

ARTFORUM

Best of 2020 Johanna Fateman

Johanna Fateman, December 2020

1. K8 HARDY (REENA SPAULINGS FINE ART, NEW YORK)

While the “Best of 2020” sounds like a grim joke (the ten best catastrophes?), the year wasn’t without absurdist bright spots, such as Hardy’s ten-foot-long pigment-soaked maxi pad (her show’s sole work). Which is not to say the “canvas”—an old-fashioned Color Field painting in a sour-power palette—was played for laughs. For me, it was the indelible gesture of the New York fall openings. Greedily absorbent, radiant with hostility, clotted with rage, the monumental menstrual composition’s perfect crudity and complicated joie de vivre provoked not only glee but also an honest-to-goddess gasp.



View of “K8 Hardy: A New Painting,” 2020, Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

2. DAPPER BRUCE LAFITTE (FIERMAN, NEW YORK)

Lafitte’s online show during lockdown was titled “Stuck Inside,” but the New Orleans artist kept his focus on the outside world: Crowd scenes are his métier. In some drawings, pallbearers carried caskets through oceans of Black mourners, symbolizing the pandemic’s toll on his community; in others, vast expanses of Klansmen reflected white supremacy’s insidious power and spread. Lafitte’s work is always urgent, but this exhibition opened June 1, when his resolute imagery and zoomed-out views of the masses were germane, to say the least.

3. JONATHAN BERGER (PARTICIPANT INC, NEW YORK)

A display of daunting, labor-intensive complexity, Berger’s numinous exhibition “An Introduction to Nameless Love” was a hypnagogic visitation of scrolling, swirling messages. Meticulously soldered tin letters arranged into text-based sculptures featuring quotes culled from diverse sources, an astonishing floor of charcoal cubes, and spooky lighting formed a moving tribute to socially uncelebrated, rarely described, life-sustaining kinds of love.



Dapper Bruce Lafitte, *Anti Lie*, 2020, ink on paper, 12 x 9”.

4. MICHAELA COEL, I MAY DESTROY YOU (HBO)

Writer-director-star Coel's harrowing and entertaining series is an ambitious, unsimplified post-#MeToo narrative depicting the knotted traumas of rape, racism, and millennial precarity. But most remarkable may be its nuanced representation of a friend group, an emotional ecosystem disrupted by her activist-influencer protagonist as she's goaded off the rails by social-media solidarity and is denied justice IRL.

5. RAYYANE TABET (METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK; CURATED BY KIM BENZEL AND CLARE DAVIES)

I hope the museum does more shows like this one. "Alien Property" engages beautifully with the Met's collection and the fraught provenances of its ancient objects. The artist's family connection to the 1920s excavation of stone reliefs from the ninth century BCE at the archaeological site Tell Halaf in Syria is used as an entry point for another, deeper excavation in this brilliant, understated project.

6. ELISABETH KLEY AND TABBOO! (GORDON ROBICHAUX, NEW YORK)

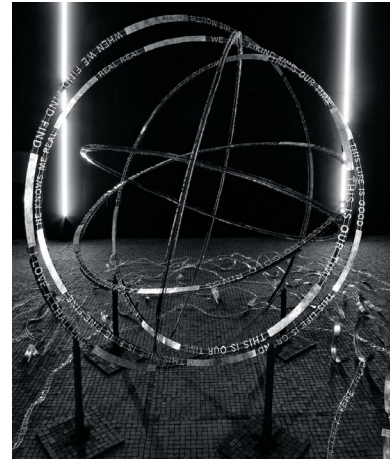
The friends' collaborative installation "Garden" was literally Edenic. (Perhaps it's no coincidence the show dates from the halcyon days of late 2019.) Kley's roughly rendered black-and-white ceramics, architectural murals, and functional fountains offset Tabboo!'s graceful, botanical, and glorious ultrasaturated bird paintings, transforming this reliably superb young gallery into an oasis.

7. JANE ROSENBERG, COURTROOM SKETCH OF STEVE BANNON'S ARRAIGNMENT

Whatever happens between the writing of this text and December 1, we will always have this: fascist grifter Bannon, in cuffs and a surgical mask, facing charges related to his fraudulent We Build the Wall crowdfunding campaign. Seasoned courtroom illustrator Jane Rosenberg could not help but channel Otto Dix, capturing Bannon's signature beneath-contemptness with blinding, blasé slashes of pasty white in a likeness destined to go viral.

