

ARTFORUM

Beau Rutland on the best exhibitions in 2012

I'M TEMPTED HERE to list off some of the great monographic undertakings of 2012. They were certainly satisfying, but the year's instances of artists refusing to supply demand seem to be more memorable in the end.

What should have been a staid pairing of two bastions of art history, "Rembrandt and Dégas" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art left a surprisingly earnest impression of the young modernist, who defied academic standards by looking to the Dutch master's penumbral canvases for inspiration. The resulting exhibition included several self-portraits of a vulnerable artist worried over what he would amount to. To bring the (valid) cliché into the present, one can imagine young painters today being forced to reckon with anti-painting authority Michael Krebber or David Joselit's essays, deciding instead to look further back as a way of going forward.

Or, facing such pressures, one could always take the "deal with it!" approach. Whitney Clafin's solo exhibition at Thomas Erben, "As Long As You Get To Be Somebody's Slave, Too" debuted brash new abstractions by the painter. Barraged by feminine signifiers (bobby pins, a spandex dress, eyeshadow), varnished-on text, and thin staccato brushstrokes, Clafin's paintings offered up a self-aware notion of identity at uncomfortably close range. By marching unabashedly forward with an affable humor, the show suggests a certain determination and comfort in making an abstract painting this far into the medium's history.

As I was walking recently through MoMA's painting and sculpture galleries, the glint of a George Platt Lynes photograph caught me off guard—the backside of the lithe ephebe inspecting a Pavel Tchelitchew work didn't quite fit. "Artist's Choice: Trisha Donnelly," to which the displacement belongs, breathed fresh life into the museological apparatus, halting the narrative the institution labors to achieve. In this configuration, Futurism gives way not to Kandinsky but to Eliot Porter's mystifying and somehow uplifting jewel-toned avian portraits. Further along, Donnelly tightly packs a gallery with works depicting both human and natural subjects, all achingly familiar and easily resonant. "All of these works feel necessary to me. Each one is an epic entity," she states in the wall text. Donnelly's tightly wound installation reminds us that the previous capacious galleries had been filled with exclusions, both historical and social. Certain images, especially now in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, whether logs floating precariously close to low-hanging power lines or wave patterns in rippling water, evince a humanism seldom seen in this rarefied space. That Donnelly is able to provoke and awaken with the work of others speaks to the strengths of her associative practice and perhaps the fragility of this moment.

Beau Rutland is an art historian and curator based in New York.