

There's no denying that each of this year's gallery exhibitions, from the museum-worthy to the modest, was considered through the veil of the precarious market and the dozens of closings it wrought. But though sales may have been slow, dealers remained optimistic, at least where the art itself was concerned, presenting a cornucopia of rich offerings, particularly this fall. Here are some that most stuck with us.

"Picasso: Mosqueteros" at Gagosian Gallery, March 26 – June 6, 2009

"Picasso: Mosqueteros," a show of paintings and prints circa 1962–72, looked better than most museum shows, installed in Gagosian's elegant, light-filled 21st Street space. The 50 or so paintings and 40-odd prints challenged a common (and unfair) analysis of his last works, proving that his works during the last decade before his death in 1973 did not in fact fall into a crevasse of incoherent nonsense and skittishness. The partly comic, partly erotic works were inspired by masters like Rembrandt, Velázquez, and Manet and are tinged with Shakespearean references. The exhibition opened in an especially poignant, perhaps favorable, time, when the art market — and its woolly notion of what it takes to be an artist — had been ripped apart at the seams. This was one of the most refreshing shows — full stop — of the year.

— Marina Cashdan

Caragh Thuring: "Assembly" at Simon Preston, Sept. 9 – Nov. 1, 2009

I was reminded of this exhibition recently, while reading Manohla Dargis's review of the excellent new James Cameron flick *Avatar* in the *New York Times*. Of the actor Stephen Lang, who plays, as Dargis colorfully puts it, "a military man turned warrior for hire. A cartoon of masculinity," she writes: "Mr. Lang, who until this year had long been grievously underemployed, tears into the role like a starved man gorging on steak." That was the sort of effect Caragh Thuring's show seemed to have on fans of good, smart painting this past fall.

I went to visit it with two whip-smart colleagues, Daniel Kunitz and Ben Davis, both of whom went on to praise Thuring's work rather effusively (in the *Village Voice* and on *Artnet*, respectively). Kunitz: "Thuring... dissects paintings in order to reanimate the medium. ... Some of the shapes are hard-edged, some soft; some of the drawing is precise, some gestural. The resulting mix is a complex melody without stuffiness or nostalgia." True. Davis: "Thuring's [paintings]... are... arresting, and possess a certain mystery. ... To say that these are the best paintings one has seen in a long time is, in the end, perhaps true — but that statement also has a melancholy ring to it, because in their way, Thuring's paintings are about what a lonely thing it is today to take painting seriously." I agree, I agree! I can't put it better than these two, and so am not going to try. Except to add this: In an interview in the *Paris Review* recently, poet Frederick Seidel says, "I like poems that for all the power of the sentiments expressed, and all the power to upset and offend, are so well made that they're achieved things." These Caragh Thuring paintings are achieved things. — Sarah Douglas

Piero Manzoni at Gagosian Gallery, Jan. 24 – March 21

As *LA Times* art critic Christopher Knight tweeted recently, *New Yorker* writer Calvin Tomkins has indeed bestowed upon two of megadealer Larry Gagosian's megagalleries in New York's Chelsea art district the status of museums. It was a subtle move: Slipped in among Tompkins' *newyorker.com* feature, "The Best Museum Shows of 2009," where shows at the Hammer, the Met, the Whitney, and the New Museum also figured, were the "Picasso: Mosqueteros" show at Gagosian's 21st Street space and the Manzoni show at his sprawling space on 24th. I mention this because, while museums get everyone's knickers in a twist over ethics disputes and layoffs and admission prices and whatnot, Gagosian just keeps casually and seemingly effortlessly putting on these quiet little free-to-the-public blockbusters. (Remember the dazzling Ferus show in 2000?) The Manzoni was a stunner, and brought to light much of his little-known work, and Manzoni's mug on the show's poster, where, true to form, he looked like a mischievous kid, was alone worth a visit. — SD