

Top 10 Picks of 2021

by Ezrha Jean Black | Dec 28, 2021



Roland Reiss, *The Castle Of Perseverance*, 1978 ©Estate of Roland Reiss

I resisted compiling this list (the limitations of which are obvious); but then thought: “Wait! In this awkward year of slow emergence from a pandemic that may never really be over, how many really great shows could there actually be?” Until, as I went over the shows that had intrigued me enough to write, review, recommend, it was clear there were more than 20 of them. There are a number of reasons why this might be, beginning with the fact that artists and curators both understand that there *is no time to lose*; that *anything* is possible; and that there is no point in risking less than *everything*.

Still a few criteria may apply. As Samuel Goldwyn once said, “If people don’t want to go to the picture, nobody can stop them.” The same thing applies to public or private art spaces and museums. Should there be any rules to it anymore? Great art is the *donné*, the baseline, the given. A good narrative helps—a strong, resonant theme and throughline; a provocative theoretical armature—something that moves the conversation forward, but is also ahead of it; something that suggests where we might be going—but also something that *excites* that conversation—a sound, image, idea, obsession—something you need to invent new ways to think about.

To the extent the list reflects my tastes and biases, I’m saved by the fact that many of the shows provided their own corrective—to the extent they knocked me off-guard with their sheer originality, the electricity of their provocations, their passions, even perfection—rendering bias almost beside the point.

Roland Reiss: *The Castle of Perseverance* Diane Rosenstein Gallery

I arrived late to the party that was the work of Roland Reiss and I regret that I never told him directly just how much joy his phosphorescent (he called them “unapologetic”) flower paintings brought me. I wrote on a 2018 Instagram post that those paintings “let us celebrate the beauty even as we cursed the darkness.” But that’s life, baby; and Reiss’ work celebrated the whole of it—from its ‘castles’ to the private hells our myths and morality tales construct for us. Reiss captured us in the maze—with all our tools, devices, pleasures, ideals, hopes, ambitions, anger, vices and detritus; and from the show’s title work to its “fairy tales” and “morality plays,” I never wanted to leave.