

Best Art Books of 2021

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In a lockdown year, with travel reduced, there was no movable feast quite like an art book. Art is made by all sorts of people, everywhere, all the time, along many different paths, some of which are illuminated by these intriguing publications chosen by our critics.

Holland Cotter's Favorites

'Ray Johnson c/o'

The maverick American artist Ray Johnson (1927-1995), who managed to be nowhere and everywhere in the art world through his invention of Mail Art, was lucky in his longtime friend William S. Wilson, to whom, over 60 years, he gave thousands of letters, collages, drawings and clippings. Wilson saved every last scrap, and a jampacked sampling of them makes up this gold mine of a book, edited and curated by Caitlin Haskell with Jordan Carter. Funny, biting, morbid, it's a page-turner for sure, and accompanies a show at the Art Institute of Chicago through March 22). (*Art Institute of Chicago, distributed by Yale University Press*)

'The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse'

Edited by the curator Valerie Cassel Oliver, this catalog for one of the outstanding exhibitions of the season — originating at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, it's now in Houston — proposes that the culture of the African American South, as defined by music and vernacular art, is the bedrock of American culture itself, with a strong influence on new art today. The book vividly illustrates and deepens the show's powerful argument. (*Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, distributed by Duke University Press*)

'Yannis Tsarouchis: Dancing in Real Life'

This book lovingly excavates the career of a Greek modernist painter who designed sets for Maria Callas and kept a Greek Classical figurative tradition alive in paintings of homoerotic nudes. Tsarouchis (1910-1989) was both too radical and too conservative for the art world of his time and fell into oblivion outside of Greece. Edited by Niki Gripari and Adam Szymczyk (and including a selection of the artist's writings), this tender tribute brings him back. (*Sternberg Press*)

'Titian: Love, Desire, Death'

The London exhibition by this name reunited six major mythological paintings that Titian produced for the Spanish court. One of them, "The Rape of Europa," belongs to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, where the show, now called "Titian: Women, Myth & Power," is making its final stop (through Jan. 2). A slender Gardner-issued publication devoted to that picture is an indispensable companion volume to the handsome London catalog. (*National Gallery, London; published by Yale University Press*)

'Women in Abstraction'

Edited by Christine Macel and Karolina Ziebinska-Lewandowska and produced for a major show at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, this book documents the contributions of more than 100 female painters, sculptors, photographers and performers to the history of modernist abstraction and, by including artists from Asia and South America, demonstrates that abstraction itself has always been a global phenomenon. That many worthy figures aren't included only makes the case for a continuing corrective art history stronger. (*Thames and Hudson*)

'Godzilla: Asian American Arts Network 1990–2001'

Edited by Howie Chen, this compendium brings together archival documents related to the formation, in New York City in 1990, of Godzilla, a collective of artists and curators intent on pointing out the exclusion of Asian American artists from the contemporary art world and pushing for their presence in that world. The book includes protest letters, news releases, and the minutes of group meetings. The result is a how-to in advocacy politics, a study in the complexities of identity politics, and a chorale of treasurable voices. (*Primary Information*)
