13 GALLERIES

Simone Fattal's colorful parade of sumptuous ceramics.

BY ROBERTA SMITH

16 BOOKS

Four tips from the author of a new graphic memoir.

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Space-Age Dreamer

The Brooklyn Museum is revisiting Pierre Cardin's groovy futuristic fashions in a new exhibition. The designer took his space travel seriously: In 1969, he even journeyed to Houston and quizzed officials at NASA headquarters about how to stay stylish on the moon. A review by Jason Farago, Page 12.

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WHITTEN SABBATINI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Can Virgil Abloh Fit in a Museum?

An exhibition in Chicago tries to capture the essence of a prodigious fashion designer.

ART OF THE STREETS

A show in Brooklyn embraces the sprawling world of graffiti, examining its pioneers and provocateurs. A review, Page 14.

CHICAGO — There is one room in "Figures of Speech," the Virgil Abloh exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, that vividly demonstrates how his aesthetic principles, emotional range and commercial ambitions all cohabitate cozily.

On one wall is an Inez & Vinoodh triptych of a young black child playing with Louis Vuitton items, from Mr. Abloh's first ad campaign as the artistic director of Louis Vuitton men's wear design. The most striking is the middle image, in which a girl wears a psychedelically colorful sweater with a "Wizard of Oz" theme — is draped in it, actually — with small, fragile origami paper boats strewn at her feet. Her left arm is outstretched and she's gazing off into the distance — it's beatific.

But step to the other side of the room and see these photographs anew. On the floor in front of you will be a sculpture of a sort, an array of 16 numbered yellow markers, the kind used to denote the location of evidence at a crime scene. (What's not on any information card is that 16 is the number of shots a Chicago police officer fired at Laquan McDonald in 2014, killing him.)

On the floor, there is tragedy. On the wall, there is hope.

It was also striking just how many people stepped right around the ghost on the floor — barely noticing it, if at all, as they snapped photos of an ad.

This midcareer retrospective of Mr. Abloh's work turns on unanticipated juxtapositions — visual, sociopolitical and even structural. As an artist, he's a light-touch conceptualist, his work a series of small disassemblies and reassemblies. Mr. Abloh trained as an architect and was Kanye West's right-hand man for several years before branching out and becoming a fashion designer for Louis Vuitton and his own line, Off-White; a D.J.; a visual imagineer for other clients; and a collaborator with Nike, Ikea, the Red Cross and others.

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On the wall at the Virgil Abloh exhibition in Chicago, Inez & Vinoodh's ad campaign images for Louis Vuitton, and in the foreground, "Options" (2019), consisting of yellow evidence markers.

Virgil Abloh: 'Figures of Speech'
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

JON CARAMANICA | EXHIBITION REVIEW

Can Virgil Abloh Fit in a Museum?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE C11

He is the standard-bearer for the internet-speed globalization of haute post-hip-hop style, suggesting that the chasm between taking a marker to your shoes and ending up the head designer at an iconic fashion house may not be as vast as it once seemed. That he has achieved so much so rapidly is its own provocation, one amplified by "Figures of Speech." It is his first museum exhibition, and fundamentally it asks how a museum — by practice, a static institution — can capture and convey the work of someone who moves quickly, has prodigious output, and who isn't nearly as preoccupied with what he did yesterday as what he might do tomorrow.

HIP-HOP, STREETWEAR, skateboarding and graffiti are all art practices born of resistance, and by the time Mr. Abloh found them, they were eking their way into institutions. More than any of his generational peers, he has applied their disruptive urges in new contexts.

His art is about besting capitalism — from within. He has a just-make-it ethos; the essence of his work is process as much as product. In a 2017 lecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design — published as a book, "Insert Complicated Title Here" — he focused on "shortcuts," about how changing an existing thing just 3 percent is often enough. "I'm sure that you're trying to challenge yourself to invent something new, trying to be avant-garde," he told the students. "Basically, that's impossible."

For Mr. Abloh, there is no art practice outside the mode of consumption. You sense that for him, the sneaker in the store (which costs you money) and the picture of the sneaker in the store that goes on Instagram (which costs you time) serve effectively the same purpose.

That same blitheness is at work in "Figures of Speech," curated by Michael Darling, which gives equal weight and space to Mr. Abloh's most meaningful work and his loosest-conceived projects. Perhaps most jarringly, the space given over to his signature work — his fashion design for Louis Vuitton and Off-White, his various sneaker prototypes for Nike — is rather small.

