The Defining Artworks of 2023

BY THE EDITORS OF ARTNEWS

December 18, 2023 2:20pm

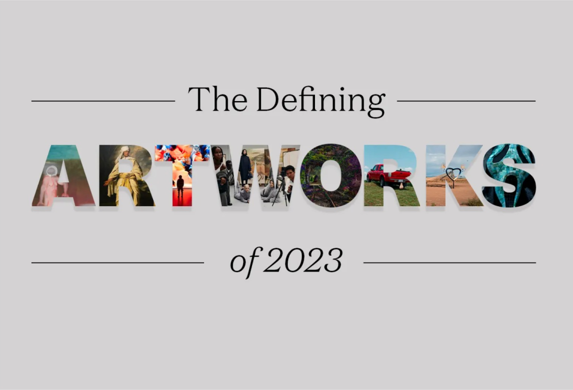


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: KAT BROWN/ARTNEWS

Each year, countless new artworks are made and historical ones come into sharper focus as events in the art world and beyond give them new valance. That's the case with the 25 works assembled here, which in one way or another defined our editors' art-viewing experiences. While the NFT bubble may have burst, several highlighted works here look at our relationship to the digital world, and were often created in collaboration with AI. Others debuted as part of major exhibitions, with the 15th edition of the Sharjah Biennial in the United Arab Emirates having produced a number of exceptional works in 2023. Still, others look at our relationship to history and the urgency of looking at it from perspectives that have long been purposefully marginalized and silenced.

Below, a look back at the defining artworks of 2023.

---

25 Betye Saar, *Drifting Toward Twilight*, 2023

Most-Read Stories

1 A Painting of Kate Middleton, Princess of Wales, Graces...

2 Top Collector Ron Perelman Sold 71 Works Worth $963 M. by...

3 Painter George Rouy Joins Hauser & Wirth, Becoming the...

4 Sotheby's Rainmaker Brooke Lampley Heads to Gagosian

Art in America
The World's Premier Art Magazine since 1913.
Subscribe today and save!
SUBSCRIBE

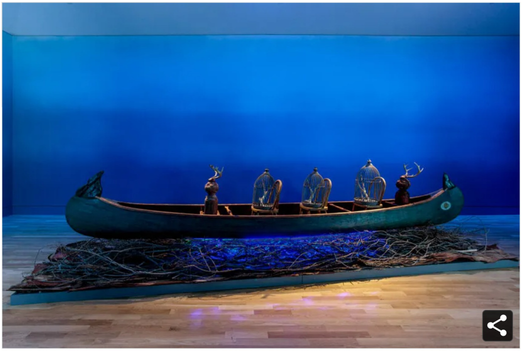
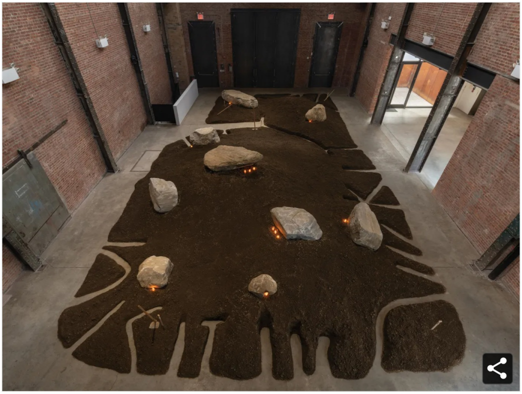


Photo : Photo Joshua White/©Betye Saar/The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens

Tucked away in its own room in the Huntington Library's American art galleries is a new commission (and acquisition) by longtime LA-based artist Betye Saar, whose childhood visits to the Huntington in the 1930s proved to be an informative experience. At the center of this blue-lit gallery is a 17-foot vintage wood canoe that Saar had had in her collection for a number of years. Inside are three wood chairs atop which are three birdcages, each filled with a large tree branch; sandwiching them are sculptures of Saar's own making. The canoe sits on a bed of branches, sourced from around the Huntington's grounds, and strips of neon lights; a diagram of different moon cycles rises high in one wall. An **accompanying short documentary** by Kyle Provencio Reingold provides a soothing jazz soundtrack to the experience of viewing the work. Where is this boat going? Saar has left it intentionally open ended, but in the room there is a palpable sense of hope—of a new beginning just on the horizon. —*Maximilíano Durón*

ARTnews
Sign Up for our Newsletters
Email
Subscribe Today
By providing your information, you agree to our Terms of Use and our Privacy Policy. We use vendors that may also process your information to help provide our services. // This site is protected by reCAPTCHA Enterprise and the Google Privacy Policy and Terms of Service apply.

