

THE BOSTON PHOENIX

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Cars, boats, babes — but is it art?

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Instead of the traditional Impressionist blockbuster, the Museum of Fine Arts gave us Ferraris and Porsches from Ralph Lauren and then followed up with a show from the collection of Bill Koch that included numerous nudes plus two America's Cup yachts beached on the museum's front lawn. Controversy ensued: does "art" mean America's as well as Cubism? Here's a look at what we got this year as seen by Christopher Millis, Jeffrey Gantz, Greg Cook, and Jon Garelick.

1 Artbusters?

For all the hype — and the controversy — surrounding "[Speed, Style and Beauty: Cars from the Ralph Lauren Collection](#)" and "[Things I Love: The Many Collections of William I. Koch](#)," the cars were artistic, and at least some of the Koch collection (the Monets, for starters) was art that any museum would be happy to show. The MFA also gave us [Damien Hirst](#) (more than just suspended animals in formaldehyde), "[The Quilts of Gee's Bend](#)," [Ansel Adams](#), and performance artist [Zhang Huan](#). In short, a varied and thoughtful year.

2 The quick and the dead

Two spirits dominated the Institute of Contemporary Art's "[Likeness: Portraits of Artists by Other Artists](#)." And though Andy Warhol and AIDS opposed each other like Heaven and Hell, what they had in common was their power — ferocious, mutable, enduring. The result was that "Likeness" had the feel of a mythic power struggle, a stage where titanic forces clashed.

3 Surprising monuments

Shown at Bernard Toale Gallery, Abelardo Morell's "[New Photographs](#)" were marked by a spirit of playful exploration, a seasoned pleasure in the fleeting magic of the material world, the calculated boldness of a general plotting a major military maneuver. Without sacrificing any feature of his signature style — high-contrast, large-scale, black-and-white images that imbue commonplace architectural elements with lyrical narratives — he appeared to be looking around and asking, "How does this work?"

4 Up close and impersonal

"[Intimate and Unseen](#)," a small, strange gem of an exhibit at the Fitchburg Art Museum, allowed for both Andy Warhol the public mannequin and Andy Warhol the private man. And constructed mostly of his black-and-white photographs but including also a half-dozen seldom-seen screenprints, it allowed for several other Warhols as well — the engaged artist, the dispassionate observer, the lover.

5 Going with the flow charts

Theme-free, so that the curators' sole obligation is to quality, the [DeCordova Museum's Annual Exhibition](#) has established itself as one of the most important events of its kind, and this was a vintage year, from Michael Lewy's inkjet digital designs to Sally Moore's complex, miniature, zany hanging sculptures to Nadya Volicer's room built from recycled scraps of painted and unpainted plywood.

6 Abstract thoughts

The Harvard Art Museums collected their holdings of a beloved "representational" artist for a beautiful non-blockbuster of a show, "[Degas at Harvard](#)," and it threw all the old questions about form versus content and representation versus abstraction into high relief. We got to see Degas's obsession with revision, his returning again and again to the same subject matter in various media, and how even the simplest "study" in pencil or charcoal has the authority to dominate a room.

7 Warring impulses

The magnitude and the density of Thomas Hirschhorn's "[Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress](#)" at the ICA created a kind of awe. Living-room furniture, mannequins, six-foot candelabras of crudely fashioned wood, walls of sneakers, walls of globes, rubber ducks, countless photographs, panes of glass, toys, dolls, multiple television monitors playing silenced music videos, two 20-foot forms resembling the fuselage of an airplane, large, painted biomorphic shapes hanging from the ceiling by industrial chains — that was just a fraction of the cornucopia that crowded the stairs and walls and floors. But despite the variety, not a single object of the thousands on display departed from the artist's obsessive theme: the erotic charge of war.

8 Laughing matters

Christian Jankowski skewers art patrons, curators, art critics, actors, televangelism, television, and film in ways that are unmistakable and merciless. Yet this boyish 37-year-old German-born artist, who with "[Everything Fell Together](#)" enjoyed his first major survey at MIT's List Center, does get away with it, to judge not only from the MIT exhibit but from his growing list of international credits, which include showcases ranging from the Whitney Biennial and the Venice Biennale to the Swiss Institute in New York and London's Serpentine Gallery.

9 Mutations on a theme

Traditionally a mega affair with scores of artists competing for precious space, the [Drawing Show at the Boston Center for the Arts' Mills Gallery](#) pared down and beefed up this year, with just a handful of artists drawing directly on the walls and most of them weighing in with a single very large work, from Joseph McVetty III's *To the Victors Go the Spoils*, with its murderous pack of homo sapiens with identical DNA, to Amy Ross's pencil-and-ink *Garden*, where the mutations crossed species and phyla with initially playful and ultimately not so playful results.

10 Best of the rest

"[Cuban Prints](#)" at Mass College of Art; "[Pretty Sweet](#)" at the DeCordova Museum; "[Dreaming Now](#)" and "[Double Take](#)" at the Rose Museum; "[Chairs](#)" at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; [Peter Kayafas and Tama Hochbaum](#) at Gallery Kayafas; [Chuck Close](#) at the Addison Gallery; [Duane Slick](#) at the Nielsen Gallery; [Joan Snyder](#) at the Nielsen Gallery and the Danforth Museum; "[Syncopated Rhythms: 20th-Century African-American Art from the George & Joyce Wein Collection](#)" at the Boston University Art Gallery.