In the second gallery, clothes hang on racks that make it tough to appreciate the unusual details — whether in terms of silhouette, or design in-jokes — that Mr. Abloh has made his stock in trade. At the end of one rack are some prototype Vuitton pieces with a strip of paper attached that reads "LEWIS VUITTON," an intriguing in-house tweaking of a design lineage that could also fit in at a group exhibition at a Bushwick art gallery. (Such garments were never actually produced.) Later, a grid of Abloh/Nike prototype sneakers has been set at ground level. Presumably artifacts like these are what draw many people to the exhibition, but the presentation minimizes their importance and their strengths.

There is a kind of exhibition that's effective for work like this, something more process-focused that shows the inspiration and the innovation side by side — a display of tools, techniques and gambits.

In places here, that happens — mentioning Calder on the wall text next to a mobile-like sculpture made of pink insulation foam, or pointing out the Caravaggio that was referenced in his earliest clothing line, Pyrex Vision. But some are obscured: the oversize version of the clear CD case Mr. Abloh designed for Kanye West's "Yeezus" album is missing any mention of Peter Saville, a mentor of Mr. Abloh's, who did something similar for New Order.

BORROWING IS IN MR. ABLOH'S DNA, and one of the unlikely pleasures of this exhibition is the way he freely absorbs the work of others. One wall is completely wheatpasted with posters of the Chicago rapper Chief Keef wearing a Supreme T-shirt, photographed by Ari Marcopoulos — it all clings to the wall like a proud stunt, one of several places where Mr. Abloh imports a vernacular context into the museum setting. Similarly, there are works made of concrete cast to resemble outdoor benches that would be manna to skateboarders.

Mr. Abloh also applies that mode of creative direction to his own emotions. In one case, he displays some of his gold and plati-

Right, Virgil Abloh's designs on racks, which obscure their unusual details, though glimpses of some of the works reveal intriguing in-house tweaking; below right, a grid of Mr. Abloh's sneaker prototypes; middle, the oversize version of the Abloh-designed CD case for Kanye West's "Yeezus" album.

JON CARAMANICA | ART REVIEW

The Graffiti Whirlwind Comes Together, Bit by Bit

A show flaunts the art form's pioneers and provocateurs.

Beyond the Streets
Through Sept. 29 at 25 Kent Avenue, Brooklyn; beyondthestreets.com.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER that graffiti was never just one thing. Within a few short years from when scrawled tags first went up on walls and trains, graffiti became marketing, fine art, politics and more. The form evolved rapidly and spread widely, captured in an eternal tug of war between external legitimacy and internal credibility, between the outlaw fringes and solvency.

Admirably, the exhibition "Beyond the Streets" tells both of those stories side by side, and sometimes all at once. Curated by Roger Gastman, it takes up two floors of a huge new development in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Less a narratively driven exhibition than a themed amusement park of all things graffiti and post-graffiti, it embraces the movement's many tributaries — even ones that seem at odds with one another, via an epically scaled show that takes in historical images and contemporary art, hyperstylized abstraction and gut-level immediacy, news accounts and ephemera.

"Beyond the Streets" is at its best when assessing how the meaning of the graffiti impulse changes when the context is moving between oppositional and welcoming. Among the most striking contributions to the show are a series of lived environments — "The Vandal's Bedroom" by Todd James is a vitrine holding an imagined graffiti writer's private space. Small pieces cover every surface, capturing the tension between the interiority of artistic impulse, the public presentation of graffiti, and the desire by outsiders to keep it contained. Just behind it, the tattoo artist Bert Krak and the artist Alexis Ross installed a house-front decorated in tattoo flash sheets, a blend of the outlaw and the familial that on some days serves as a functioning tattoo parlor.

Much of the great graffiti has been lost to time (and visionless authorities) — Henry Chalfant's photos here serve both as art and historical record. But some of the most provocative works in the show suggest that graffiti has evolved far beyond letters and form. Take José Parlá's free-standing Stonehenge of scraped-up collage slabs that look like they were cut off construction sites. They suggest that urban decay itself — the way the city acquires and sheds layers, and has its past always peering out from underneath the present — is, in essence, graffiti.