24 Edgar Calel, *B'alab'äj (Jaguar Stone)*, 2023



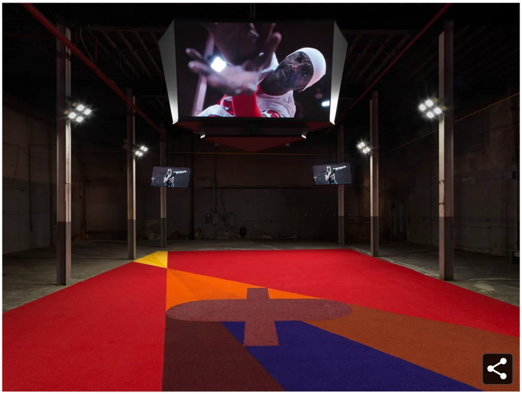
Edgar Calel, *B'alab'äj*, 2023.

Photo : Courtesy Proyectos Ultravioleta/Photo Charles Benton

Those who entered SculptureCenter's cavernous ground-level gallery this summer were greeted by this room-filling piece, composed of shaped mounds of dirt interrupted by rocks and lit candles. Edgar Calel, a deft creator of sculptural works that bring his Mayan Kaqchikel heritage to the rest of the world, was here referencing a stone that can be found in Chi Xot (San Juan Comalapa), the Guatemalan town where he was born. Seen from above, the installation even looked like that stone, and the candles were themselves a reference to the offerings that are left by the local community at the piece's namesake landmark. In tethering an art space in Queens, New York, to the natural environment of Chi Xot, Calel suggested that art can be a portal to places far afield. He also implied that art can be generous: he enlisted SculptureCenter workers in the daily act of lighting the candles, effectively asking them to perform a thanksgiving ritual that he and others in Chi Xot regularly undertake. —*Alex Greenberger*

23

Matthew Barney, *Secondary*, 2023



Matthew Barney, *Secondary* (installation view), 2023.

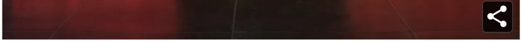
Photo : Photo Dario Lasagni/©Matthew Barney/Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery

Football and dance have more in common than might seem to make sense, as evidenced by the famous ballet-lesson-taking Pittsburgh Steelers star Lynn Swann and, even more so, **this hour-long video work** by Matthew Barney. The story, such as it is, follows a dark bit of football lore dating back to 1978, when Oakland Raiders defensive back Jack Tatum (nicknamed "The Assassin" in his day) tackled New England Patriots receiver Darryl Stingley and left him paralyzed. But Barney's approach to any particulars of narrative and tone is more like poetry in a wordless fever dream set in the artist's former studio along New York's East River. (The studio and the river both count as characters of a sort.) The work distills a lot of Barney's interconnected interests, and certain sights and sounds within it stand to linger in the mind for a long time to come. —*Andy Battaglia*

22

Hannah Gadsby, copy of *Large Bather with a Book*, ca. 1995

IT'S
PABLO
PICASSO ACCORDING TO
HANNAH GADSBY
MATIC



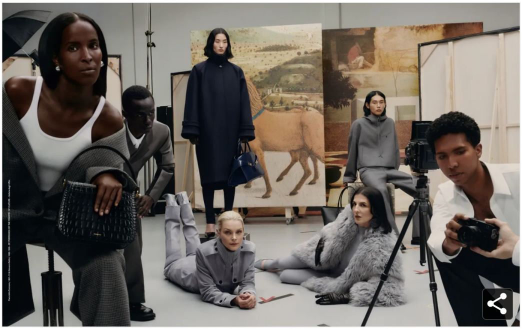
The entrance to the exhibition “It’s Pablo-matic: Picasso According to Hannah Gadsby,” 2023, at the Brooklyn Museum.

