

Best art shows of 2013

'Impressionism' at Art Institute best in show in a funky year

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Phyllis Bramson, "Idle Hours" (2000). (Elmhurst Art Museum)

When it came to Chicago's visual art exhibitions, 2013 was not a historic year. There were few if any truly ambitious new art works, nor did we see many museums experimenting with innovative exhibition forms. Instead, 2013 was a year where artists and art institutions alike were consumed with the subject of history itself. Is looking backward the only way to move forward? For now, the answer seems to be yes, so we'll follow suit. Below, in no particular order, are this year's highlights.

1. "Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity" at the Art Institute of

Chicago, June 26-September 29: It was designed to be a wildly popular, world-touring blockbuster, and in that it succeeded, but this incisive look at figurative painting's relationship to Parisian fashion from the 1860s-1880s also drew on rock-solid scholarship and offered fresh perspectives on familiar Impressionist classics — not to mention close-up views of the chicly beribboned garments that inspired them.

2. "Africobra in Chicago," The South Side Community Art Center, the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, and The Dusable Museum of African American History, May 10 – September 29: Not only did this vibrant trio of exhibitions and related programs offer the most comprehensive survey yet of the aesthetics, culture, and political philosophy of AFRICOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), they provided a necessary corrective to the notion that Imagism and its offshoots were Chicago's only historically significant postwar art movements. Founded on the South Side in 1968, AFRICOBRA is still going strong.

3. "Model Studies: Thomas Demand with Fernand Léger, Francis Bruguière, Thomas Scheibitz, and the VKhUTEMAS School" at the Graham Foundation, March 21-June 1: Curated by and including a stunning series of abstract photographs by the renowned German artist Thomas Demand, this group drawing and photography show looked at how models and various kinds of model-making shape the thinking processes of artists and architects, along with the structures they may or may not eventually build.

4. "Josiah McElheny: Two Clubs at The Arts Club of Chicago," September 17 – December 14: McElheny's gleaming glass pavilion was more than a stylishly-outfitted lounge — it was a portal for looking back on a particular era in Chicago's architectural history as well as The Arts Club's own institutional lineage, both of which have been immeasurably influenced (not to mention aesthetically enhanced) by the visionary modernist principles of Mies van der Rohe.

5. "The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Nov 9, 2013–Mar 9, 2014: It isn't flawless, but this group show provides a highly useful encapsulating metaphor for the prevailing artistic winds driving contemporary artists to dig into the past through archival research, historical reconstructions, or by "excavating" a place or environment using tools like photography and film, if not actual shovels.

6. "Spontaneous Interventions: Design Actions for the Common Good" at the Chicago Cultural Center, May 24-September 1: "Spontaneous interventions" are ad-hoc actions taken by regular folks — artists activists and designers among them — to rectify gnawing problems like defective infrastructure, food deserts and a lack of safe gathering spots in their cities and neighborhoods. Of the year's big exhibitions, this was one of the few to speak directly to our present moment, rather than the past.

7. "Johanna Billing: I'm gonna live anyhow until I die" at Kavi Gupta Gallery, Feb 9 – Mar 30, 2013: The sole work in Swedish artist Billing's solo show was this marvelous short film that follows a group of Italian children running amok on the streets of Rome and through an abandoned schoolhouse, where they playfully wreak havoc on troves of outdated educational equipment. Billing's piece mines Rome's history of progressive pedagogy, but its poignancy for Americans probably lies mostly with its depiction of joyful children suddenly in control of their own destinies, if only for a little while.

8. Deb Sokolow at Western Exhibitions, March 15-April 20: To her fans, each local unveiling of a new Deb Sokolow drawing feels like a long-awaited release by a favorite author. Why? Because Sokolow is not only among Chicago's best younger artists, she's a fantastic storyteller in the Thomas Pynchon vein. Especially memorable was the 28-foot long drawing unfolding around "You," her usual protagonist, during a mountaintop retreat for artists employed as museum guards. Of course, this is Sokolow's world, so the retreat turned out to be a secret recruitment center for an international ring of art thieves ... you get the idea.

9. "Inventory_The EAM Collection" at the Elmhurst Art Museum, September 21, 2013-January 25, 2014; Curator Staci Boris installed a good chunk of the EAM's collection throughout the galleries and salon style, where they take on added dimensions as fragments of an institutional history. In the process, Boris also figured out a way to make the Museum's mostly middling art collection look positively grand.

10. "State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970" at the Smart Museum of Art, October 3, 2013-January 12, 2014 ; This survey of late 1960s and 1970s California conceptual art runs a bit dry, given the often viscerally provocative nature of the era's works, but in this case the look back in

time reveals precisely what most of today's art world lacks: a sense of purpose and urgency, and a working frame of reference beyond aesthetic **trends** dictated by the art market.