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Downtime at New Year? It's Filled

By [HOLLAND COTTER](#)

Which cultural offerings in the first few weeks of the New Year are worth a look? Three art critics and a book reporter for The New York Times present their choices.

EARLY January, when everyone's ready for a long, postholiday winter nap, is traditionally downtime in the New York culture world, particularly in art. No big exhibitions are opening. Galleries are stretching out December shows. You can't even dash around making last-day visits to exhibitions, as nothing's quite ready to close. But in the city that really does never sleep, there are always novelties, and in early January ones that you might have overlooked at a busier time of the year.

Artists and poets have always kept close company, and the alliance becomes a celebratory bash in "Portraits of Poets, 1910-2010," an exhibition presented by the Poetry Society of America at the [National Arts Club](#) beginning on Tuesday. The kickoff event of the society's centennial year, the show brings together more than 150 portraits of 20th-century poets, many by well-known artists, and the guest list is formidable.

As might be expected, photography dominates. In the classics department, look for Alfred Eisenstaedt's vintage portraits of [Robert Frost](#), [Robert Lowell](#), Edna St. Vincent Millay and [T. S. Eliot](#).

Gerard Malanga focuses his lens on outrider turf, with pictures of [Patti Smith](#), Jackson Mac Low and [Charles Bukowski](#). From the young photographer Rachel Eliza Griffiths, a member of the Cave Canem collective, we get a double portrait of the poets Nikky Finney and Lucille Clifton.

In some cases writers make likenesses of fellow writers, as in the case of Jonathan Williams's photographs of [William Carlos Williams](#), Thomas Merton and [Ezra Pound](#). Mr. Malanga, a writer-artist, photographs another of this crossbred species, Joe Brainard, as does Star Black in her portrait of Kenneth Goldsmith.

The show's curator, Alice Quinn, executive director of the Poetry Society and former poetry editor of [The New Yorker](#), has also chosen a good amount of work in other media. From [Kiki Smith](#) and [Alex Katz](#) come lithographic portraits of the poets [Mark Strand](#) and Kenneth Koch, and from Duncan Hannah a collage-drawing of his friend James Schuyler. There are portraits in the traditional medium of oil painting: [Langston Hughes](#) by Paul Gordon and May Swenson by Bernard Rosenquist. And there's one — George Schneeman's portrait of a beardless [Allen Ginsberg](#) — in the highly untraditional format of stone mosaic.

The Schneeman piece would doubtless win the event's Farthest-Out Award but for a small section of the show called "Portraits of Poets in Childhood," which offers images of several revered writers — Amy Clampitt, Galway Kinnell and Mary Oliver among them — dating to when they were infant phenomena.

For more artist-poet pairings, visit the society's Web site at poetrysociety.org and check under poetry for "Birds & Bards," where you'll find a poem by Ms. Clampitt accompanied by splendid portraits of kingfishers by the artist-ornithologist Mark Seth Lender. From the Web site you can also learn details of a poetry reading at the National Arts Club on the Tuesday opening day, featuring Mr. Kinnell, Marie Ponsot, Yusef Komunyakaa, Richard Howard and Sapphire, author of the novel on which the film "Precious" is based.

For the group show "Compassion," the artist A. A. Bronson has dispersed work by nearly a dozen of his colleagues throughout the premises of the Union Theological Seminary in Morningside Heights, sending visitors on a winding pilgrimage in search of art — you'll find maps at the front entrance — through the seminary's 1908 neo-Gothic complex.

Each piece Mr. Bronson has selected touches, sometimes obliquely, on the title theme. In a short film by Marina Abramovic, children in Thailand play startlingly realistic war games but end up making a bonfire of their guns. In a pair of photographs by Paul Mpagi Sepuya, the body of a white-skinned man is caressed by a disembodied dark-skinned hand. A giveaway work by [Yoko Ono](http://YokoOno.com) consists of pin-on metal buttons printed with one of three gentle remonstrations: Remember, Breathe, Dream.

A fair amount of the art is geared to complement the seminary setting. Photographs of Milanese cemetery statuary by Scott Treleaven encircle the walls of a chapel. A small hand-drawn copy by Gareth Long of William Blake's visionary image "Albion Rising" is tucked away in a cloister. Mr. Bronson collaborates with Terence Koh on a performance piece that involves the setting free of two imaginary white doves to nest in the seminary's high-ceilinged refectory.

