



At the end of last year, it was easy to identify the most controversial, hot-topic event of the art season in Santa Barbara. It went by the title “State of the Arts,” a series of sculptures parading on State Street for several months, triggering a storm of discussion over the nature of public art. The eye of the storm was Colin Gray’s clever anti-Bush, anti-corporate piece “W”.

By contrast, 2007 in Santa Barbara art was at once tamer and more provocative. The public was not provoked much, at least on its own turf, and yet the sheer amount of contemporary art increased by encouraging degrees, as spaces such as the exciting new Edward Cella Art + Architecture gallery, Gallery Ocho, and the discerning, smart part-time Jane Deering Gallery greatly expanded the domain normally kept in check by Contemporary Arts Forum and, on a more accessible order, by Sullivan Goss.

In 2007, Sullivan Goss’s roster included memorable exhibitions by Nicole Strasburg and the “1957” show. CAF ushered in its usual series of surprises with emerging, conceptually lubed artists, including Jacob Boeson and his creative uses for Sonotubes and a Surfing-themed group show, minus the usual suspects.

Naturally, the heart of the art matter in Santa Barbara is the Museum of Art, which remains an anchoring presence downtown and in art circles, managing to please most of the people some of the time. The blockbuster Museum show this year was an expansive look at Rufino Tamayo, a much more complex artist than we deduced from his mild-mannered decorative work – which has made him popular in the art poster trade.

Among new spaces to put on one’s art watching map, the Patty Look Lewis Gallery also made a valuable contribution to the scene, offering a well-justified look at the art of worldly Santa Barbarans Selden Spaulding and visual poet William Dole. As gallery stories go, the rising phoenix award goes to Frameworks, which closed its doors after a devastating fire and reopened months later in a more prime location (around the corner from Patty Look Lewis, in fact).

Landscape painting runs deep in the art scene, of course, and galleries like the Easton Gallery, the Palm Loft Gallery in Carpinteria (a stone’s throw from the State Beach), the Corridan Gallery and the Waterhouse Gallery keep the torch and forum alive for the plain air painters and photographers among us.

Up Santa Ynez Valley way, the Elverhoj Museum in Solvang is always worth a visit, as is the Wilding Museum in Los Olivos, which this year hosted evocative photographic reports from the Everglades and Antarctica by Roger Craton and Clyde Butcher, and impressively luminous postimpressionist landscape paintings by Russell Chatham.

Over the course of any given year, Santa Barbara’s academic campuses offer much to admire in the way of art gallery action. The University Art

[THE YEAR IN ARTS]

Museum’s fare was highlighted by the deceptively breezy, secretly cultural experiment “Andy Warhol Presents” and the current emerging architecture show, “Gritty Brits.” Westmont College’s Reynolds Gallery season hit its peak at the beginning of this academic year, with the grave elegance of Roualt’s “Miserere et Guerre.”

Meanwhile, the Santa Barbara City College Atkinson Gallery – the gallery with the best view in town – gave us such enticing shows as the two-man, two-sibling exhibition by the Pederson Brothers and the adventurous site-specific painting project by John Sonsini, certainly one of the brighter shows of the year here. The Los Angeles-based Sonsini spent weeks in the gallery during the summer, painting portraits of day laborers, hired off of Yanonali Street, resulting in a unique portrait of Santa Barbara we wouldn’t normally see, especially in a gallery setting.

In Santa Barbara’s expanding art world, the more options, the more specialty niches and alternative viewpoints, the better.

The Santa Barbara dance community had the misfortune of shrinking in number, however, with the end of Summerdance. In its absence, dance fans turned to UCSB Arts & Lectures for their fix and weren’t disappointed. The Stephen Petronio Company started off the year, followed up by the revelatory Chunky Move from Australia, Connecticut’s Pilobolus, Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie, and the all-Ohad Naharin evening spend with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, which may have been the most spellbinding of the lot.

Then the Center Stage Theater, once a Summerdance venue, opened its doors in the summer for a number of offbeat visiting companies: Company XIV, Janosphere Dance Co., and Eric Hawkins Dance Co. It almost felt like old times.

Local companies continued to make their way. Santa Barbara Dance Theatre clocked in a 16th year of quirky, original work with “Romeo and Juliet” and an international tour. State Street Ballet gave us their “Carmen.” Ballet Santa Barbara completed its first year of performances and dove right into a second with “Fandango and Other Fantasies,” the UCSB Dance department’s biannual showcases highlighted future talent and local choreographers, and the Santa Barbara Dance Alliance continued to put on all sorts of events, among them the well-loved BASSH (Ballroom, Argentine Tango, Salsa, Swing, and Hip-Hop).

Alas, there is life after Summerdance.

As for the Santa Barbara arts scene in general, 2007 reminded us that yes, there is life after the tourist trade.

– Josef Woodard and Ted Mills