

Anne Barnes

Stuart Steck, Academic Advisor

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Art-wise

One of the advantages to living in a major metropolitan area like Washington, DC, is the easy accessibility to the (mostly free) art institutions situated along the city's historic Mall, as well as to the museums and galleries that are available by a short car or train ride to other cities nearby such as Baltimore, New York, and Philadelphia. Still, even with the ostensible convenience, there have been many times over the past years that "life" seems to have gotten in the way, and before I knew it, I had missed seeing something important art-wise.

Indeed, when it comes to art related activities—from exhibits, to artist talks, to gallery openings, to fundraisers—there is something I could probably be doing almost every night of the week. And while I have definitely *not* been filling up my calendar quite that much, I have vowed since starting my pursuit of an MFA in Visual Arts, that I would definitely not allow myself to miss anything of importance again. Fortunately, it seems that so far, I have done an admirable job at keeping myself accountable on the subject, and over the last few months I have managed to experience an interesting and vast array of art.

To name some of what I have seen since January of this year: In February there was Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Pulse* at the Hirshhorn in Washington, DC, and Hilma af Klint's *Paintings for the Future* at the Guggenheim in New York City; In March there was Zilia Sanchez's *Soy Isla (I am an Island)* and Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration Series*, at the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC; In April there was the Louise Bourgeois exhibit *To Unravel a Torment* at Glenstone in Potomac, MD, the Freer/Sackler's *Empresses of China's Forbidden*

City: 1644-1912, and Ursula von Rydingsvard's *The Contour of Feeling* at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC, as well as a gallery tour and a visit to the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, MD; Finally in May, so far I have visited Meow Wolf's *House of Eternal Return*, and the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, NM. And all of that is not even counting the other local gallery pop-ups, openings, and artist talks that I have attended over the past months as well. Needless to say, not only have I been extremely busy, but the sheer quantity and quality of art that I have consumed over the past few months, also makes it very difficult for me to pick just one experience to write about.

Originally, it seemed that the obvious choice would have to be the blockbuster Hilma af Klint exhibit. After all, she was a women abstract painter who was making her “radically abstracted paintings . . . [that] were like little that had been seen before . . . untethered from recognizable references to the physical world.”¹ And she did this in 1906, many years before other European artists like Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian would cover similar territory, and at least *three decades* before the American Abstract Expressionist artists in New York City were breaking new ground along similar themes. Yet, af Klint rarely showed her work, and “convinced the world was not yet ready to understand” her art, she stipulated that it not be shown until at least 25 years after her death. Of course, as a women abstract painter myself, not only did her work speak to me from a creative standpoint—indeed her bright color palette, work that addressed color theory and more intuitive abstraction, echo my own interests. But I also strongly identify with her work from the feminine perspective, and quite frankly, I am a little peeved that she has been left out of the art-historical conversation until now.

¹ Information about Hilma af Klint was taken from the wall labels and catalogue to the exhibit *Paintings for the Future*, that was on display at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City from October 12, 2018 through April 23, 2019.

But then, I went to the wonderful private galleries at Glenstone² and my allegiance quickly turned towards the small, but lovely, Louise Bourgeois exhibit *'To Unravel a Torment.'*³ It was clear from her work, that she was not only an artist with plenty of moxie, as evidenced by both her creative concepts (she wasn't afraid to make *big* phallic references), as well as through the sheer variety of mediums in which she worked (there were paintings; sculptures made of wood, metal, plaster and stone; needlepoint; fabric pieces; artist books; collections of glass; and installation rooms). But I was also moved by her ability to admit vulnerability through her work. In one of her installation "rooms" she had embroidered on the sheets of a small bed "I need my memories they are my documents" and "Art is the guarantee of sanity," both of which were seemingly odes to her art practice and its preoccupations with her past. The exhibit ended with a series of large paintings on paper entitled *I Give Everything Away* that were made in 2010 the year of Bourgeois' death, which encompassed hand scrawled notes on them that combined seem to be a goodbye letter of sorts:

