to the stars and worked with the Goupil Gallery, one of the biggest and most commercial of the time. He was reasonably good friends with Degas, but the Impressionists may have looked down on his desire for mainstream recognition.

Franklin Sirmans

Department Head and Curator of Contemporary Art
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

There's a whole group of artists who were born in the late '20s, early '30s, particularly black artists from around that time, who seem to be quite overlooked. Joe Overstreet, an abstract artist whose work was last seen in a show at David Zwirner in 2007, is definitely someone worthy of consideration. The show helped bring the work back out in the context of contemporary art and not just as an abstract moment that was part of a second-generation movement.

Another name that comes to mind is Amalia Mesa-Bains, coauthor with Lucy Lippard, among others, of *Contemporary Art by Women of Color*. She's based in California and has



Amalia Mesa-Bains, *The Curandera's Botanica*, 2008, mixed media.

done several significant installations over the years and was part of my show "NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith" at the Menil Collection and P.S.1 in 2008–9. In terms of working with materials and found objects, Amalia has had a significant influence on a lot of younger artists.

Bodys Isek Kingelez, a sculptor from the Congo who was born in the late '40s, is another whose work came out and was discussed thanks to the Pigozzi Collection (an important Italian private collection of contemporary African art in Geneva), but you don't hear much about it now. There's an extraordinary attention to craft and architecture using humble materials, and it surprises me that we don't have him as part of the daily conversation.

Ursula von Rydingsvard

Artist, New York

One of my favorites is Charles Juhasz-Alvarado, whose work is exhibited all over Puerto Rico and was last seen in New York in a show at Exit Art in 2008. He has the ability to brilliantly incorporate humor, politics, and conceptually oriented



Charles Juhasz-Alvarado, *i-scream (resist!)*, 2004, mixed media.

art on a huge scale. He seems on the side of those who are victimized and communicates that with a great deal of intelligence; he makes political art with a heart. In one installation, he lived throughout the exhibition in an enormous shoeshine box, playing the roles of different characters. Sexuality always seems present in his work, though not in obvious ways.

Jane Rosen is an artist who lives alone on a ridge overlooking the ocean in Bear Gulch, California, in San Mateo County. She has fused herself with the nature that surrounds her, and is able to reap her own version of psychological characteristics from the animals with whom she constantly communicates and who find their way into her art; for example, there is so much tenderness in the way she represents the hoof of a horse. These intimate relationships are made clear in her sculptures and drawings.

Jeff Rosenheim

Curator of Photographs

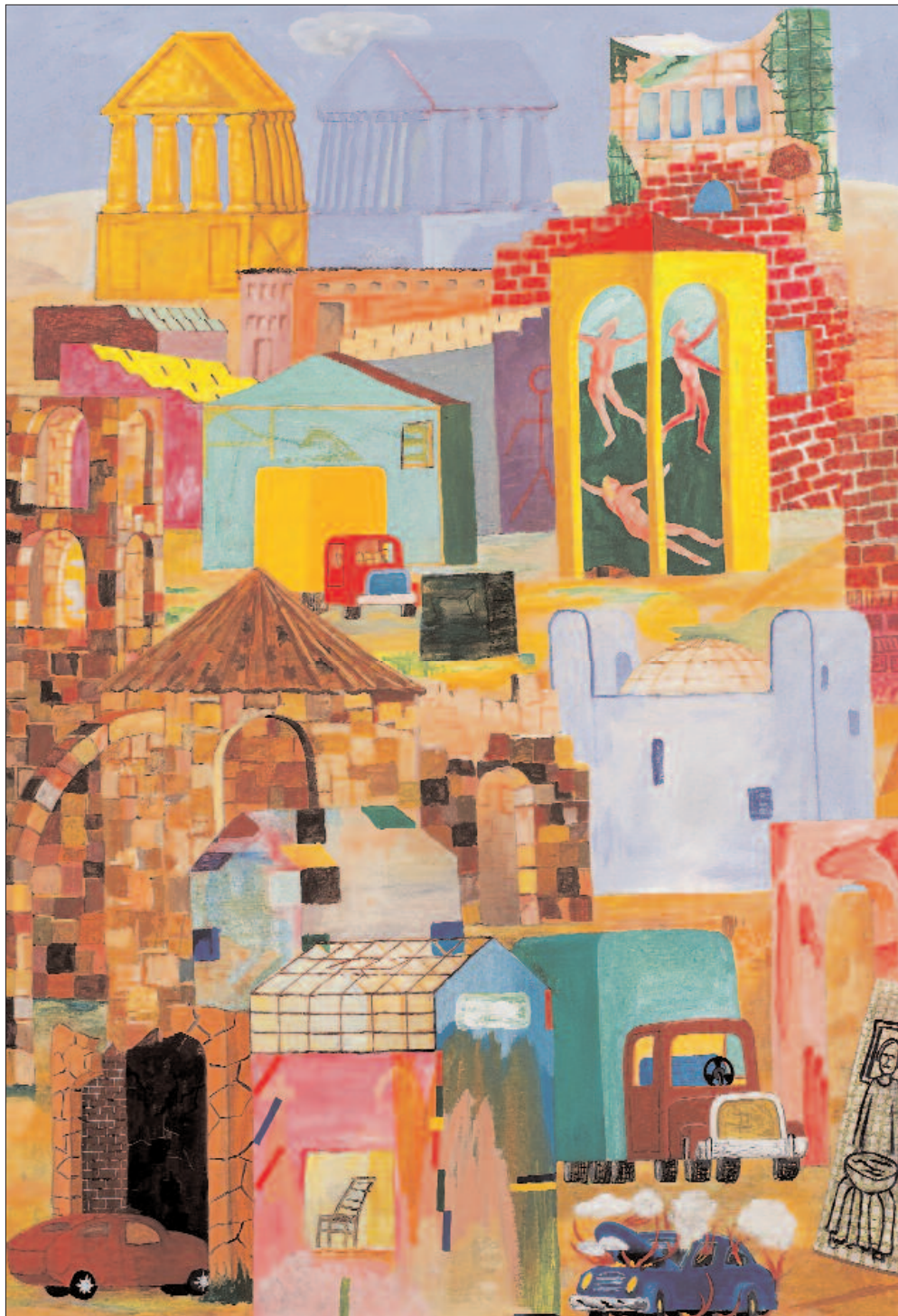
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Leon Levinstein, the subject of my current show, "Hipsters, Hustlers, and Handball Players" (through October 17), showed in the '50s at the Museum of Modern Art and was included in



