

Time flies in our face

Writer MICHAEL PARASKOS looks back at the best and worst exhibitions and artwork of 2010

It is likely 2010 will be seen as the year when the 20th century and all its cultural values finally came to an end. Being 10 years out of synch with the actual calendar is not unusual in these things, but there comes a time when we have to recognise there is an emerging new order in art which will define a new era.

That is not to say we know what form the new art will eventually take. But we can be certain it will not resemble the old art of Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, or Nicholas Serota in any way. My sense of the way things are going is that we will end up with an art that is the opposite of everything late 20th century art stood for.

Whereas the old art lacked technical skill, was ignorant of aesthetics, and undermined the physicality of art, the new art is likely to be highly skilled, rooted in aesthetics, and based on making physical objects. The logic of this rests on the fact you can only pretend a succession of talentless drones are the next Rembrandt for so long. Eventually you want a real Rembrandt.

The most surprising sight of the year has been how different institutions have coped

with this new art world. While the Tate, Serpentine, and Whitechapel have failed predictably to offer a forward-looking agenda for art, the National Gallery in London has proven itself astonishingly progressive. In fact the suggestion has been made that the National is at the centre of a nexus of institutions that are becoming the home for a new avant garde art.

That said, there have been great exhibitions at Tate Modern this year. The major show of paintings by Arshile Gorky was a lesson in the true purpose of art. Gorky started as a dull painter of surface patterns derivative of Picasso. But he became one of the great artists of the 20th century by creating work in which we have a real sense of another reality existing through the window frame of the painting.

Coupling this with an equally major show of the De Stijl paintings by Theo van Doesburg, Piet Mondrian and others, the Tate threatened us with modernist overload. But it actually reinforced lessons learned from Gorky. Unlike Mondrian, Van Doesburg was incapable of transforming the physical medium of paint into

a convincing alternative world. That is why Mondrian was a great artist and van Doesburg only a good one.

As usual there were plenty of turkeys in the art world this year. Rachel Whiteread, Fiona Banner, and Angela de la Cruz all made pitches to be the worst artist in Britain, although of the three only Whiteread really counts as an artist. Yet her exhibition of drawings at Tate Britain was so bad it verged on comedy. As with Tracey Emin we need to stop pretending that making a drawing is the same



She should stop her twaddle and get a job at Tesco

as making a good drawing. Like Emin's best efforts, Whiteread's cack handed scrawls were not evidence of ability.

Banner and Cruz, on the other hand, don't really count as artists at all. I don't know what they are, but you cannot help asking why Tate Britain gave so much space to Banner's trite anti-war illustration by hanging a fighter jet from the ceiling. As for Cruz, who was shown at the Camden Arts Centre, she should stop her twaddle and get a job at Tesco. It would be more in keeping with her talents.

Two gallery refurbishments stand out this year, the long-awaited reopening of Leighton House in Kensington, and the South London Gallery in Camberwell. Leighton House was a triumph which forced us to reassess the 19th century British art world in the light of what we see, rather than through a veil of clichés. The South London also refurbished a great Victorian building, and did it well even if the result is no more than a white box exhibition space. Sadly the

South London does not have its own agenda when it comes to exhibiting contemporary art and so apes the asinine display policies of the Whitechapel and Serpentine. This was particularly noticeable in its opening show of "text art", a dull display even if you do think scrawling on a wall counts as art.

But there were also great highs in the art world this year, including a series of historic exhibitions at Dulwich Picture Gallery featuring Paul Nash, Salvador Rosa, and Norman Rockwell. Rockwell is still on and would be a real treat for a Christmas outing. Great too was Delaroché at the National Gallery last spring, although its panning by most reviewers says more about the lousy state of art criticism in this country than the exhibition itself.

Italian Renaissance Drawings at the British Museum, Treasures from the Budapest National Gallery at the RA, and Canaletto at the National were all joys, and proved that powerful art lifts the spirits rather than trying to kick you in the groin all the time. Even the perennially disappointing BP Portrait Prize this year was less awful than usual, with fewer examples of human Xerox machines touting their wares. There were even some talented celebrations of the act of painting, with works like David Dipre's self portrait suggesting he is a name to watch.