Graffiti is a career now, as well. The exhibition's second half, especially, acknowledges the way graffiti has become consonant with marketing, which is why the renegade gestures in those sections speak loudest: Craig Costello's drip art mailboxes, or the smiley faces painted using spray-can-wielding drones by KATSU, though those are less thrilling than his invasions of public space documented in the show's catalog.

Once rebuffed almost everywhere, graffiti is now welcome almost anywhere: other art practices, other media, other philosophical zones. Look at the career of Futura 2000, represented in this show by one of his "Pointman" sculptures and some paintings, but who also has recently collaborated with the Mets, and also with Virgil Abloh (who is himself something of a graffitist). But maybe that's not so different than the early-to-mid 1980s photos displayed here of storefront gates turned into exuberant murals — graffiti as intrusion, but also embrace.

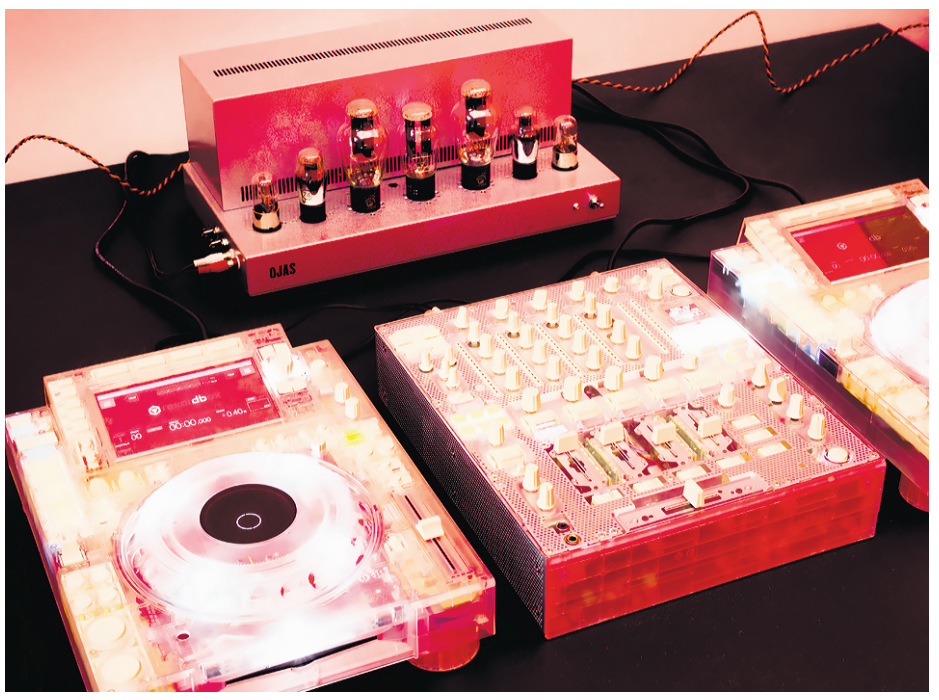
PHOTOGRAPHS BY WHITTEN SABBATINI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

num paper-clip jewelry (by the celebrity jeweler Jacob Arabo), made-real versions of pieces he once fashioned for himself out of actual paper clips, an aspirational nod to the luxury rapper chains he never expected to be able to afford.

Just across the gallery from those pieces is one of the show's most convincing arrangements. On the left is Mr. Abloh's D.J. setup — austerely beautiful wooden speakers (by Devon Turnbull), glimmering CD turntables (by Pioneer DJ) — presented as a shrine. And hanging on the wall to the right is a cease and desist letter from the United Nations chiding Mr. Abloh for using its logo on fliers for D.J. gigs.

There it is — reverence and flippancy all together, and a reminder that flippancy can often be a byproduct of reverence. And yes, Mr. Abloh is in on the joke. A biographical video near the end of the show includes a scene in which he waters, with a hose, the "WET GRASS" rug he made with Ikea. By the gift shop, I spied some tickets on a table that read "Virgil Abloh: 'Bathroom Pass.'"

Mr. Abloh even folds critique into his work — a rug in the first room is imprinted with an arched-eyebrows quotation from a Four Pins story about Pyrex Vision in 2013. An information slide in the fashion gallery alludes to some unkind things the fashion designer Raf Simons once said about Mr. Abloh: "Simons described Off-White as not bringing anything original to fashion. Abloh immediately responded with the collection 'Nothing New.'"