I give everything away

I distance myself from myself

From what I love most

I leave my home

² Glenstone is a private art museum that was first opened in 2006 by Mitchell and Emily Rales on the grounds of their home in Potomac, MD. What originally consisted of one gallery building and outdoor sculpture space, has now been transformed into a sprawling 230-acre campus of buildings to showcase their private modern art collection, all of which is open and free to the public (with a reservation). The Rales's collection is now up to 1,300 objects and it is considered by many to "be one of the greatest private collections of American and European contemporary art in the country." (Edgers 7-19)

³ Louise Bourgeois *'To Unravel a Torment'* has been on display at Glenstone since May 2018 and will be there through June 30, 2019. The exhibit "features five decades of the trailblazing work of the French-born American artist, whose formal innovation and fearless explorations of her own personal history make her an icon of late-20th-century art. There are nearly 30 works by Bourgeois (1911–2010), all from the museum's collection, on display." From the website: www.glenstone.org/art/exhibition/louise-bourgeois/

I am packing my bags

I leave the nest⁴

The exhibit ended with a small white marble sculpture *The Curved House*, also made in 2010 and supposedly—as told to me by the docent that was on duty the day that I visited—the very last artifact that Bourgeois ever made. *The Curved House*'s smooth simplicity appears to be the somber ending punctuation to Bourgeois' creative legacy. A small, but solid monument to her life.

Finally, I do not think I could finish this paper without addressing the *House of Eternal Return*, which is an experiential installation exhibit by the artist collective known as Meow Wolf.⁵ The issue I have with doing this though, is that the more I think about it, the harder it is to come up with the proper words to accurately describe the experience that is the *House of Eternal Return*. And I am starting to think that *wordlessness* might be one of the main points all together. You really just have to experience the *House of Eternal Return* in order to understand it, and even then, you may still not “get it.” Furthermore, I think you would need to go back multiple times in order to process everything that it possesses. It is a “total immersion” experience (van Rheeneh 57). The best I can do is to say, that it may be more akin to the Disney World of art themed amusements, than to an art museum's galleries.

After all, this is not an installation of what one would consider to be “high art.” But instead is a smorgasbord of wildly imaginative creative output produced by multiple artists, that

⁴ I am guessing at the order in which Bourgeois intended these to be hung and read (or even if she had that intention at all) because one of the docents indicated that the paintings were hung slightly out of “order” due to size restrictions in the gallery. I have listed them as they were hung in the Glenstone gallery for this exhibit.

⁵ Meow Wolf has grown from a group of loosely connected artists who funded themselves “through grants, donations and ticket sales,” into a for-profit collaborative art collective that has investors and a CEO/founder, Vince Kadlubek. The *House of Eternal Return* is Meow Wolf's first permanent installation that was opened in 2016, and it has plans for installations in other cities including Las Vegas and Denver (van Rheeneh 54-56).

encompasses all art mediums “high” and “low,” and is housed under the umbrella of a loosely themed fictional family and their home. The house and its initial contents (which you are encouraged to touch and interact with) seems to have been suddenly and inexplicably abandoned by its inhabitants, and upon inspection provides multiple portals into the otherworld that lays behind. These new worlds provide a kaleidoscope of psychedelic imagery, color, and sound that seems to go on forever. How you experience and interpret all of these elements is totally up to you. The options are seemingly limitless, and at times slightly overwhelming.

From the artist’s perspective, the freedom to follow your creative whims in this way, must have been intoxicating. This element, combined with the ability that the Meow Wolf collective provides artists to support themselves with their art, are probably its most enduring features.

I also wonder, could this type of “art” be the closest entity to avant-garde art that there can be in today’s materialistic, high priced art world? While Meow Wolf is definitely benefiting financially from the endeavor, nothing about these works is precious and considering the “wear and tear” brought onto it by the traipsing, curious crowds, probably has to be replaced and refreshed periodically. The work is not intended to be sold, only the experience of it is. This could be the textbook definition of “art for and of the people.”

Works Cited:

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