For me, though, art in 2010 will be remembered most of all for a small exhibition of three astonishing paintings by Clive Head at the National Gallery, which changed the agenda for art in Britain for good. I predicted in January this show would be revolutionary, and it was. It was like nothing else in the London art world, and prompted a far more eminent critic than me to describe Head as one of the greatest living painters in the world today. The work established a new aesthetics for art, not as a theory but in the physical and material reality of the paintings. They were the first true examples of 21st century art.



Canaletto *The Entrance to the Grand Canal*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Clive Head *Leaving the Underground*, Salvador Rosa *Poetry*, Angela de la Cruz *Ready to Wear*



Hallucinatory guru

GANDHI AND COCONUTS

Arcola Theatre

MASTOOR KHAN

There's something very believable about the desperate isolation of Asha. She's moved, with her husband Ajay, to a high rise flat in London. She misses the coconut trees of Goa. She misses the friendly

Ajay coming home. When he comes home, he looks forward to watching TV, undisturbed. Somehow, *Gandhi and Coconuts* manages to avoid the stereotype of the timid Indian Woman. This is thanks, in a large part, to the superb acting of Sophia Haque who makes plays Asha very convincingly. She's not stupid, her situation is understandable. This play illustrates how uprooting and moving to a foreign land can be very hard for anyone.

Mahatma Gandhi soon comes knocking on her door, pleading for tea and the pleasure of her company. And the Goddess Kali (who is very funny) and her husband Lord Shiva also begin to appear in her home. They are vibrant and exciting and they temporarily lift her from her drab existence with her husband.

Husband Ajay played by Rez Kempton, is very nuanced, and is no villain. He has his own gripes with life, and he simply cannot see that his wife has any cause for complaint.

Is it better to be happy or sane? This play has a very resounding answer to that question.

The Arcola theatre is a very small and intimate space. It suits this play, and you get to see every flicker of expression as it crosses their faces.

Until December 18th

neighbours who would call in for tea. She misses having people to talk to.

Every day, while her husband goes out to his boring job, looking at a computer screen, Asha makes him dinner and spends the rest of her time looking forward to

Hutching an escape plan

Rabbit a la Berlin

Dir. by Bartek Konopka & Piotr Rosolowski

JOE BENDEL

Was it possible to thrive under communism? Yes, for a short while, if you happened to be a rabbit in East Berlin. However, their salad days did not last forever. In a story too strange not to be true, a population of rabbits temporarily flourished in the green belt running down the centre of the despised Berlin Wall.

Directors Bartek Konopka and Piotr Rosolowski offer a truly original perspective on the communist experience through the eyes of those East German bunnies in *Rabbit a la Berlin*, part nature documentary and part parable. The film is a 2009 Academy Award nominee for best documentary short, which opens in New York as part of a double bill of short docs examining 20th century German history.

During the immediate postwar years, a hearty band of rabbits survived by raiding the garden patches on Potsdamer Platz. Much to their supposed surprise, sheltering walls were suddenly erected around them in 1961.

With a nice grassy run,

plenty of shade, and little human contact, the whiskered critters made like rabbits and multiplied. The East German guards even began adopting them to help pass the time.

However, for many West Berliners, especially artists, the rabbits' ability to burrow beneath the walls made them symbols of something greater – coyote tricksters for their divided age. Then, as escape attempts became more frequent and daring, the rabbits' peaceful lives were upturned.

Their lush grass was destroyed so that fugitive footsteps would be easier to track in the dirt beneath. Formerly their protectors, the guards declared open season on the rabbits, like a red army of Elmer Fudds.

One of the film's many surprises is the extent and quality of archival film capturing Berlin rabbits in their former environment. Credible simply as a wildlife film (even featuring the smoothly placid narration of Krystyna Czubówna, a well-known Polish voice-over artist for nature docs), it also has a slyly subversive sensibility, particularly when it incorporates news footage of

the likes of Fidel Castro and Yassir Arafat coming to gawk approvingly at the Wall.

