The best (and worst) of 2007

By Howard Halle

THE BEST

Morton Bartlett at Julie Saul Gallery

Henry Darger may be better known, but the equally pervy and brilliant work of outsider artist Morton Bartlett (1909–1992) got a boost with "The Sweethearts of Mister Bartlett," at Julie Saul. Bartlett—who created a fantasy family consisting of lifelike dolls of children age 6 to 16, which he dressed up and posed before the camera—was heretofore known for black-and-white photos. But "Sweethearts" consisted of prints made from recently discovered color slides. While you can quibble over whether these posthumous images are really Bartlett's "work," color makes his bizarre personal universe all the more riveting.

"Biographical Landscape: The Photography of Stephen Shore 1969–1979" at the ICP

Speaking of color photography, Stephen Shore was one of the pioneers of the form, and his landmark series, "Uncommon Places," took center stage in this International Center of Photography survey. Among other things, Shore elevates the humble roadside pancake breakfast to artistic symbol.

"Francisco Alÿs: Fabiola" at the Hispanic Society of America

The Belgian-born, Mexico City–based conceptualist offered up a meditation on what constitutes a masterpiece. The show consisted of Alÿs's collection of nearly 300 portraits of Fabiola—a 4th-century Roman nun—who ascetic—all identical and copied from the same 19th-century painting. "Apparition avant la lettre," the artists (some professional, some amateur, many anonymous) who made these copies acted largely out of their own sense of devotion. But, Alÿs seems to suggest, they also created a cultural object that falls somewhere between icon and meme.

"Georges Seurat: The Drawings" at MoMA

No stranger to masterpieces, Seurat is known as the "dot guy," but as this magnificent exhibit shows, there was more to the artist's work than his cosmos of optical daubs; he was pretty handy with conte crayon, too.

"Glitter and Doom: German Portraits from the 1920s" at the Met

Weimar-era decadence was on full view in this look at Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) painting.

Undoubtedly, the piece that stole the show was Christian Schad's Self-Portrait from 1937, showing him in a green transparent shirt, sitting next to a nude model with a scar running down her face. "Willkommen, indeed.

Kevin Landers: Photographs 1990–2007" at Elizabeth Dee Gallery

Landers's understated yet potent still lifes and street scenes took us back to our own Weimar era—pre-Giuliani New York—with images like that of a soiled, crushed HEART NEW YORK paper cup.

Martin Ramirez at the American Museum of Folk Art

This retrospective introduced Ramirez (1985–2003) to a wider, possibly Darger-size audience. Originally a migrant from Mexico who arrived in California in 1955, Ramirez was institutionalized for schizophrenia; disorders from 1931 on. In the confines of this care, he embarked upon a remarkable self-taught career. More than just a great outsider artist, Ramirez was one of the 20th century's greatest artists, period.

"Noo Rauch at the Met: Pase" Rauch's haunting mix of Surrealism and Socialist Realism held up just fine in the mezannine bunker that the Met sets aside for contemporary artists.

"Richard Serra Sculpture: Forty Years" at MoMA

No slouch when it comes to artistic ego, Serra put the me in heavy-metal postminimalism, but in this retro of curving laminine slabs, he put you and I and just about everyone else in there, too.

Rudolf Stingel at the Whitney

Stingel's sculptures of styrofoam, insulation board and carpeting proved that conceptual art can be sensual and unpretentious.

THE WORST

"Richard Prince: Spiritual America" at the Guggenheim

This 30-year survey reveals that the Emperor of Appropriation Art had no clothes.

Report card: In a year when everyone started wondering whether the overheated art market was adversely effecting the quality of new work (short answer: yes), it was also true that this sea of money lifted the boats of many fine artists who'd been previously overlooked.

FINAL GRADE: A−