Leon Levinstein, *Untitled, New York City*, 1960s–70s, gelatin silver print.

"The Family of Man," like Robert Frank, on whom he probably had a great influence. But when the '60s came around, he kind of dropped out and never had gallery representation. You can see that he had a phenomenal compositional sense; he cropped his pictures dramatically. And he was fearless on the street. It's virtuosic black-and-white street photography, and I think this show is going to open the public's eyes to an artist of great achievement and stunning pictorial value.



Charles Garabedian, *Die tote Stadt (The Dead City)*, 2009, acrylic on canvas.

Fred Tomaselli *Artist, New York*

Two artists who I think deserve greater recognition are both veterans of L.A.'s storied Ferus Gallery, although they couldn't be more different. Llyn Foulkes makes paintings, constructions, and hand-built musical contraptions that put him in a class all by himself. He's been making dark, funny, whacked-out, and wildly beautiful stuff for over 50 years, but at least here in New York, he's criminally underknown.

Robert Irwin has also been at it for over 50 years, and while he's done all right, he should be a bigger part of the conversa-

tion. Part of the problem may be that many of his phenomenological experiments are ephemeral, so you really can't find much to experience. Sure, he's got his gardens, but I'd love to see more.

Oh, and while I'm on the subject of old-guy California artists, Charles Garabedian, who is well into his 80s, did one of the best gallery shows I saw, at LA Louver in 2004-5. His work seems especially germane to the zeitgeist, given the current interest in inventive figurative painting.

Vasif Kortun

Director

Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center, Istanbul

Cengiz Çekil has been for me an eye-opener since the first time I saw his works, back in 2000. It was in Izmir, the third-largest city in Turkey, where he had moved with his wife and



Cengiz Çekil,

Towards Childhood Since Childhood, 1974, mixed media.

young child to escape the terror-laden atmosphere of Istanbul in the late '70s. It is unfathomable to think of an artist from that generation surviving in a provincial city of a country that is not in the limelight. I was shocked to see the works from the early '70s. They were extremely sophisticated, remarkably grounded in the "local," and at the same time they would be in discussion with the most sophisticated discourses in conceptual practice. Çekil was "local," but never in a representational or exotic style. His gift, particularly in the early works, was to imbue with energy materials unapologetically culled from the everyday—from the street, the workshop, or the neighborhood hardware store.

David Rubin

Curator of Contemporary Art

San Antonio Museum of Art

Martha Alf received some fine critical attention for her paintings of toilet-paper rolls and her drawings of fruits and vegetables. Her photographs, however, have been almost entirely overlooked. She has a keen eye and the ability to make almost



Martha Alf, *Red, White and Blue, 1973, oil on canvas.*

any subject look ethereal.

In Cleveland, Mark Howard has received regional attention for his recent public-art projects, but his pattern paintings loaded with African-inspired imagery are deserving of wider exposure.

Two Phoenix-based artists worth noting are

Henry Leo Schoebel, who has constantly expanded the potential of sumptuous abstraction, and Anthony Pessler, whose landscapes bring a fresh contemporary edge to the Luminist tradition.

And here in San Antonio, James Cobb is a genuine master, whether working with paint or the computer mouse. The intricacy and depth of his vision never cease to astonish.

