

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian

The best art and architecture of 2021 – the year the galleries reopened

Adrian Searle, Jonathan Jones, Oliver Wainwright

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As the lights came back on, Jean Dubuffet was recast as an incendiary prophet, Poussin revealed his raunchy side – and a giant Swedish ‘plyscraper’ showed the miracle of wood. Our critics rank the highlights of 2021.

Adrian Searle's best art shows of the year

5. Derek Jarman: Protest!

Manchester Art Gallery until 10 April

With Jarman's paintings as its core, this retrospective looks at the development of this restless spirit who moved first into theatre and movie design, and then into film-making. The show also charts his radicalisation as an HIV-positive artist in the mid-1980s. With music videos for the Smiths and Pet Shop Boys, we also revisit his later, coruscating canvases and tarry reliquaries, and the garden he created at Dungeness. Derek Jarman Protest! Runs concurrently with a show at the John Hansard Gallery in Southampton and a film retrospective at Manchester's Home, starting in January. Read the full review.



Image: A restless spirit ... a still from Jarman's 1990 feature film *The Garden*. Photograph: Liam Danie/Basilisk Communications

4. Jean Dubuffet: Brutal Beauty

Barbican, London, now closed

The everyday and the extraordinary collided in the Barbican's Dubuffet exhibition, which took us through the twists, turns and leaps of the career of this complex and contrary man. Bustling bistros, crowded buses, bonkers traffic, wonky people: Dubuffet approached his subjects with hilarity and horror, subtlety and a perversely sophisticated cack-handedness. Collector of outsider art, loners, people driven by some private need (which he termed Art Brut), Dubuffet learned from, and was freed by these wayward individualists. Read the full review.

3. Sophie Taeuber-Arp

Tate Modern, London, now closed

The Swiss-born abstractionist, applied artist, painter and sculptor, maker of humorous marionettes, stained-glass, interior design and textiles brought visual pleasure, curiosity, seriousness and joy to whatever she did. For a long time, like Sonia Delaunay and Anni Albers, her reputation languished in the shadow of her male partner the sculptor Jean (Hans) Arp. Her applied art was also relegated to a secondary position. An introduction to an artist whose unbounded energies were cut short by her death in 1943, this exhibition (now at MoMA in New York) is more than a corrective, it is a lesson in openness and freedom. Read the full review.



Image: Njideka Akunyili Crosby's *Remain, Thriving*, on show at Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s–now.

2. Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s–now

Tate Britain, London, until 3 April

Windrush and carnival, the rise of the Black Power movement, social injustice, racism and pride are some of the themes of this important and overdue show. Looking not just at artists who came to Britain from the Caribbean, and those of Caribbean heritage, but also at artists who have travelled in the opposite direction. Flawed and fascinating, this is a show of great richness and impact. Read the full review.

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1. Theaster Gates: A Clay Sermon

Whitechapel Gallery, London, until 9 January

For Gates, working with clay is as much cultural and bodily language as it is a procession of useful, decorative, commemorative and sculptural objects. Gates's show takes us from Han dynasty storage jars to the work of Dave the Potter, a hugely talented 19th-century enslaved worker, and from there to Peter Voulkos, the controversial clay sculptor who died in 2002. Amid it all, Gates's own ceramics, and a related film, delve into materiality and mourning, pushing clay, and ideas, to their limits. Wonderful. Read the full review.

Jonathan Jones's best art shows of the year

5. Gold of the Great Steppe

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, until 30 January

Nomads have long been looked down on as the outsiders of history, raiders and rovers who never created anything of their own. This is a hugely important exhibition that refutes that. The ancient Saka people of the east Kazakhstan steppe made dreamlike images of deer, eagles and big cats in gold, and dressed their horses as fabulous dragons. The loans here are so newly dug up you can almost smell the earth. A poem of a show that marries emotion and science. Read the full review.



Image: A shroud depicting dancers with feline mouth masks holding severed heads ... Peru: A Journey in Time. Museo de Arte de Lima. Prado Family Bequest. Restored with a grant from the Bank of America Art Conservation Project.

4. Peru: A Journey in Time

British Museum, London, until 20 February

Pottery will never look the same after you see how ancient Peruvian peoples stretched clay into surreal shapes, used it to make panpipes and giant drums, then painted it with scenes of sex and death. Human sacrifice and drugs are prominent themes. It includes such unforgettable masterpieces as a 2,000-year-old burial shroud embroidered with dancers swinging severed heads and a scene of musicians inspired by hallucinogenic cactus. A mind-altering encounter that changed my artistic map of the world. Read the full review.