In a rotunda area is one of Chrysanthe Stathacos's gorgeous rose-petal floor mandalas — why don't we see more of this artist in the city? — and in the balcony above it a film by Michael Bühler-Rose of a Hindu priest performing a healing ritual. By this point you will have traveled far from where you started, and the seminary itself, with its architectural carvings, dusty portraits and memorial plaques, will have become an installation piece, a work of environmental art.

The exhibition is the inaugural venture of a project called the Institute for Art, Religion and Social Justice, recently founded at the seminary by Mr. Bronson, who is a graduate student in divinity studies. So far the institute exists as much spiritually as materially, but it has a handful of members (Mr. Bronson is one), a base (the seminary) and a Web site (artreligionandsocialjustice.org). Even as a concept, it's like nothing else in the city, and this quiet show, far from the art world downtown, bodes well for its future.

"Portraits of Poets, 1910-2010" is on view Tuesday to Jan. 15 at the Grand Gallery, National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South, Manhattan; poetrysociety.org. "Compassion" is on view through Jan. 14 at the Union Theological Seminary, 3041 Broadway, at 121st Street, Morningside Heights; artreligionandsocialjustice.org.

MORE ART SHOWS

In the opening weeks of the year, otherwise known as January, my needs are basic. It's dark and usually cold. I want light and heat — if possible combined in strong, unremitting color and conveyed by refreshingly unfamiliar works of art. At least two shows on the immediate horizon promise to deliver.

The one burning most brightly is "Demons and Devotion: The Hours of Catherine of Cleves," which opens on Jan. 22 at the [Morgan Library & Museum](http://MorganLibraryandMuseum.org). These volumes of hours, or

illustrated prayer book, are among the greatest in the Morgan's outstanding collection of manuscripts and will be "disbound" for the occasion, meaning that nearly 100 of its 157 miniatures will be viewable at one time, a rarity. Commissioned by Catherine, duchess of Guelders and countess of Zutphen, around 1440, this manuscript is the work of an anonymous artist known as the Master of Catherine of Cleves. His feeling for harmonious arrangements of jewel-like colors was equaled only by his eye for naturalistic detail. Both were bolstered by an ability to realistically render light and texture that indicates attention to Jan van Eyck and Robert Campin.

These two volumes are also known for their innovative borders and for depictions of everyday life that are considered forerunners of Dutch genre painting. There is also, as suggested by the show's title, an unusual interest in the fiery furnaces of hell, often entered through the maws of monsters that strongly resemble a household feline having a very bad day.

This is also Viola Frey month in New York. I refer to the formidable Bay Area ceramic sculptor who died in 2004 at the age of 70. On Thursday the Nancy Hoffman Gallery in Chelsea opens a large exhibition of sculpture and works on paper, including an enormous tile piece. On Jan. 27 the [Museum of Arts & Design](#) will follow suit with "Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey," a full-scale retrospective.

Frey was the only woman on the male-dominated ceramics scene that sprang up around San Francisco in the 1950s, spread to Los Angeles and included artists like Peter Voukos, Robert Arneson, Kenneth Price, Ron Nagle, John Mason, Richard Shaw and David Gilhooly. She was an artist of multiple mediums and processes. In the mid-1970s, she made set-up photographs using dolls and porcelain figurines, which she also cast and enlarged, cobbling into bricolage sculptures.

Frey is best known for monumental ceramic figures, calm in expression, in contemporary dress (when clothed); the rough textures and brushy colors of their forms suggest they are escapees from paintings. The long-lost cousins of these creatures include [Alex Katz's](#) cutouts and the figurative sculptures of Ann Arnold, William King, Stephan Balkenhol and Claudette Schreuders. Charles Ray's towering mannequins also come to mind. The ferocity, variety and interdisciplinary richness of Frey's art will come as a surprise to many New York art mavens. Even before the show opens, the Museum of Arts & Design deserves credit for thinking outside the New York museum mainstream.

Other shows where the blasts of expertly marshaled color should counter those of winter include exhibitions of Philip Taaffe's works on paper at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea (Jan. 16); Stanley Whitney's new abstractions at Team Gallery in SoHo (Thursday); the paintings of the underknown New York abstractionist Roy Newell, who died in 2006, at Carolina Nitsch Project Room in Chelsea (Jan. 15); and works from the last four decades of [Jacob Lawrence's](#) exemplary career at DC Moore, on Fifth Avenue, near 57th Street (Wednesday).