When Mr. Abloh is playful, he can be exhilarating — there's serious joy in the gallery that includes a pile of his Ikea collaborations, which looks as if it were assembled via tornado. When he works in the métier of consumer goods, he understands how to differentiate just enough from the norm to stoke passion. But the pieces here that hew closest to traditional artistic disciplines are the least inspiring.

More than a dozen are marked as having been made in 2019 and as belonging to a private collection. Mostly they are room fillers: grand-scaled billboards, an all-black Sunoco sign sinking into the ground, and so on. Taken together, they betray an anxiety about what type of work might belong in a museum exhibition. They eat a lot of space, but don't communicate a lot of information.

Mr. Abloh's best work could fill these rooms several times over, just in a very different fashion. He is a tinkerer. Rather than a simple grid of sneakers, what about a video of him drawing on them, or cutting one up and making something new? Instead of racks of largely obscured clothes, what about the WhatsApp messages between him and his colleagues that led to his creative decisions? For Mr. Abloh, paterfamilias to a generation that understands garments are to be modified, not simply worn, that would have been apt. (The show's hefty, excellent catalog embraces this spirit, deploying a titillating level of detail.)

As this exhibition is standing there, still, Mr. Abloh is plowing through ever more references on his Instagram stories. What about a screen that displays his real-time preoccupations? The notion that the museum can only hold finished works is an obsolete one.

THOUGH THERE IS NO room for true hands-on interactivity in this exhibition — probably a crowd control measure — at least two works elsewhere in the museum do invite interaction: Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "'Untitled' (The End)," an endlessly replenished stack of paper that you can take freely from, and Ernesto Neto's "Water Falls From My Breast to the Sky," basically a divan you can sit on, covered by crocheted nets extending to the top of the building.

But Mr. Abloh still found ways to break the borders of a museum show. Security guards wear limited-edition cool-blue Nike Air Force 1's that he designed for the occasion. One guard told me he'd been offered $7,000 for his pair. (They're currently going for around $2,000 to $3,000 on resale sites.) And the exhibition extends into the gift shop, which sells a rotating collection of T-shirts, posters, art pieces and $5,000 gradient-painted chairs — almost everyone I saw bought something.

Millions of people rarely, if ever, experience art in a museum setting. They see it on the streets, in their clothes and sneakers, on the walls around them. The way for art to have wide impact is to set it free — Mr. Abloh understands that his real museum is the world outside these walls.

Capitalizing on his relationships with established brands, he set up de facto satellite locations for the show. At the NikeLab installation next to the Nike store on Michigan Avenue, there was an ocean of shredded sneaker bits in the windows and walls. Inside, you could piece together D.I.Y. projects with markers, rubber ink stamps and various embellishments — I filled in a coloring book outline of an Air Jordan Spiz'ike in shades of pink, green and brown, and pocketed a couple of pink chenille swooshes.

Louis Vuitton opened an orange-themed pop-up location in the West Loop neighborhood carrying items from the FW19 collection. (Weeks later, New York had a similar green-themed one.) The space was filled with life-size (and larger) mannequins that were surprisingly emotional, and wouldn't have been out of place at the museum.

But perhaps the greatest provocation — the most ineffable artistic moment — came at the main Louis Vuitton flagship store on Michigan Avenue, which was carrying several pieces of Abloh-designed clothing emblazoned with references to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. One varsity jacket had a hand-embroidered patch on the back in the shape of Africa.In this temple of high fashion were clothes that shouted their radical intentions, locating black history at the very center of the aesthetic conversation.

It was moving, and also undaunted — a dash of capitalist conceptualism hiding in plain sight.

Virgil Abloh: 'Figures of Speech'
Through Sept. 22 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; 312-280-2660, mcachicago.org. The exhibition comes to the Brooklyn Museum in 2020, after stops at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and the ICA Boston.

Top, a D.J. setup is presented as a shrine; above, "Dorm Room," 2019, which includes a pile of his Ikea collaborations, seemingly assembled via tornado; left, a coat prototype.

DAN BRADICA

DAN BRADICA

JOSÉ PARLÁ/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; DAN BRADICA

Far left, paintings and sculptures by Futura 2000 at "Beyond the Streets," a graffiti and street-art exhibition in Brooklyn. Above, smiley faces painted using spray-can-wielding drones by KATSU. Left, sculptures and paintings by José Parlá.