Photo : Courtesy Brooklyn Museum

The Brooklyn Museum’s “It’s Pablo-matic: Picasso According to Hannah Gadsby,” **arguably the year’s most notorious art exhibition**, opened not with Picasso but with Gasby aping Picasso. According to the lore put forward by the exhibition, this painting was done on a wall in Gadsby’s parents’ home when the comedian was a teen. It’s a not-so-bad copy of a Picasso painting showing a partially nude person reading. Do not call this an example of hero worship or artistic appropriation: Gadsby wrote off their work in its wall text as “shitty,” and encouraged viewers to see the painting as an example of how deeply engrained Picasso, a misogynist, had become in the public consciousness. Then again, so what? Gadsby told us nothing we didn’t already know, but the painting’s exhibition in 2023 pointed up a crucial problem in all the Picasso festivities that were staged this year: attempts to destabilize his reputation as a genius still accidentally ended up affording him too much attention. —*Alex Greenberger*

21

Tyler Mitchell, Ferragamo FW23 Campaign, 2023



A photograph for Ferragamo’s Fall/Winter 2023 New Renaissance campaign, shot by Tyler Mitchell and featuring paintings from the Uffizi collection.

Photo : Photo Tyler Mitchell/Courtesy Ferragamo

Tyler Mitchell is one of the few young photographers in the past decade to ascend to the top of the fashion industry’s ranks, while at the same time establishing a foothold with major players in the art world. In August, when the Italian luxury house Ferragamo unveiled a campaign for its Fall/Winter 2023 collection, the closely watched image-maker—best-known for his 2018 *Vogue* cover of Beyoncé, the first time a Black photographer shot the esteemed American fashion magazine’s cover—was as much a starring centerpiece of it as the campaign’s idyllic backdrop: Florence’s Uffizi Gallery. The label’s artistic director Maximilian Davis and Mitchell placed models before 15th- and 16th-century scenes, including works by Botticelli and Piero della Francesca. —*Angelica Villa*

20

Joshua Reynolds, *Portrait of Omai (Mai)*, ca. 1776

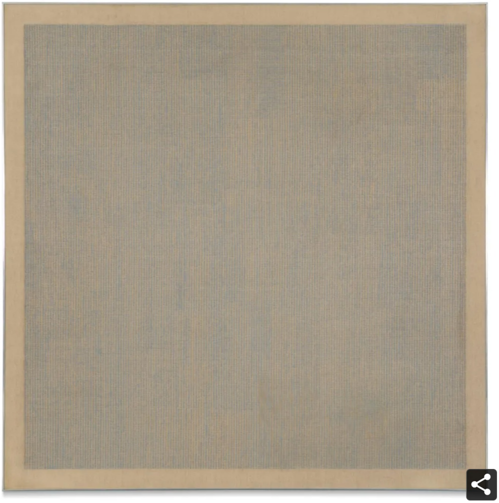
Joshua Reynolds's *Portrait of Omai (Mai)* ca. 1776 has rarely been seen publicly. Here, it is being moved by installers ahead of its appearance at Tate Britain in 2005.

Photo : Photo Matthew Fearn/PA Images via Getty Images

In April, the National Portrait Gallery in London and the Getty Museum in Los Angeles jointly acquired a prized Joshua Reynolds painting, *Portrait of Mai (Omai)*, concluding a tense race to keep the painting within England **before its export ban** expired in July. Against considerable odds, the two museums raised the £50 million ($61.9 million) necessary to keep the painting from disappearing into private hands. The acquisition garnered international attention given the painting's huge art historical importance: it depicts the first Polynesian to visit Britain, and some historians even believe it is one of the earliest portraits of to depict a person of color as its subject in Britain. The collaborative, multinational nature of the deal, too, was highly unusual. The painting went on view at the **National Portrait Gallery when it reopened** in June and will travel for the first time in Los Angeles in 2026 and also be on view when the city hosts the Summer Olympics in 2028. —*Tessa Solomon*

---

19 Agnes Martin, *Grey Stone II*, 1961



Agnes Martin's large-scale canvas Grey Stone II (1961) sold for a record breaking $18.7 million with fees

Photo : Courtesy Sotheby's

The buzz during New York's marquee fall auctions this year was not about speedy flips, young hotshots, or a dour market downturn, as has been the case in recent years. It was about something more enduring: **Agnes Martin's *Grey Stone II*** (1961), which was sold at Sotheby's from the estate of **Emily Fisher Landau**. While Picasso's *Femme à la montre* (1932) stole the headlines ahead of the evening sale, it was Martin's work that set tongues wagging afterward.