Last but hardly least, Exit Art, on 10th Avenue and 36th Street in Manhattan, will enter terrain that it usually leaves untouched with "New Mirrors: Painting in a Transparent World," an exhibition opening on Jan. 9 of abstract and semi-abstract painting by seven young artists in which color is the unifying force. ROBERTA SMITH

The Morgan Library & Museum is at 225 Madison Avenue, at 36th Street, Manhattan; [themorgan.org](#). The Museum of Arts & Design is at 2 Columbus Circle, Manhattan; [madmuseum.org](#). The Nancy Hoffman Gallery is at 520 West 27th Street, Chelsea; [nancyhoffman.com](#).

AT THE WHITNEY

The [Whitney Biennial](#) is an affair of short-term memory and long-term amnesia. How many artists can you name who were in it, say, in 2006? With this year's model slated to open in February, however, the museum will offer a refresher course in the form of "Collecting Biennials," an exhibition of works by artists who have participated in the Whitney Museum's periodic surveys of the art of the moment over the last eight decades.

Judging by the preliminary list, the museum's curators have done a pretty good job of picking winners. From [Edward Hopper](#) to [Ed Ruscha](#), it is an all-star roster. It also has the potential to serve as a fascinating lesson in the evolution of 20th-century art and the vagaries of taste and fashion.

A quick read of the list suggests this narrative: Early on there was the Magic Realism of Peter Blume. Then came the Abstract Expressionism of [Jackson Pollock](#) and [Willem de Kooning](#), followed by the proto-Pop Art of [Robert Rauschenberg](#) and [Jasper Johns](#) and the Pop Art proper of [Andy Warhol](#) and Claes Oldenburg. Vija Celmins and Sylvia Plimack Mangold were among those who reintroduced realism as Minimalism fell from favor and the art world went pluralistic.

Inspired by new ideas about art and the mass media, [Cindy Sherman](#), Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince led the so-called Pictures Generation, while [Julian Schnabel](#) and Sue Williams reanimated expressionist painting. Cady Noland, [Robert Gober](#) and Charles Ray reinvigorated sculpture in different ways, and [Matthew Barney](#) produced some of the most ambitious art films ever.

Who will be remembered from 2010? Maybe it will be George Condo, the humorous painter of Modernist clichés and the only artist who will appear in both exhibitions. KEN JOHNSON

"Collecting Biennials" will be on view from Jan. 16 to Nov. 28 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street; (212) 570-3600, whitney.org.

AT THE MET

One of the strangest and sexiest paintings ever made is "An Allegory With Venus and Cupid" (1540-50) by the Florentine Mannerist and Medici court artist Agnolo Bronzino (1503-72). Its meaning has defied the interpretive exertions of generations of art historians, but the image certainly is arresting. Cupid, a naked boy, mouth-kisses Venus, his full-frontally nude mother, while fondling her left breast with one hand. Just behind them, the bald, gray-bearded Father Time reaches across with one muscular arm to hold up or take down a blue drape. Whether he means to shield or expose the incestuous couple remains unclear, and that ambiguity adds to the picture's mysterious allure.

To see that painting in the flesh you have to go to the National Gallery in London. Stay-at-home New Yorkers who want to see a Bronzino must make do with two on public view: the gleaming portrait of Lodovico Capponi at the [Frick Collection](#) and the equally polished "Portrait of a Young Man" at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#).

But wait, there will be another opportunity to get acquainted with this extraordinarily suave artist when the Met opens "The Drawings of Bronzino." The first extensive exhibition devoted to Bronzino, it will present almost all of his 61 known drawings. Including works in chalk, watercolor and gouache, it will feature studies for frescos, altarpieces and tapestries. Loaded

with examples of virtuosic skill and allegorical imagination, the show promises to shed new light on the art, life and times of a singular old master. KEN JOHNSON

“The Drawings of Bronzino” will be on view from Jan 20 to April 18 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; (212) 535-7710, met.org.

BOOKS

In publishing, January was once considered a quiet time after the hubbub of the holiday rush, but this year many publishing houses delayed some of their hottest books to the first of the New Year to remove them from a scrum of titles by big-name authors that were released last fall.

