Who are the six greatest living artists? This provocative, perhaps unanswerable question is worth asking for what it reveals about a cultural arena in which money and fame often seem to be the paramount obsessions. Surveying the results from L.A.'s poll of top artists, academics, and curators, MARK STEVENS creates a portrait of the art world today and identifies the values that really preoccupy its best and brightest.
Richter and Johns
Are Highly Personal—So Slippery
You Can Find Them Only in Losing Them.
RICHARD SERRA

BEFORE A SERRA,
I IMAGINE ANDY WARHOL GOING, “WOWWW,”
AND ROY LICHTENSTEIN PAINTING POW!
stolen, don’t wish to be photographed.) In her later work she shows more slippage—and wreckage—between mask and model.

Both Gerhard Richter and Jasper Johns are highly personal painters, but with selves so seriously slippery that you can find them only in losing them. Richter is a chameleon who, like Sherman taking on a role, can enter into any style of painting and assume its essential character. He can be a calm realist or, if he wants, an explosive Abstract Expressionist. He can be a public painter with political intent or an intimiste fascinated by private detail. Among the many remarkable things about Richter is that, taking his work as a whole, he does not seem to play any easy conceptual game with his shifting styles. He does not diminish any of his approaches by suggesting that he’s engaged in parody or pastiche or dress-up or braggadocio. He contains contraries, as if no single net can capture the whole truth. Richter’s art is so wide that its center is hard to locate, or, more interesting still, not necessarily there.

Johns is no less distinctive—and elusive. His painterly hand is typically commented upon and admired. His touch is unusually personal; the brushwork suggests he’s right there with you. Touch itself is often described as the earliest and most essential sensation, our first connection to the world. But Johns is not sentimental about connection. The Johns hand enlivens but does not possess whatever it touches. It never holds down a meaning or thought. A word is not only a word; a flag is not only a flag; a map is not only a map. You are not only you, and I am not only me. In the 1950s, Johns’s American flags turned Stars-and-Stripes certainty into a question. His subsequent work, marinated in personal symbols and iconography, makes a question of himself. Over time, in a culture that can hardly remember yesterday, Johns, at 83, has become the master of the revisited. He enjoys the momentary touch of memory, but knows it changes even in the remembering.

Johns makes puzzles of the self. So do other artists on the list. John Baldessari, who is sometimes called a conceptual artist, is more precisely a conundrum artist. He’s a philosophical joker, blessed with a fine cynicism, slipping joker-like between the playing cards of statements, mediums, and genres and using them together to leave you—leave you what?—hanging on a question. (What Is Painting is a Baldessari painting.) Like Johns and Baldessari, Bruce Nauman, who did particularly well in the vote, also likes to de-stabilize

Cindy Sherman
Sherman in her photograph
Untitled Film Still #3, 1978.
IF SERRA SEEMS ALL
BOY, SHERMAN'S
ALL GIRL. SHE'S ALWAYS
PLAYING DRESS-UP.
The Voters
in Vanity Fair’s Poll of Greatest Living Artists

The ARTISTS

MARINA ABRAMOVIC
ZHANG HUAN
DOUG AITKEN
ALEX KATZ
CARLO ANDRI
ELLSWORTH KELLY
JOHN BALDESSARI
JEFF KOONS
ROD BLECHNER
BRICE MARSDEN
FERNANDO BOTERO
TAKASHI MURAKAMI
MARCO BRAMBILLA
SHININ MESHAT
CICELY BROWN
CATHERINE DPE
BRUCE HIGH QUALITY
ENOC PEREZ
FOUNDDATION
ED RUSCHA
CHUCK CLOSE
TOM SAHC
WALTER DE MARIA
(TIEN 7/25/2013)
SARA DONOVAN
DORIS SALCEDO
JIM DAIN
JULIAN SCHNABEL
MARLENE DUMAS
RICHARD SERRA
WALTON FORO
MARK TANSEY
DOUGLAS GORDON
ROBERT WILSON

The EXPERTS


The Most-Voted-for Artists

TOP SIX

GERHARD RICHTER
24
JASPER JOHNS
20
RICHARD SERRA
19
BRUCE NAUMAN
17
CINDY SHERMAN
12
ELLSWORTH KELLY
10

RUNNER-UP NUMBER OF VOTES

JOHN BALDESSARI
5
WILLIAM KENTRIDGE
5
JEFF KOONS
5
AI WEIWEI
5
DAVID HAMMONS
4
BRICE MARDEN
4
ED RUSCHA
4
JAMES TURRELL
4
KARA WALKER
4

tired to a distant corner—is no less telling than who occupies the center table.

Most surprising to me was how few women received votes. Jeez Louise! In fact, if the two grand Lourdes were still alive (Bourgeois and Nevelson), they would surely have added to the numbers; the same goes for Joan Mitchell. As it stands, women artists received less than 25 percent of the total number of votes cast; only two women had a place in the top 15. This result comes 50 years after the postwar women’s movement began in earnest in New York, which was the capital of the art world. Perhaps I shouldn’t be surprised. Last spring, the Robert Miller Gallery staged an old-fashioned panel called “Gender Politics in the Arts,” during which Laurie Simmons, a panelist and a veteran of the New York art world, suddenly veered off topic. Gender? Today, she said, artists talk about nothing but money.

