

Art World

What I'm Looking at: Delcy Morelos Reinvents Earth Art, 'Wild Style' at 40, and Other Stuff at the Edge of Art

Highlights from New York galleries from the past few weeks.



Rammellzee, *The Gasholear* (*THE RAMM:ELL:ZEE*) (ca. 1987-1998). Photo by Ben Davis.

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"What I'm Looking at" is a monthly column where I digest art worth seeing, writings worth reading, and other tidbits. Below, thoughts from October and November.

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Delcy Morelos, "[El Abrazo](#)" at Dia Art Foundation

I'm glad my colleague Sarah Cascone already gave Delcy Morelos the [profile treatment](#), so I can just focus on saying the following: This exhibition is awesome.

The Colombian artist gives us two installations, each filling one giant chamber at Dia in Chelsea. The first, *Cielo terrenal* (*Earthly Heaven*) (2023) unfolds as a series of stacked elements built up along the ground, none more than calf height, all in the same earth color and exuding the scent of cloves and cacao (a [signature for this artist](#)). Feeling geometric but alive, this landscape of scattered, abstract accumulations melts away from you into the shadows at the back of the chamber. Surveying it, you have the sensation of soaring over some mysterious civilization.

Then, in a great moment of stagecraft, as you move from this first installation to the second gallery of Morelos's show, your sense of scale flips—suddenly, you go from feeling as if you are towering over a landscape to being towered over yourself. *El abrazo* (*The Embrace*) (2023) is a hulking trapezoidal earth mass studded with hay, filling the space while also seeming to hover magically above the ground (via a set-back base), complete with a passage that you can venture into, to really feel yourself engulfed.



Delcy Morelos, *El abrazo* (*The Embrace*), 2023, at Dia Chelsea, New York (detail). Photo by Don Stahl, ©Delcy Morelos.

You are encouraged to touch the structure, its packed-dirt body feeling warm and brittle. In doing so, you feel viscerally that this giant synecdoche for the Earth is both imposing, and that you could damage it if you treat it too recklessly. That sense is part of its symbolism too.

To sum up: Morelos's work hits you directly while also being full of feelings that unfold in time. It's heady, but also a full-body art experience. And it conveys a wonderful attention to detail, while feeling like a force of nature itself. It's about as effective and affecting as anything I have seen any time recently. I could go on, but really—just go and see it.



Delcy Morelos's *El abrazo* (*The Embrace*) (2023), at Dia Chelsea, New York. Photo by Ben Davis.



Delcy Morelos, *Cielo terrenal (Earthly Heaven)* (2023), at Dia Chelsea, New York. Photo by Ben Davis.



Delcy Morelos, *Cielo terrenal (Earthly Heaven)* (2023), at Dia Chelsea, New York. Photo by Ben Davis.

"Wild Style 40" at Jeffrey Deitch

A lightening flash of creativity out of the past, with a low rumble of melancholy thunder that hits you on a delay, as you think about a lost era of rebel creativity. The great Carlo McCormick curates an exhibition marking the 40th anniversary of Charlie Ahearn's definitive graffiti doc, *Wild Style*, full of new and old work by classic graffiti artists, the street-art stars they inspired, photographers who chronicled the scene, plus some harder-to-define figures who worked the Bronx/Downtown access in the early '80s.

There's plenty to take in, from a mural-sized canvas by Lee Quiñones to cells for *Wild Style*'s exuberant [title sequence](#) by Zephyr & Revolt. What stands out? I will say that I find the polychromatic portrait busts by John Ahearn (twin brother of Charlie) genuinely moving, with their winning combination of fidelity and flair. And Rammellzee, shown here via one of his samurai-armor junkyard-exoskeleton sculptures, increasingly looks to me like one of the very best artists of that era.



"Wild Style 40" at Jeffrey Deitch. Photo by Ben Davis.



Zephyr & Revolt's cells for *Wild Style*. Photo by Ben Davis.



John Ahearn, *COKE LA ROCK w/ Original Glasses* (2023) and Smith vs. *The Vandal Squad* (2014), in "Wild Style 40." Photo by Ben Davis.

Melissa Joseph, "Irish Exit" at Margot Samel

The Brooklyn-based artist's key device sounds like a gimmick: She makes painting-like things, but using felt and tufted wool instead of pigments. In person, it works. The result is compositions with a warm and lovable presence, rendering family photos and domestic still lifes in a way that conveys the warmth and personality—and the woozy inexactitude—of treasured memories.



Melissa Joseph, "Irish Exit" at Margot Samel. Photo by Ben Davis.

Trey Abdella, "Under the Skin" at David Lewis

There's more Abdella to see in New York—lot's more, as a matter of fact, as this is just one part of a two-part show, the other much more extensive half of which is up now at [Vito Schnabel](#). I am promising myself I will get to it. Nevertheless, it's worth spotlighting the David Lewis part all by itself just to say this: Think of how high the bar is to get attention these days, when a work *this* outstandingly bonkers is essentially almost a side attraction.

How to explain what's going on in this sculpture? It features a vitrine containing a detailed diorama of a mystery town, sandwiched between a top layer that is an enormous blow-up of a medical illustration of human skin, complete with giant hair follicles, and a bottom layer that is a hulking one-to-one scaled cross-section of earth, perforated by warrens where rabbits—both animatronic and animated (via small “[holofans](#)”)—cavort alongside some literal buried skeletons. It's like a 3-D collage stitched together from pieces of different, disparate haunted theme parks.



Trey Abdella's "Under the Skin" at Davis Lewis. Photo by Ben Davis.

"Homecoming" Art + Technology Gala for Public Works Administration

I'm so glad to have caught this three-day fundraiser for the inventive Times Square-based [Public Works Administration](#) gallery, which took the form of a feverish festival of creative technology packing four floors of an abandoned school on DeKalb in Brooklyn. The 50-plus young artists here were selected via a quartet of curatorial talent: Alex Czetwertynski, Tomi Faison, Jason Isolini, and Dev Moore. The resulting spectacle hit home how, with the right crew, the contemporary scene allows a blurring of high-tech immersion with what-the-hell garage-punk experiment, in satisfying ways.

Each classroom-gallery here threw you into some fun new exploration on the present-day art-tech headspace. You had works that used TikTok gossip as a readymade or that riffed on NPC livestreams as performance art; AI-generated avatars on Instagram and Kindle Paperwhite e-readers as a medium; elegant experiments with digital abstraction and visceral investigations of sound that literally shook you to the core.

Give any one of these artists a solo show; you can't go wrong. "Homecoming" was the kind of event that makes you hopeful about art's present and near future.