3. Yinka Shonibare CBE RA

Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, now closed

Shonibare is my artist of the year, setting out a theory of creativity as a hybrid, even “monstrous” process in brilliant sculptures that put African masks on classical European statues, then bringing the same vision to coordinating the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition as a truly global event. Shonibare's pop art cultural mashups knowingly allude to Picasso's mask-robbing and the surrealist concept of the marvellous. He's a visionary who knows how to steal from the past to make the future.



Image: A wild and passionate rebel ... Poussin and the Dance, National Gallery, London 2021. The National Gallery Photograph/© The Trustees of the Wallace Collection

2. Poussin and the Dance

National Gallery, London, until 3 January

It takes brilliant curatorial insight to turn one of the most apparently remote and cold artists in the canon into a wild and passionate rebel you'd love to have a few glasses of wine with. I finally saw the point of Poussin in this exciting, sharply executed rethink of his early career that is also a beautiful poem to the Rome he loved – a city of classical learning, clerical largesse and plentiful sex, at least to judge from his bacchanalian art. Read the full review.

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1. Jean Dubuffet: Brutal Beauty

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This phenomenal exhibition turned the story of modern art upside down. The true revolutionary of the 20th century who paved the way for all today's most exciting impulses turns out not to be Duchamp or even Warhol but this champion of graffiti and children's art whose cult of the "raw" burst apart every convention. From his grotesque yet moving portraits to landscapes layered in mud and stone to abstractions rivalling Pollock's, he emerged as a great artist as well as incendiary prophet.

Oliver Wainwright's best architecture of the year



Image: Whimsical journey ... The Cosmic House. Photograph: Oliver Wainwright

5. The Cosmic House

From first entering the Cosmic Oval lobby, lined with disorienting mirror-panelled doors, to ascending the momentous Solar Stair, each step marking a week in the solar calendar, Charles Jencks' house takes visitors on a whimsical journey of cosmological enlightenment – with a good dose of postmodern kitsch. The house of the late architectural theorist opened to the public this year, unleashing a wonder-world of ornament, symbolism and historical in-jokes, a temple to the man who championed eclecticism and wit in the built environment. Who else could have commissioned a whirlpool bath in the shape of an upside down baroque dome? Read the full article.

4. Becontree Forever

The largest interwar council estate in the world, Becontree in Barking & Dagenham celebrated its centenary this year. It wasn't your usual local council anniversary jamboree, but a carefully curated series of permanent interventions across the estate, led by arts group Create. It included a pair of colourful new playgrounds designed by Yinka Ilori and Eva Rothschild, as well as (forthcoming) new public squares on the estate's corner plots, by Nimtim architects. One of the most eye-opening projects was by Verity-Jane Keefe, whose exhibition at the RIBA recreated several of the estate's customised facades, featuring crazy paving and pebbledash alongside doric columns and golden cement lions. Read the full article.



Image: Young visitors take advantage of a creator space at East Quay, Watchet. Photograph: Joseph Horton

3. East Quay, Watchet

Standing as an anarchic, piratical encampment on the windswept harbour front of Watchet in Somerset, the East Quay arts centre shows how coastal regeneration can be done differently. Many are the shiny new arts centres that have been airlifted into struggling seaside towns, but this one is different. Initiated by a group of local mothers, and developed in partnership with the town's community, it provides a series of airy studio spaces for artists and makers alongside a gallery, classroom, restaurant and shop, as well as a geology workshop, print studio and paper mill – all topped with a cluster of quirky holiday rental pods. Read the full article.

2. Serpentine summer pavilion

At just the moment when the 20-year-old annual commission seemed like it might be reaching the end of its useful life, along came a young, largely unknown architect from South Africa to show why it still has the power to inspire. Rather than designing a singular object, Sumayya Vally assembled a mesmerising landscape of ghostly architectural fragments. It was a dreamy collage of steps, plinths, columns and niches, sampled from places across London that all held significance for migrant communities. It was one of the few recent pavilions that made you want to sit, lounge or lie down and while away a few lazy hours. Read the full article.

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1. Sara Cultural Centre, Skellefteå

While building regulations in England might be making it ever harder to use timber in construction, Sweden is leading the way with wood, showing what a bold new future of “plyscrapers” might look like. The Sara cultural centre and hotel in Skellefteå stands as a 20-storey beacon of pine and spruce, glued and cross-laminated to form super-strong beams, columns and floor slabs – making it stronger than both steel and concrete, relative to its weight. With all the trees harvested from within a 60km radius of the site, and processed nearby, the project shows what locally sourced, low-carbon architecture can be. [Read the full article.](#)