At the same time, some big-name and ubiquitous postmodernists, never far from the discussion about contemporary art, fared poorly; perhaps too much love and hate lead, finally, to ho-hum. Damien Hirst, who aspired with his platinum-and-diamond skull to create the symbol of our age, received three votes. Dead meat? Kitsch-meister Jeff Koons received a respectable—a respectability that can be an afront—five votes. Richard Prince, one vote.

Papa Painting showed his age. Nowadays, painting is often not what those of us who love it think of as painting, but just another form of conceptual art. Many art critics do not focus upon this medium anymore, though it can still do well in the marketplace if it is well positioned (or hung). It’s true that Richter, Johns, and Kelly were in the top six, with Brice Marden not too far behind. But you can feel the age and—sorry for this, but sports analogies are required when you talk about lists—there’s not much depth on the bench. After Richter, other much-discussed German painters, such as Anselm Kiefer (3), A. R. Penck (6), and Neo Rauch (1), did not do well. And Robert Ryman was overlooked altogether. Exclude an abstract artist as gifted as Ryman? You can only imagine the situation of more traditional painters. Among those who take seriously what one usually associates with traditional painting, Antonio López García received two votes and David Hockney three. Perhaps painting is now moving to the side, as poetry has, to cultivate its private garden.

Frank Stella did not receive a single vote, which is astonishing... CONTINUED ON PAGE 199
Greatest Living Artists

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 172: if one has any institutional memory. In the 1970s, Stella was top fella at the Museum of Modern Art. He was widely regarded as the anointed successor—in the grand, art-historical narrative of progressive modernist painting—of Pollock and Barnett Newman. Some would say the waning of his reputation stems from weakness in his later work, but I disagree. (Many have also grumbled about Johns’s late work, but he did well in the poll.) Stella is a victim of the collapse of confidence in a modernist narrative that emphasizes a this-begat-that progression of style. Had he continued to make the sort of art he made in the 1960s and 1970s, he might now be perceived, as Donald Judd is, as one of the last great moderns in that story. A celebrated period piece. I admire Stella for moving on.

What has happened to Stella—cut out from today’s portrait—suggests that you should remain wary of shifting fashions in taste, particularly in a period like ours that does not have powerful convictions about how best to measure art of enduring value. (Imagine if Richter were to strike out in a Vanity Fair poll 30 years from now. Impossible? Well, Stella’s reputation in 1975 was as strong as Richter’s position now.) Another example: some of the reigning artists of the 1980s and 1990s did poorly. There was a time when you could not escape the names of Julian Schnabel (0), David Salle (1), and Francesco Clemente (0). However, if taste is fickle, it also makes sense to prepare for reappraisals. Perhaps Stella will be a hit at the Museum of Modern Art once again, in 2025.

Apart from painting, other genres also aroused less excitement than I would have anticipated. Few people who specialize in photography were asked to vote in the poll, but, even so, the lack of mainstream enthusiasm for photography is noteworthy. (Is photography a woman?) Robert Frank, the Swiss who did so much to define postwar America, did not get one vote. Nor did many talented American photographers who came of age in the later decades of the 20th century. Recently, some Continental photographers have emerged—such as Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth—who deftly capture the strangely warm/cool, vacant, and surreally disconnected character of many postmodern places. They received few votes. Indifference toward performance art is more easily explained, since it’s an idealistic genre that’s not easily seen or collected. (So much in the doing, so little in the done.) But its evanescent spirit, together with its emphasis on the body and role-playing, does offer a brilliant platform from which to address and critique a narcissistic culture.

Nauman, Hammons, and Weiwei are social performers, to be sure, but I would have guessed that Marina Abramović—recently the subject of a wildly successful retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art—would have received more than three votes.

No doubt many respected artists who received few or no votes would have done better if the voters had been asked to name 10 rather than 6 artists. But establishing a cutoff was the point: it forced voters to define this moment’s priorities. The rather weak showing of artists who can be easily defined—as a “painter,” for example, or a “photographer”—is a defining part of the portrait. (Those artists would have done better in a larger sampling.) What, after all, would you call Nauman, Sherman, or Hammons? What is Weiwei or Kentridge? Are Baldessari and Ruscha only painters? Conceptual art doesn’t cover it. The phrase is a meaningless catchall. The preference for artists who are not tied to one genre or another, or who move among genres, reflects an impatience with customary boundaries and scales, perhaps because staying within the lines seems an insufficient response to today’s world.

Floaters—and Richter and Johns, despite being painters, have a lot of “float” in their sensibilities—can more easily piece together a postmodern “I” that seems to fit the moment.

Several people indicated that they would have liked to vote for artists who died young or who have died recently—but whose work remains a vital part of this moment. They’re right. Certain ghosts are necessary to complete the society portrait. Two in particular. Cy Twombly, whose quixotic line always seems to escape. And Andy Warhol, our particular mirror.

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