

Globe Review

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

2009
VISUAL ARTS

BY SARAH MILROY



Big splashes in small ponds

Major museums played it safe in '09, letting the little guys steal the show

2009 IN REVIEW

A look at the year that was in arts and entertainment.

MON. DEC. 21
 Dance, by Paula Citron

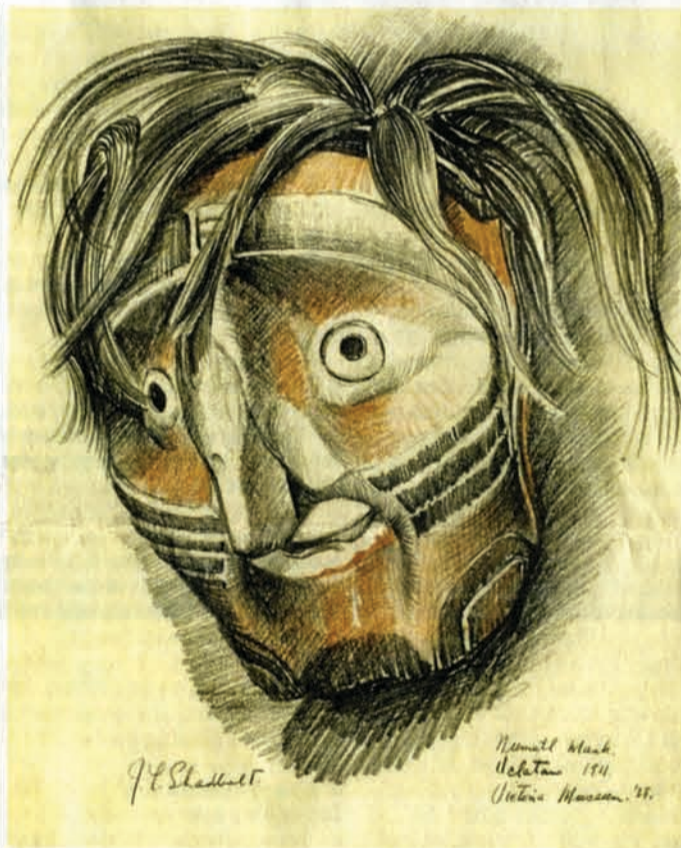
TUES. DEC. 22
 Film, by Liam Lacey

WED. DEC. 23
 Music, by Robert Everett-Green

SAT. DEC. 26
 Architecture, by Lisa Rochon

YESTERDAY
 Theatre by J. Kelly Nestruck

YESTERDAY
 Books, by John Barber

TOMORROW
 Television, by John Doyle


Other notable works of 2009

STAN DOUGLAS, *Artist's Cabin*: An interior view of the hideaway homestead of seminal artist and poet Al Neil, the photograph conjures a sacred spot in the cultural landscape of British Columbia.

MARK LEWIS's *Cold Morning* and *TD Centre, 54th Floor*: This pair of projections, shown at the Venice Biennale in June, were a testament to the bitter have and have-not extremes played out in Toronto's urban core, capturing by turns the reality of homelessness and the lofty detachment of corporate privilege.

GARETH MOORE, *Uncertain Pilgrimage*: A consummate expression of Vancouver's ever-stronger tradition of hobo bricolage, this installation at Catriona Jeffries Gallery included seeds gathered on Donald Judd's Marfa art compound in the Texas desert, and a walking cane retrofitted as a cigarette case.

PASCAL GRANDMAISON, *Untitled* from the series *The Inverted Ghost*: Modulating from his customary Apollonian restraint to a new tone of queasy horror, this new image of eyeballs embedded in a sea of blue-fingering ooze signals an abrupt and intriguing change for one of Canada's foremost emerging artists.

» S.M.

TOP: Watercolours by Tim Gardner were among the savvy mix of artworks on show at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver.

COURTESY OF 303 GALLERY, NEW YORK

BOTTOM: An exhibition of works on paper by Jack Shadbolt, at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at UBC, was an important contribution to British Columbia's art history.

