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Clockwise from top: Nancy Grossman, *T. Y. V. L.*; Willem de Kooning, *Woman I*; Marilyn Minter, *Playpen*

Best (and worst) of 2011

In a year that saw stellar shows of modern-art second bananas and theme park rides as art, there were plenty of highs and lows. By **Howard Halle**

THE BEST

1 "De Kooning: A Retrospective" at the Museum of Modern Art MoMA barely bought any work by Willem de Kooning in his lifetime, but the museum more than made up for past slights with this magnificent survey, revealing him as a talent with greater painterly gifts than his AbEx contemporary Jackson Pollock. Striking a balance between pure abstraction and the figurative tradition of Western art, De Kooning was at once the quintessential New York School figure and an apostate; an artist, in other words, for the ages.

2 "Georges Braque: Pioneer of Modernism" at Acquavella Galleries As De Kooning's retro dragged him out from under Pollock's shadow, this museum-quality survey threw a spotlight on Georges Braque, beta to that alpha of alphas, Pablo Picasso. Among other things, the exhibit made a convincing case that Braque authored the invention of collage, perhaps the singular most important development in 20th-century art. But it also showed a deeply cerebral, methodical artist, whose work left many pictorial mysteries to be unlocked by future generations.

3 Christian Marclay, *The Clock* at Paula Cooper Gallery *Masterpiece* isn't a word to be casually tossed around, but it's hard not to ascribe it to Marclay's 24-hour video, in which movie-land snippets of clocks and watches chronologically depict the minutes of an entire day. A musician-turned-artist, Marclay has long been fascinated with time, but with *The Clock*, he transformed literalness into metaphorical transport, examining our fascination with cinema—which Jean-Luc Godard called truth at 24 frames a second—and its entwining with our lives.

4 David Hammons at L&M Arts Hammons's lyrically abstract canvases, obscured by drop cloths, plastic trash bags and pieces of discarded furniture, subjected the idea of painting to a sort of passive-aggressive defacement, robbing the luxury items of the 1 percent with the detritus usually associated with the very bottom of the 99. Evoking everything from Jackson Pollock's late peekaboo abstractions to Klu Klux Klan hoods, the work interrogated race and class in America with Hammons's usual eloquence, soulfulness and understanding of lived experience.

5 "Lynda Benglis" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art This long-overdue reassessment of

Benglis's 40-year career made it clear that her work was so much more than her infamous 1974 *Artforum* ad in which she posed nude with a double-ended dildo between her legs. An artist who refused to accept limits or categories, Benglis imbued late-1960s–early-'70s video, performance and process art with her ambition to transcend dualities: masculine and feminine, abstraction and representation, culture and nature, chance and intent.

6 Sean Landers at Marianne Boesky Gallery and Friedrich Petzel Gallery Landers's brand of bad-boy art has included forays into video and sculpture, which is probably why his efforts in paint have often been eclipsed by his Yale grad-school compadres John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage and Richard Phillips. But in this gallery doubleheader, Landers presented a 1996 series that took the pictorial piss out of William Hogarth, as well as new paintings depicting circus-clown ship captains navigating the treacherous seas of life—proving that Landers is no slouch with a brush.

7 Marilyn Minter at Salon 94 Bowery Minter entered her silver age with these ultra-slo-mo videos and billboard-size paintings, featuring

images of babies and close-ups of feet in high heels splashing through puddles of aluminum paint. Luxuriant and decadent, the work continued Minter's cautionary investigation of our never-ending cultural obsession with glamour and beauty.

8 "Martin Ramirez, 'Landscapes'" at Ricco Maresca Gallery The Picasso of outsider art, who spent more than 30 years of his life in mental institutions, resurfaced in this show of landscapes culled from the two troves of his work: the drawings known at the time of his 2007 American Folk Art Museum retrospective, and those that were subsequently discovered in a California garage—all characterized by the patterns of undulating lines that have become Ramirez's signature. And like those lines, the exhibit as a whole was hypnotic.

9 "Nancy Grossman: Heads" at MoMA PS1 Begun partly as a protest against the Vietnam War, Nancy Grossman's series of heads completely covered in leather seemed as campy as they were sinister at MoMA PS1, especially in the way they managed to both evoke and send up S&M, as well as such tangential issues as misogyny. Robotic yet organic, they were powerful as symbols of the inhumanity that can be found sometimes at the core of the human condition.

10 "George Condo: Mental States" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art This three-decade survey of New York painter George Condo and his patented mash-up of cartoony figuration, Old Master technique and High Modernist tropes

PHOTOGRAPHS: GROSSMAN: COLLECTION OF HALLEY K. HARRISBURG AND MICHAEL ROSENFELD; NEW YORK, NY: DE KOONING: THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART; NEW YORK, NY: MARCLAY: PURCHASE; © 2011 THE WILLEM DE KOONING FOUNDATION / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS); NEW YORK, NY: MINTER: COURTESY SALON 94; NEW YORK, NY: HAMMONS: COURTESY L&M ARTS; NEW YORK, NY: LANDERS: COURTESY MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY AND FRIEDRICH PETZEL GALLERY; NEW YORK, NY: BENGELIS: COURTESY NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART; NEW YORK, NY: CONDO: COURTESY NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART