Art Book List - December 2016

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by Kathryn Heine

In December’s edition of our Art Book List, expect to find books dedicated to individual artists. Wilfredo Lam, Francis Bacon, James Ensor, Alma Thomas, Walter De Maria, Doug Wheeler and others are highlighted in new book releases this month.

“Wilfredo Lam: The EY Exhibition”

Cuban artist Wifredo Lam (1902–1982) traveled extensively in Europe during the 1930s, where he intersected with many of the 20th century’s greatest artists, most significantly Picasso. He returned to Cuba in 1942, where he nurtured his personal connection to Afro-Cuban iconography and spirit, combining modernism with the vitality and force of the native culture.

Initially viewed as “dangerously savage,” his work is now recognized as essential viewing among his contemporaries. A major retrospective at Tate Modern “The EY Exhibition, Wilfredo Lam” (on view through January 8, 2017) showcases his singular career from the 1930s to the 1970s, with particular focus on his first encounter with Picasso in 1938 to his return to Europe in 1952. Illustrated with more than 300 works, including paintings, drawings and photographs, this book celebrates the life and creative contribution of a remarkable artist.

BASIC FACTS: “Wilfredo Lam: The EY Exhibition” is written by Catherine David (Editor). Published by Tate. Release Date: December 6, 2016. Paperback; 240 pages; $45.00.

“The Concrete Body: Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, Vito Acconci”

Offering an incisive rejoinder to traditional histories of modernism and postmodernism, this book examines the 1960s performance work of three New York artists who adapted modernist approaches to form for the medium of the human body. Finding parallels between the tactility of a drip of paint and a body’s reflexive movements, Elise Archias argues that Yvonne Rainer (b. 1934), Carolee Schneemann (b. 1939), and Vito Acconci (b. 1940) forged a dialogue between modernist aesthetics and their own artistic community’s embrace of all things ordinary through work that explored the abstraction born of the body’s materiality.
Rainer’s task-like dances, Schneemann’s sensuous appropriations of popular entertainment, and Acconci’s behaviorist-inflected tests highlight the body’s unintended movements as vital reminders of embodied struggle amid the constraining structures in contemporary culture. Archias also draws compelling comparisons between embodiment as performed in the work of these three artists and in the sit-ins and other nonviolent protests of the era.

**BASIC FACTS:** “The Concrete Body: Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, Vito Acconci” is written by Elise Archias. Published by Yale University Press. Release Date: December 6, 2016. Hardcover; 240 pages; $75.00.

**Francis Bacon: Invisible Rooms**

This illustrated book on the work of Francis Bacon, takes an in-depth look at his trademark motif of figures imprisoned within ghostly frames. Francis Bacon painted haunting portraits that employed themes of crucifixion, torment, and isolation. Incorporating the insights of “The Logic of Sensation,” French philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s seminal criticism of Bacon’s work, this volume highlights Bacon’s approach to space as one of the defining forces of his work. By organizing the spatial and dramatic structure of his compositions with barely visible cubic or elliptical cages, his figures become trapped in a kind of invisible room.

This book features reproductions of 40 large-scale paintings, as well as a selection of rarely exhibited works on paper. “Francis Bacon: Invisible Rooms” also contains a series of essays that explore the range of variation in Bacon’s use of isolating constructions over a period of nearly 50 years, as well as the nature of his painting technique and compositions.

**BASIC FACTS:** “Francis Bacon: Invisible Rooms” (English and German Edition) is written by Staatsgalerie Stuttgart (Editor) and Ina Conzen (Editor). Published by Prestel. Release Date: December 8, 2016. Hardcover; 256 pages; $45.00.

**James Ensor: Through the Eyes of Luc Tuymans**

James Ensor (1860–1949) produced some of the most unusual paintings of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Marked by psychological complexity, contradictions, and sheer eccentricity, his works—featuring such bizarre subject matter as dressed-up skeletons and macabre carnival masks—have continued to baffle and intrigue in equal measure.

Ensor was born in Ostend, Belgium, and despite his success barely left his hometown during his lifetime; his family’s curio shop, which was filled with exotic objects including parrots, a monkey, and masks from around the world, surely influenced the imagery of his mature work. In this volume, published to accompany a major exhibition (“Intrigue: James Ensor by Luc Tuymans” at the Royal Academy of Arts, London. On view October 29, 2016 to January 29, 2017), essays explore Ensor’s
life and legacy, while leading contemporary artist Luc Tuymans comments on his selection of Ensor’s works, offering a distinctive view of Ensor, one only another artist can provide.

**BASIC FACTS:** “James Ensor: Through the Eyes of Luc Tuymans” is written by Luc Tuymans (Author), Herwig Todts (Author) and Gerrit Vermeiren (Author). Published by Royal Academy Publications. Release Date: December 13, 2016. Hardcover; 176 pages; $55.00.

**“Alma Thomas”**

This comprehensive monograph examines the work of Alma Thomas, an important artist in the Color Field movement and a pioneer among African-American artists working in abstraction. Alma Thomas started her painting career at the age of 68, after retiring from teaching art to junior high school students in Washington, DC. At the age of 80, Thomas’s colored abstractions were exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, where she was the first black female artist to be given a solo show.

Filled with vibrant illustrations, this volume traces Thomas’s development as an artist: her transition from figuration to abstraction, her fascination with the natural world and space exploration, and the mosaic-like paintings she completed before her death. New writings focus on different themes in Thomas’s work, and the book includes specially commissioned responses by leading artists Leslie Hewitt, Jennie C. Jones, Leslie Wayne, and Saya Woolfalk. Together these bring Thomas’s work to a new generation of readers.

**BASIC FACTS:** “Alma Thomas” is written by Ian Berry (Author) and Lauren Haynes (Author). Published by Prestel. Release Date: December 22, 2016. Hardcover; 256 pages; $49.95.

**“Walter De Maria: Meaningless Work”**

Walter De Maria is known worldwide for his sculptures such as “Lightning Field,” but his contributions to the practices of music, drawing, photography, and film have been largely forgotten. Featuring in-depth analysis of many previously unknown works and correspondence, this book offers the first major critical account of de Maria’s broader range of interests. In a 1960 score, Walter De Maria called for “meaningless work:” art that does not “accomplish a conventional purpose.” He followed this call with a period of experimentation.

The resulting work reflected shifts in how we understand the sites of art during an era of moon shots and road trips, of wars that moved from jungles into living rooms via electromagnetic waves. It helped us understand ourselves and how race, gender, and sexuality vie for space in the social realm. By bringing to light de Maria’s lesser-known works, this book challenges established histories and methodologies for the art of the 1960s and ’70s, while also exploring de Maria’s own obsessions with art’s possibilities.
Known for his immersive environmental spaces and his experiments with light, Doug Wheeler (born 1939) helped pioneer both the material and conceptual approach behind the Light and Space movement. This monograph, includes extensive archival imagery from early on in the artist’s career, along with plates from his recent shows and projects.

Structured around an essay by renowned Italian art historian Germano Celant, “Doug Wheeler” presents the first definitive history of the artist’s life and practice. The volume is interspersed with excerpts from interviews conducted with Wheeler’s peers that situate him alongside the artists of his time, shedding light on his influence on the development of West Coast art.

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