It's a fall afternoon and I'm sitting in the front row of a performance of *Black and Tan*, choreographed by the legendary 84-year-old Québécoise multimedia artist Françoise Sullivan. The dancer, Ginette Boutin, is performing a work that seems to release all the savagery of the north wind, due any day. Dancing in her bare feet in front of canvases of Jean-Paul Riopelle, Paul-Émile Borduas and their confreres (and consœurs),

Boutin wears a costume duplicating the one originally designed for Sullivan by artist Jean-Paul Mousseau in 1948 – a combination of burlap, rope, string and swaths of paint laid on in bold, vigorous strokes. Sullivan sits watching, a few seats away from me, her face a study in satisfaction. Her dance is about seduction, survival, tenacity and joy. This is the spirit of Quebec automatism brought to life. It's a very Canadian moment. Watching

it, I feel a kind of pride and wonder.

Then I remember where I am: the Varley Art Gallery in Markham, Ont., a small, semi-rural bedroom community of Toronto that sits about as far from the pretensions of trendy Queen Street, VIP art galas and "contemporary cultural discourse" as it is possible to be. How is it that I am having my most important Canadian art experience of 2009 here?

» SEE 'VISUAL ARTS' PAGE 2

ART » PRODIGY

A small fry drawing in the big bucks

His last exhibition of paintings sold out in 14 minutes. He's 7 years old

BY PATRICK BARKHAM HOLT, NORFOLK

Kieron Williamson kneels on the wooden bench in his small kitchen, takes a pastel from the box by his side and rubs it on to a piece of paper.

"Have you got a picture in your head of what you're going to do?" asks his mother, Michelle.

"Yep," Kieron nods. "A snow scene."

Because it is winter at the moment? I ask.

"Yep."

Do you know how you want it to come out?

"Yep."

And does it come out how you want it to?

"Sometimes it does."

Like many great artists, small boys are not renowned for their loquaciousness.



Starting price for a simple pastel picture by Williamson is £900.
GRAHAM TURNER/GUARDIAN

While Kieron Williamson is a very normal seven-year-old who uses his words sparingly, what slowly emerges on the small rectangle of paper in his kitchen is extraordinarily eloquent.

This month, Kieron's second exhibition in a gallery in his home town of Holt, Norfolk, in eastern England, sold out in 14 minutes. The sale of 16 new paintings swelled his bank account by £18,200 (\$30,000). There are now 680 people on a waiting-list for a Kieron original. Art lovers have driven from London to buy his work; agents buzz around the town; people offer to buy his schoolbooks. The starting price for a simple pastel picture like the one Kieron is sketching is £900 (about \$1,500).

Kieron lives with his dad Keith, a former electrician, his mother, who is training to be a nutritionist, and Billie-Jo, his little sister, in a small flat overlooking a petrol station. When I arrive on a Saturday afternoon, Kieron and Keith are out. When Kieron returns in football socks and shorts, I assume he has been playing football. But no, he has been replenishing his stock of pastels in Holt, a chichi little place where even the chip shop has grainy portraits for sale on its walls.

» SEE 'PRODIGY' PAGE 3

INSIDE » THEATRE » REVIEW

WHO'S AFRAID OF ALBEE?

Not this gang. Three hours of malicious fights, backstabbing, and word games have never been so much fun

Page 3 »



Kevin McNulty, Gabrielle Rose, Craig Erickson and Meg Roe star in a Vancouver production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

FROM PAGE 1 » VISUAL ARTS

The year small and smart bested big and shallow

As it turns out, most of my big experiences of this year were like this. With the major museums gasping for cash like whales beached on a dropping economic tide, and the federal government tightening the reins on culture spending, it was the little fish that were still swishing their tails and swimming free.

Sure, the big museums had their moments. At the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the exhibition *Expanding Horizons: Painting and Photography of American and Canadian Landscape, 1860 to 1918* was a solid undertaking; and the superb summer show honouring the memory of Betty Goodwin at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal was delicately installed and deeply moving.

I enjoyed the eccentricity of our 2009 pre-Raphaelite moment, with British painters J.W. Waterhouse at the MMFA and Holman Hunt at the Art Gallery of Ontario (the site, as well, of a marvellous small show of hallucinatory sculptures and photo works by Winnipegger Sarah Ann Johnson). Photo artist Scott McFarland at the National Gallery of Canada was snazzy and timely. (The Berninis weren't bad either.) And the Vancouver Art Gallery kept things current and surprising with an Andreas Gursky mega-show, and solo exhibitions by B.C. up-and-comers Reece Terris (who choked the central staircase of the museum with a faux apartment block) and DVD light-box artist Owen Kydd.

