

Peter Plagens

1 "Recognizing Van Eyck"

(*Philadelphia Museum of Art*) A painter friend of mine in Chicago who deejays on the side once explained to me the reason he had so many more old rock 'n' roll records than new ones. "I like the best of the new," he said, "and the best of the old, and it just so happens that there's a lot more old." In art, old really has the edge, but—given the way artists crank out stuff nowadays—it sometimes seems like there are fewer old works than new. So here I'm gonna go with old. Back when men were men and pictures were little and took a long time to make, Jan van Eyck painted a pair of almost identical Saint Francis in the Wilderness (one about 5 by 6 inches, the other about a foot on a side), which are two of the best paintings ever done in the history of the entire world. Really.

2 William Kentridge

(*Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego*) If you care about positioning your opinions according to some scale of cool, Kentridge—whose hype peaked about a year ago—probably isn't a great bet these days. In case you were napping and somehow managed to miss this artist's ascent: Imagine a three-hankie Stanley Kramer movie with genuine avant-garde ambition. Tough to picture? Maybe, but Kentridge's drawings and videos really do choke me up and I don't care who knows it.

3 Richard Serra

(*The Geffen Contemporary, Los Angeles*) After a summer of lite microbrews, a jigger of sour mash. After a Weezer CD, Robert Johnson live in my living room. After two Anna Quindlen novels in a row, refuge in *Northanger Abbey*. After 4,037 exhibitions of intratextual multimedia pieces addressing the issue of cultural nomadism (while exploring memory, loss, and the violated transgendered body), some real big, real abstract, real art. At last.

4 Arthur Dove

(*Whitney Museum of American Art, New York*) It's conceited to quote yourself, right? OK then, I'll try and paraphrase: abstract, but not too abstract; American, but not too American; small, but not too small; poetic, but not too poetic—the kind of show I hope we'll see more of at the newly back-to-basics Whitney.

5 Eija-Liisa Ahtila

(*Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunert, New York; originated at Kiasma, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki*) To hear her talk, Ahtila is a cinematic formalist—she says she uses space and time as physical entities, in the same way as, say, a sculptor uses mass and volume. She also builds stories from the ground up, so to speak, about intimately connected but poignantly uncommunicative residents of Helsinki and environs. And those stories are beautiful. Footnote: So how come the genetically reticent Finns manufacture Nokia cell phones and are now the most telephonically interconnected country, per capita, in the world? (Even street sweepers stop and gab on their Nokias.) I asked my friendly native guide, who told me that Finns have all this pent-up stuff to say to each other, so long as they don't have to do it face-to-face—which just may account for the quiet intensity she gets onto film.

6 John Wesley

(*Jessica Fredericks Gallery, New York*) There's something really sneaky, nasty, dirty, perverted, and, all right, "transgressive" about Wesley's paintings. And they look like Necco wafers. How does he do that?

7 Claude Wampler

(*Postmasters Gallery, New York*) First you gotta get their attention. Flitting about naked onstage is one way to do it. I'd already seen a tape of Wampler's latest performance piece, but I went to the gallery show hoping to catch this compelling performer in the flesh. What I got (and I guess deserved) was a big-screen dressing down. Wampler, as a domineering mom in a steam bath with "jumbo shrimp" Magic Markered on her forehead and some kind of jellied blood oozing from her nostrils, hurled Naumanesque abuse. Peering at me through a fish-eye lens, she left me no choice but

to listen. And, you know, I have to agree with her: Whatever *did* make me think I could get into an Ivy League school?

8 Apex Art C.P., New York

This gallery's address is 291 Church Street, which has got to be a coincidence, or else there's a god of modern art out there. Anyway, this place puts on intelligent ("smart" is probably the word I want) little shows of mostly pocket-size or stripped-down works—the kind of stuff I come across in my professional travels and fear won't make it to New York. Apex is a nonprofit with some noble and complicatedly fair system for curating its shows, but that's not what gets me there. I just like to wander in for a recharge whenever the battery warning light in my brain starts flashing.

9 Steve Hayes and Tom Cayler

(*Eighty Eights, New York*) I'd put these guys higher up on my list if this entry weren't so self-congratulatory. My wife and I saw Hayes and Cayler do a themed stand-up piece called "The Exhibition" at Eighty Eights in the Village, and we laughed our heads off. So we commissioned a performance, in her studio, for some friends. "The Exhibition" is the product of a NYSCA grant a while back, but it's still funny.

10 George Bellows

(*New Britain [Connecticut] Museum of Art; Williams College Museum of Art*) No, not whole shows of Bellows, but there sure as hell ought to be. I saw two little paintings by him—*Red Dinghy* (in New Britain) and *Portrait of a Young Man* (Williams)—and was hit by Paulist lightning: this guy is right up there with Hals, Manet, and Sargent as one of the fastest, bestest brushes in the West. Plus, he's got soul. There's also a roomful of Bellows in the National Gallery that will (with maybe two exceptions) absolutely floor you. Time for a huge retro. We want Bellows! We want Bellows! We want . . . □