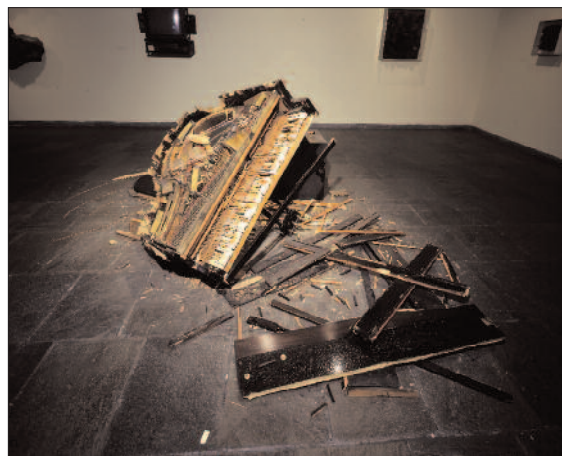
Julián Zugazagoitia

Director

Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri

Carmen Herrera has been dedicated to her art, but it's only late in her life that she has started to have representation and shows and critical acclaim. It's mature work that has evolved in a steady way. She had all the obstacles of her time—being a woman and pushing the envelope, working as a foreigner in New York in the '50s—but she kept developing her vision, and now there's a lot of traction and attention to her work.

An artist whose career has been interesting to follow is Raphael Montañez Ortiz, the founder of El Museo del Barrio, who also was in the forefront of the avant-garde and has always been doing his own thing. The Whitney Biennial invited



Raphael Montañez Ortiz, *Humpty Dumpty: Piano Destruction Concert, 1967/96, piano and video.*

him to do one of his signature pieces in the '60s, destroying a piano as part of a performance. He's someone who has gone into a lot of things, and often been in the forefront, and perhaps as a Latino artist he was always a little bit too early.

Christopher Knight

Art Critic

Los Angeles Times

An exceptional portraitist, Hermenegildo Bustos (1832–1907) is a national treasure in Mexico, but virtually unknown outside that country. Partly it's because of Mexico's patrimony laws, which restrict art exports. A large permanent installation of his work is in Guanajuato's Alhóndiga de Granaditas, but I'm unaware of a full museum survey in the last 25 years, certainly not in the United States. Largely self-taught as a restorer of church and domestic altarpieces, Bustos was

profoundly affected by the rapid spread of photography in the second half of the 19th century. His portrait paintings on canvas or tin are about presentation—a formal ceremony of exchange between sitter and artist, and sitter and viewer.

Edward Weston's daybooks describe his astonishment at first meeting Canadian-born Henrietta Shore (1880–1963). He believed she was the best painter working in California between the two world wars, first in Los Angeles and then Carmel. I'd say he was right. Influence is notoriously tortuous, but Weston's photographs seem more indebted to Shore's paintings and drawings than vice versa. Taught by William



Hermenegildo Bustos, *Señora Francisca Valdivia de Chávez and Her Sons, 1862*, oil on canvas.

Merritt Chase, Robert Henri, and John Singer Sargent, Shore was bowled over by Diego Rivera. (Weston had urged her to go to Mexico.) Shore painted slowly, laying on oil colors in thin, seemingly brushless glazes. Most gorgeously, she applied her brand of sleek, Art Deco simplification to suc-

culents and other desert flora, rather than the products of industrial manufacture. One result is a weird animism that feels thoroughly modern rather than primitive. John McLaughlin (1898–1976) was Southern California's first major artist of the postwar '50s. More than any other, he's the painter for whom the term "hard-edge abstraction" was coined by L.A. critic Jules Langsner. The subsequent co-optation of that term for European-derived geometric painting may be one reason his extraordinary work remains misunderstood. McLaughlin's art comes from a profound engagement with Eastern, and especially Japanese, esthetics. In his paintings, the perceptual experience of the void is full, not empty, infused with unfolding clarity rather than shrouded in mystery. The '60s and '70s Light and Space art of Robert Irwin, Doug Wheeler, and others is unimaginable without McLaughlin's precedent.

Petah Coyne
Artist, New York

Lygia Clark was way ahead of the game in her installation work. Every time I see a piece of hers, I'm like, Wow! She's so up my alley. She's always grouped with Hélio Oiticica. Both

did installation work, both were painters, but she was much more radical, much wilder, perhaps because Hélio came from an architectural background and Lygia, being a woman, had nothing to lose. Paul Thek is another of my big heroes. If you look at his work, you're going to see the roots of Robert Gober and Louise Bourgeois, in both the psychological and the visual dimension (though Bourgeois is more connected to his installations and pieces in wood). Thek died very young, and he's an artist's artist, because nobody but the artists looks at him. The "meat sculptures" are amazing, and he did realistic-looking parts of human limbs made of wax in Plexiglas boxes. The work is very fragile, though, and that may be one reason it's seldom shown.

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Pat Steir
Artist, New York

I think Malcolm Morley should be considered a major American artist, because he has a large, roving, and curious mind, inventing forms in painting and not conforming to pre-considered limitations set by the market or critical dialogues. He's an explorer who investigates realism, abstraction, quotation, collage, and much more in new, puzzling, and masterful ways.



Stephen Mueller, *Black House, 2009*, ochre on polypropylene.

Stephen Mueller is simply a great artist, a painter in his late 50s, who has been overlooked. His images, lately culled from his travels to Australia, are deeply meditative and compelling.



Paul Thek, *Untitled #76* (from the series "Technological Reliquaries"), 1964, mixed media.