But the real energy in the Canadian scene largely shifted this year. Many of the country's liveliest curator/directors have what some people may consider CVs in reverse thrust: They've opted for the freedom of the smaller venues over the cumbersome bureaucracy of the larger institutions they left behind. There's Barbara Fischer, formerly of the Power Plant and the Art Gallery of Ontario, who has briskly remade the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto's Hart House into an essential part of the Toronto art ecology. Its show *Noise Ghost: Shuvina Ashoona and Shary Boyle* shook things up, presenting the art of Cape Dorset alongside that of Toronto, revealing kindred imaginative cosmologies. This is Canadian content pitched with real sophistication.

There's Christina Ritchie at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, balancing the best from Canada with the odd well-chosen foreign visitor in a savvy mix. I caught its summer show of watercolours by Tim Gardner (depicting the artist and his tree-hugger friends palling around in nature) and ironic sculptures on woodland themes by Quebec City collective BGL. (I particularly enjoyed the pink plastic bonfire in their ersatz wilderness.)



Among the few great moments at a big museum this year was a superb summer show honouring the memory of Betty Goodwin at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

And out at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia, director Scott Watson made the most important contribution to the province's art history this year with a comprehensive exhibition of Jack Shadbolt's varied and impressive works on paper.

There's the oracular Philip Monk, reigning from his remote perch at the Art Gallery of York University (also an alumnus of both the Power Plant and the AGO), apparently as happy as a clam in the modernist gulag, so long as he can have the freedom to pursue what interests him. This year's General Idea show (a painstaking reconstitution of two landmark GI shows from the seventies) was a strategic, high-impact reincarnation of recent Canadian art history, while Monk's exhibition of new work by Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins, earlier in the season, marked the emerging Toronto couple's best work to date.

In Montreal, the little Galerie de l'UQAM hit new high notes under the continuing direction of Louise Déry, one of Canada's most insightful curator/directors. This year, she presented a marvellous boutique exhibition of acclaimed Austrian artist Erwin Wurm and a show featuring the New York-based feminist collective Guerrilla Girls. The space has become required viewing.

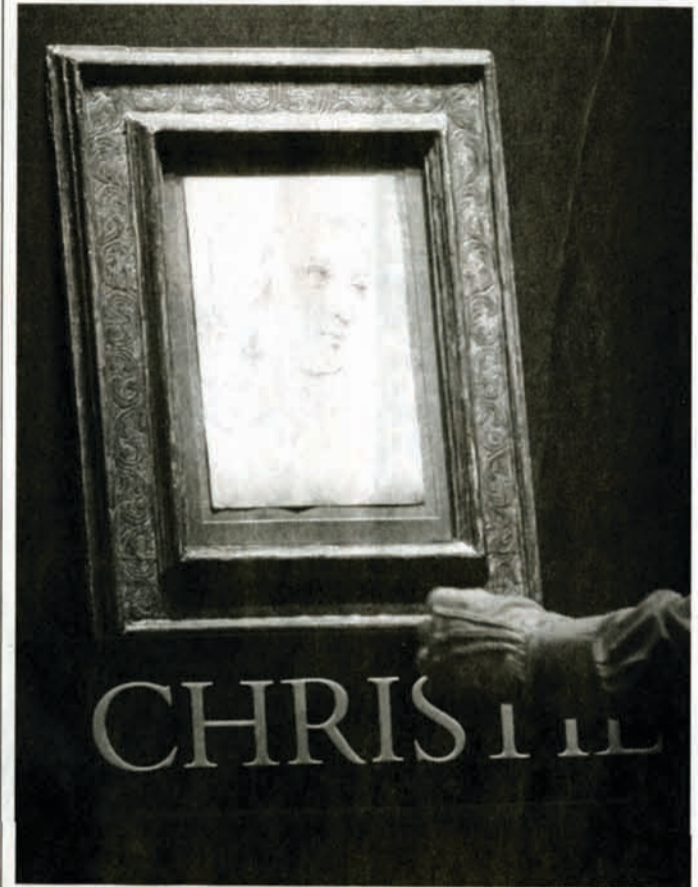
There's more. Wayne Baerwaldt at the Alberta College of Art + Design's Illingworth Kerr Gallery. Kitty Scott at the Walter J. Phillips Gallery in Banff, Alta. Reid Shier at Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver. Mercer Union, one of Toronto's venerable artist-run spaces, revitalized under the leadership of Elaine Gaito and Sarah Robayo Sheridan. What's going on here?

These people are settling happily in the smaller venues because the big museums are tending increasingly to stick

to safe, shallow ground. But their safe, shallow shows are also expensive to mount and market, and big audiences are a must. It makes for a diabolical game of chicken and egg (which came first, the deficit or the inflated marketing budget?), with programming losing bravura, depth and meaning along the way. Instead of curatorial staff pioneering inquiry and experimentation, curatorial administrivia takes hold.

Things have been trending this way in Canada for years, but in 2009 — with the economic downturn and the constraints that came with it — it suddenly seems written all over the walls. Our bigger institutions in Canada by and large no longer reflect the intelligence, ambition and insight of our country's best art professionals. How might those museums, once more, become hospitable to curators of talent, imagination and drive? That's something to think about for 2010.

The Top 10 gavel landings of 2009



Raphael's *Head of a Muse* sold at Christie's London for \$47.6-million (U.S.), the highest price for a work at auction in 2009. MATT DUNHAM/AP

While the art market shrank in 2009, many individual artworks achieved strong results at auction. Here are the year's Top 10 sales:

1. Raphael's chalk drawing *Head of a Muse* sold for £29.2-million (\$47.6-million U.S. at the time) at Christie's London on Dec. 8, setting an auction record for a work of art on paper. It was bought on the telephone, dealers said, by U.S.-based collector Leon Black, chief executive of Apollo Global Management LLC and a trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.
2. Henri Matisse's 1911 still life of cowslips, *Les coucoux, tapis bleu et rose*, from the collection of late couturier Yves Saint Laurent and his partner Pierre Berge, fetched €35.9-million (\$45.6-million), an artist record, at a Christie's Paris auction on Feb. 23. The buyer was New York-based dealer Franck Giraud.
3. Andy Warhol's 1962 silkscreen painting of 200 one-dollar bills sold for \$43.8-million at Sotheby's New York on Nov. 11.
4. Constantin Brancusi's wooden sculpture *Madame L.R. (Portrait de Mme L.R.)*, dated 1914-17, raised €29.2-million (\$37.1-million) at Christie's Feb. 23 auction in Paris, from the collection of Saint Laurent and Berge.
5. Rembrandt's 1658 *Portrait of a Man with Arms Akimbo* sold for £20.2-million (\$32.9-million) to a telephone bidder, later identified as Las Vegas casino developer Steve Wynn. The painting was sold by Johnson & Johnson heiress Barbara Piasecka Johnson at Christie's London on Dec. 8.
6. An Art Deco armchair with lacquered wood arms shaped as dragons, by designer Eileen Gray, raised €21.9-million (\$28.1-million), more than 10 times its low estimate at Christie's Paris. The work, from the collection of Saint Laurent and Berge, established an auction record for 20th-century design.
7. Piet Mondrian's 1922 abstract *Composition avec bleu, rouge, jaune et noir* fetched €21.6-million (\$27.4-million) at Christie's Paris; from the collection of Saint Laurent and Berge.
8. A Ming-dynasty scroll by Wu Bin made 170-million yuan (\$25-million) at Poly International Auction Co. in Beijing in November. Shanghai-based collector and stock investor Liu Yiqian bought the work.
9. Alberto Giacometti's figure of a falling man, *L'Homme Qui Chavire*, sold by Condé Nast chairman S. I. Newhouse Jr., fetched \$19.4-million at Sotheby's New York on Nov. 4.
10. Edgar Degas's bronze sculpture, *Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans* (1922) sold for £13.3-million (\$19.2-million) at Sotheby's London on Feb. 3.

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