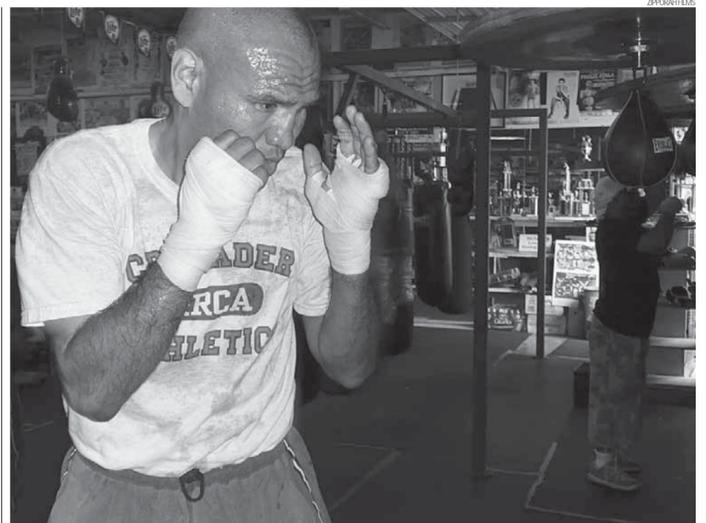
Wistful without being nostalgic, *Rabbit a la Berlin* is one of the more inventive and entertaining documentaries to reach theatres this year.

Loss While the fate of the Berlin Wall rabbit warren is not widely known outside of Germany, the Holocaust and its implications are certainly well-established terrain for documentarians. Yet, French-Israeli filmmaker Nurith Aviv finds fresh insights in *Loss*.

Returning to her father's ancestral home of Berlin, Aviv explores the cultural and scientific losses Germany imposed on itself through the Holocaust.

While relatively conventional in her approach, Aviv superimposes interviews with four prominent Berliners and a vintage television appearance by Hannah Arrendt over the sights seen from the S-Bahn train as it makes its way through the city. It makes the talking heads more visually dynamic and also gives viewers a good feeling for the still grim-looking city.

Joe Bendel writes about independent film and jazz and lives in New York. Visit jbspins.blogspot.com for more articles.



TRAINING: A scene from the documentary 'Boxing Gym'

Frederick Wiseman's latest documentary is in the ring

BENJAMIN LOUIS

Legendary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman's new documentary *Boxing Gym* takes a fly-on-the-wall look at the inner workings of a neighbourhood boxing gym in Austin, Texas. Owned and operated by former professional boxer Richard Lord, Lord's Gym is a cultural melting pot and haven for people from all walks of life.

Lord welcomes all people into his gym and is a true believer that the art of boxing can improve the lives of any and all who practise it. Some come to learn how to fight, some come to let off steam, and others just to find some measure of focus and discipline in their lives.

Like many of Wiseman's previous films, such as *Ballet*, *Domestic Violence*, and *The Store*, *Boxing Gym* focuses on and explores a single subject where all

aspects of humanity are played out against a seemingly mundane backdrop.

Where *Boxing Gym* differs from many other documentaries is in its lack of narrative and soundtrack. It's a bold move, but its subtle effect allows the viewer to sink into the film's singular rhythm – the pounding of heavy bags, slapping of jump ropes, and the crack of speed bags providing the only soundtrack necessary. It's sparse, but it perfectly matches the subject matter.

The ring is a lonely place and boxing is a much-maligned, singular sport, though the film gives the layperson a new appreciation for its sweet science. Some may imagine a boxing gym as an intimidating place full of testosterone and attitude, but as anyone who has ever spent time in one knows, this is far from true.

Wiseman's film examines the bonds and camaraderie that exist between trainer and pupil as well as

between all the members of the gym, including a pig-tailed little girl, a young boy



All aspects of humanity are played out against a seemingly mundane backdrop

with epilepsy, and a crusty old ex-pro and gym owner. Benjamin Louis is a writer based in Los Angeles.