

Best art of 2010 found in unlikely places

River North wasn't a quality nexus this year

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Looking back at the year in Chicago's gallery scene, three things come to mind.

First, the art community is capitalizing on our downtrodden economy. The ample supply of vacant and/or cheap real estate, has meant an increase in both thoughtful new spaces with potential for longevity, and shoddily thrown-together art parties barely worth the free PBR. Here's hoping the new year brings more of the former and less of the latter.

Second, artists are as prolific as ever. Perhaps it's another result of the economy (high unemployment yielding free time), but we'll take it — especially if it leads to a surplus of new work.

Finally, we're champing at the bit for a professional cash-prize art contest. Our trial-run was October's uneven **Art Loop Open**, co-sponsored by **Chicago Artists' Coalition** and **Chicago Loop Alliance**, whose tribulations sealed its fate as one of the our most talked-about events of the year. When it returns in 2011 (ideally with the kinks worked out), artists will be ready.

Meanwhile, exhibitions at galleries of all shapes and sizes proved to be worth seeing -- and not one of my favorites came from the city's staid River North gallery district. This year, the best shows popped up in the least likely of places.

Wicker Park has a new gem in **Johalla Projects** (1561 N. Milwaukee Ave., johallaprojects.com), the prolific, year-old, artist-run space located a stone's throw from the increasingly vacant **Flatiron Building**. Johalla hosted standout shows by up-and-comer **Montgomery Perry Smith**, as well as the ridiculously well-attended "Chicago Aldermen Project: 50 Aldermen/50 Artists," which has since yielded hopeful collaborations with the CTA (including a Damen Blue Line installation set for early 2011) and a growing list of neighborhoods.

Down the street, the newly launched **LVL3** live-work space (1542 N. Milwaukee Ave., 323-216-0631; lvl3gallery.com) is refreshingly less apartment, more gallery, and ended the year on a positive note with a group show aptly named "Goodbye Turquoise." At the edge of the arty-again 'hood, apartment-gallery **Lloyd Dobler** (1545 W. Division St., 312-961-8706; lloyddoblergallery.com) rang in the autumn openings with a pitch-perfect installation by **Dan Gunn**. We're likely to see more of both Smith and Gunn in 2011, if curators play their cards right.

The West Loop continues to thrive with a gang of solid galleries at the crossroads of Washington Boulevard and Peoria Street. **Kavi Gupta Gallery** remained a steadfast destination (835 W. Washington Blvd., 312-432-0708; kavigupta.com) with drool-worthy shows by **Angel Otero**, **Chris Johanson** and **Curtis Mann** (which is up through Dec. 30, and recommended). **Western Exhibitions** (119 N. Peoria St., 312-480-8390; westernexhibitions.com) smartly spotlighted both **Miller & Shellabarger** and **Deb Sokolow** in solo shows (Sokolow is up through Dec. 31), but teased with just a glimpse of outstanding work by **Rachel Niffenegger**, who deserves more. (Niffenegger's work will be featured in a Jim Nutt companion show opening at the Museum of Contemporary Art on Jan. 29.) Another favorite underdog of 2010: **EC Gallery** (which shares its 215 N. Aberdeen St. storefront with **Kasia Kay Art Projects**), which consistently presents tiny, beautiful shows that underscore the important existence of working artists. On view through Jan. 15 is a lovely little show by Richard Blackwell.

Northeastern Illinois University's modest **Fine Arts Center Gallery** (5500 N. St. Louis Ave., 773-442-4944; neiu.edu/gallery) played host to more than a few good shows (among the best was **Amy Sacksteder's** "We Are Running ...," inspired by Amelia Earhart's final words), while the University of Illinois at Chicago's consistently well-curated **Gallery 400** (400 S. Peoria St., 312-996-6114; uic.edu/aa/college/gallery400) continued to impress, from **Andy Moore's** enormous book of "John's Luv" to **Steve Reinke's** "Tiny Ventriloquist" (on view through Dec. 18). Columbia's **A+D Gallery** (619 S. Wabash St., 312-369-8687; colum.edu/adgallery) sparkled with "**Let There Be Geo**," but left us scratching our heads after a glimpse at "**X-Treme Studio**." Here's hoping the next show, curated by Anchor Graphics, kicks off A+D's new year well.

There were oldies but goodies. Early in the year, legendary local photojournalist **Art Shay** displayed his "True Colors" at **Thomas Masters Gallery** (245 W. North Ave., 312-440-2322; thomasmastersgallery.com) with rare snapshots of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and then some. (A second Shay show is on view through Thursday) **Ox-Bow** celebrated its centennial (via nicely dovetailed shows at **Corbett vs. Dempsey** and **Roots & Culture**) with rarely seen prints by giants like **Claes Oldenburg**. And **The Suburban** celebrated its 10th anniversary with a hefty 1,200-page catalog of projects past, among them **Luc Tuymans** and **Tyson Reeder**. The dual-gallery venue (125 N. Harvey Ave., Oak Park, 708-763-8554; thesuburban.org) is booked through 2011 with shows from the likes of **Sara Greenberger Rafferty**, **Ruth Root** and a dozen more.

Collage proved itself at the **Chicago Tourism Center**, and vintage silkscreens resurfaced in Bridgeport thanks to **Jason Pickleman** and **Co-**

Prosperity Sphere (3219-21 S. Morgan St., 773-837-0145; coprosperitysphere.org). Running took on new life as an art form via **Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba's** fascinating "Breathing is Free: 12,756.3," which landed at the School of the Art Institute's **Betty Rymer Gallery** (280 S. Columbus Dr., 312-629-6635) last winter. And when things warmed up, curious onlookers were invited to witness "30 Days of Dinner Time" via **Kimmy Noonan's** quixotic voyeuristic performance art series at **Art on Armitage** (4125 W. Armitage Ave., artonarmitage.com).

What's more, everything mentioned was free to see, as will be whatever lands at our galleries in 2011.

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