8. WOMAN WITH CHEESECAKE FACTORY CHEESECAKE

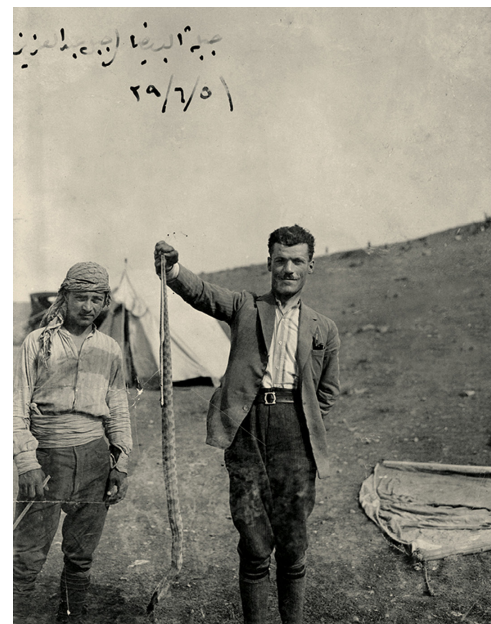
Perhaps the opposite of gifting is looting, at least this year. The unnamed Seattle protester walking in the rain with an undamaged strawberry cheesecake might not be an artist, but she's a peerless aesthete and imagemaker here. The small, delicious heist shown in the footage evokes that week's more spectacular events (for example, a Minneapolis police



Jonathan Berger, *Untitled* (Tina Beebe, Barbara Fahs Charles, Robert Staples, and Michael Wiener, with Matthew Brannon)/*Untitled* (My Name Is Ray, by Michael Stipe), 2019, tin, nickel. Installation view, Participant Inc, New York. Photo: Mark Waldhauser.



I May Destroy You, 2020–, still from a TV show on HBO. Season 1, episode 3. Arabella (Michaela Coel) and Terry (Weruche Opia).



Faik Borkhoche holding a snake, Tell Halaf, Syria, June 5, 1929. Photo: Max von Oppenheim.

precinct aflame), giving a more intimate view of the wonder and joy of a terrible time.

9. LEGACY RUSSELL, GLITCH FEMINISM (VERSO)

Incantatory auto-theory speeds this manifesto through an array of artworks, Black and trans subcultures, and concepts, using the metaphor of the digital glitch as a prism. As a counter to surveillance capitalism, violent binarism, and white (cyber)feminism. Russell proposes—and gives electrifying examples of—the generative sabotage of the glitched body. It’s spellbinding.

10. JACOLBY SATTERWHITE (MITCHELL-INNES & NASH, NEW YORK)

Satterwhite’s strangely tender, Black, queer, dystopian cosmos grows in scope and detail all the time. An epic installation in 2019 at Brooklyn’s Pioneer Works proved his multimedia practice—which includes video, virtual reality, 3D-printed sculptures, and gorgeous contemplative techno music—to be boundless, and his recent, smaller gallery show was a stunning coda. The latter’s poignant, oracular title, “We Are in Hell When We Hurt Each Other,” is perhaps the best spiritual takeaway from what has been frankly a hell of a year.

Johanna Fateman is a writer, an art critic, and a co-owner of Seagull Salon in New York. She is a contributing editor of Artforum.



View of “Elisabeth Kley and Tabboo!: Garden,” 2019, Gordon Robichaux, New York. Wall, from left: Tabboo!, Orange Bird on Blue, 2019; Tabboo!, Garden, 2019; Tabboo!, untitled works, 2018. Floor: Elisabeth Kley, Fountain with Arches and Nautilus Border, 2019. Photo: Gregory Carideo.



Jane Rosenberg’s courtroom sketch of Steve Bannon during his arraignment hearing, Manhattan Federal Court. Photo: Reuters/Jane Rosenberg.



Still from KIRO 7 News of a protester in Seattle, May 30, 2020.



Jacolby Satterwhite, *Black Luncheon*, 2020, animated neon, 84 x 88”.