Here are some of the big books expected in January:

COMMITTED. By Elizabeth Gilbert. 285 pages. Viking. \$26.95. She’s the author of “Eat, Pray, Love.” Need we say more? Seriously, this book, a memoir that Ms. Gilbert wrote entirely from scratch after she scrapped the first 500-page draft, chronicles a turbulent period 18 months after her previous book left off. She writes of how, despite her antipathy to marriage, she came to wed the Brazilian-born Australian lover she met in Indonesia in “Eat, Pray, Love,” but she also meditates on the institution of wedlock. Incorporating reflections on historical and sociological studies as well as interviews with family, friends and people she met while traveling across Southeast Asia, Ms. Gilbert’s book explores her attempt to make peace with an institution she once vowed never to re-enter. Viking, her publisher, has planned a first-print run of 1 million copies. (Publication date: Tuesday.)

NOAH’S COMPASS. By [Anne Tyler](#). 277 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$25.95. This novel, like many of Anne Tyler’s books, tells the story of one of life’s under-the-radar characters. Liam Pennywell, 60, has just been fired from a teaching job and has two failed marriages and desultory relationships with three daughters to his name. The appeal: “She’s a very evocative writer, and the male protagonist in her new book is going to resonate really strongly with her readers because the character is so vulnerable,” said Larry Norton, senior vice president of merchandising for adult trade and children’s books at Borders Group. “It’s a very complex characterization, and it’s classic Anne Tyler in terms of what she’s able to tell us about ourselves.” (Publication date: Tuesday.)

THE SWAN THIEVES. By Elizabeth Kostova. 564 pages. Little, Brown & Company. \$26.99. Elizabeth Kostova’s first novel, “The Historian,” was the subject of a heated publishing industry auction and went on to spend nearly 20 weeks on The New York Times’s best-seller list. Now she is back with her second novel, which buyers at both Barnes & Noble and Borders put near the top of their lists of hotly anticipated books for 2010. The plot follows the obsessive search by Andrew Marlow, a psychiatrist, to unravel the mystery of a patient who defaces a painting at the National Gallery. The point of view shifts among narrators, and the book goes back in time to the 19th century to explore the lives of the painters Béatrice de Clerval and her uncle, Olivier Vignot, who form a large part of the story. Writing in Publishers Weekly, [Katharine Weber](#) said: “Legions of fans of the first book have been waiting impatiently, or perhaps even obsessively, for this novel. ‘The Swan Thieves’ succeeds both in its echoes of ‘The Historian’ and as it maps new territory for this canny and successful writer.” (Publication date: Jan. 12.)

STAR: HOW [WARREN BEATTY](#) SEDUCED AMERICA. By [Peter Biskind](#). 627 pages. Simon & Schuster. \$30. Peter Biskind, the author of “Easy Riders, Raging Bulls,” a history of 1970s

American cinema, and “Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film,” about the evolution of independent film into a semicorporate niche product, has now written a biography of Warren Beatty, looking into his playboy escapades, his engagement with politics and his rich work as actor and director. In a starred review, Publishers Weekly noted that “Biskind does not gloss over the fact that Beatty has not had a box-office hit since 1990’s ‘Dick Tracy,’ nor does he ignore the string of flops that have deflated the actor’s career (‘Ishtar,’ ‘Bugsy’ ‘Love Affair,’ etc.). Yet his respect for Beatty never dwindles, and readers are left with a complicated portrait of a complicated man, arguably a great actor of his generation.” (Publication date: Jan. 12.)

THE POWER OF MANY: VALUES FOR SUCCESS IN BUSINESS AND IN LIFE. By [Meg Whitman](#), with Joan O’C. Hamilton. 288 pages. Crown Publishing Group. \$26.

Like many a political aspirant, Meg Whitman, the former chief executive of eBay who is seeking to replace fellow Republican [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) as governor of California in the fall, has written a book. Rather than a memoir or a transparent political manifesto, this one is a guide to the 10 “core values” she says guided her as a business leader. The book is peppered with stories from her childhood and her business career at companies including Disney and Procter & Gamble. When Crown announced the book deal in May, it said Ms. Whitman would donate the proceeds from sales of the book to charity. (Publication date: Jan. 26.) MOTOKO RICH

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