Selling for a whopping $18.7 million after a fierce bidding war, *Grey Stone II* stole the show, breaking Martin's auction record, and a small sign of changing times as work by women artists like Martin, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler continue to sell for higher prices than ever before. Sotheby's David Galperin dubbed *Grey Stone II* a "unicorn," marrying the market's craving for rare finds and a recognition of Martin's ability to conjure beauty at its most minimal. *—Daniel Cassady*

18

Faith Holland, *Artificial Intelligence Forced to Confront Its Own Death*, 2023

Four prints from Faith Holland's series "AI Forced to Confront Its Own Death," 2023, on view in the exhibition "Death Drive," 2023, at Microscope Gallery, New York.

Photo : Courtesy Microscope Gallery, New York

At Microscope gallery, Faith Holland's solo exhibition "Death Drive" served as a clear-eyed spectacle that probed the **intersection of tech and mortality**. Drawing inspiration from Freudian theory, Holland delved into the speculative decay of our electronics and handheld devices, sparking a conversation between the physical and digital. Her sculptures, a fusion of discarded gadgets and robust mold, serve as a poignant symbol of our environmental mess—a concoction of obsolete electronics interlaced with resilient mycelium. These eerie yet thought-provoking pieces are meant to remind us that some parts of the devices we hold so dear (but continue to update every few years) are expected to take over at least a million years to decompose. Holland's sublimation prints, titled *Artificial Intelligence Forced to Confront Its Own Death*, depict an AI's attempts to simulate mold growth, contemplating the eerie inevitability of tech meeting an organic end. Throughout the exhibition Holland invited us to ponder the whimsical yet disconcerting and seemingly impossible idea of technology's mortality. *—Daniel Cassady*

17

Emilie L. Gossiaux, *White Cane Maypole Dance*, 2023

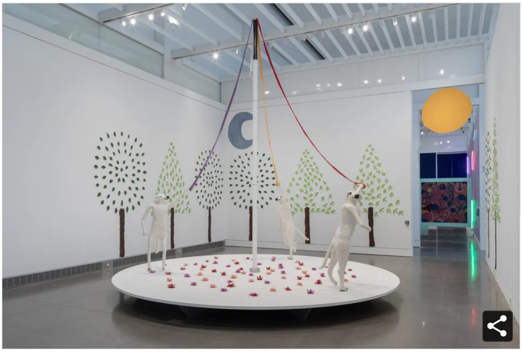
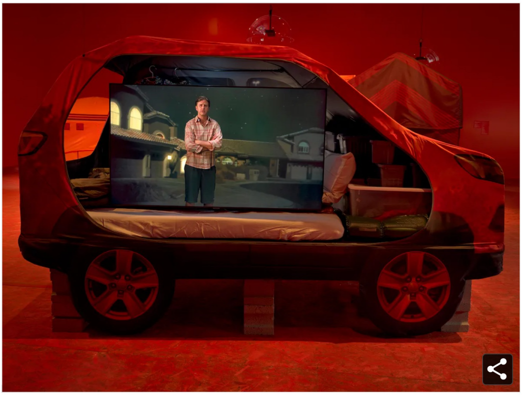


Photo : Photo Hai Zhang/Courtesy Queens Museum

With its audio descriptions and tactile interventions, **Emilie L. Gossiaux**'s debut institutional solo at the Queens Museum is an exemplary model for accessible art. Her new work explores the twinned ways in which both nonhuman animals and disabled people experience oppression: both groups are seen as lacking certain capacities, and for this, denied various rights. In response, Gossiaux celebrates the beautiful interdependence that disabled people and their nonhuman companions often enjoy. Her giant maypole sculpture replaces a regular rod with a monumental, 15-foot version of her white cane, and around it, human-sized sculptures of her guide dog London leap and dance. In a world that too often views disabled people as tragedies, Gossiaux gives us a powerful portrait of disabled joy. —*Emily Watlington*

16

Josh Kline, *Personal Responsibility*, 2023–present



Installation view of "Josh Kline: Project for a New American Century," from left to right: Disinformation, 2023; *Personal Responsibility: Keith*, 2023.

Photo : Ron Amstutz

This bracing new work, which capped Josh Kline's survey at the Whitney Museum, offers disquieting testimonials from a dystopian future in which victims of imaginary climate disasters tell harrowing tales of displacement and despair. The setting is alarming and stark, with would-be refugee tents burning in shades of emergency orange, and videos featuring characters speaking in shocked tones about their fates play as disquieting dispatches from a future that is far too like the present. —*Andy Battaglia*

15

Stephen Thaler, *A Recent Entrance to Paradise*, 2016