



Top: "Abstract Petunias" by Blanche Lazzell. Middle: a still from "Annotated Plans for an Evacuation," a video by Alex Hubbard, in "Not About Paint." Left: "Mindless" by Michael Mazur. Right: detail from "Daniela Rivera: Growth."

Contemplations on canvas

Painting's power led the way in strong shows

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The Boston gallery scene has gotten some bad press lately. Globe critic Sebastian Smee called it anemic; a story in The New York Times termed it the weakest part of Boston's contemporary art scene. It's true that the number of galleries presenting top-flight contemporary art has dropped in recent years. The struggling economy has left its mark.

But in 2011, there has been no lack of strong shows — in particular strong painting shows. Paintings are the mainstay of commercial galleries; they're easier to sell than video or installation art. This year, many exhibitions demonstrated a fresh, deep, continued exploration of where painting has come from and what it can be. There have also been a handful of exhibits put together with such thought and care, they would make small museum shows. Here are my highlights of the year, in no particular order:

Carroll and Sons has frequently mounted shows that were more than the sum of their parts. The standout was David Ording's "Reconocer," an ambitious update of Diego Velázquez's 1656 masterpiece "Las Meninas," itself a triumphant investigation into painting's power. Ording painted a mirror image of that huge work, and set a giant mirror across the gallery from it, adding to the scene the space the viewer inhabits, and inviting us into the artist's illusionistic reality.

"Not About Paint," a keen group show curated by Evan J. Garza at Steven Zevitas Gallery had very little paint in it, but every work explored painting's conceits, from Alex Da Corte's floor piece made with soda to Alex Hubbard's video in which he used a car as a canvas.

Daniela Rivera had a busy year. In "Growth" at LaMontagne Gallery and then later in "Close Distance," a mostly disappointing group show at the Mills Gallery at the Boston Center for the Arts, Rivera reckoned with painting and architectural space. For "Growth," Rivera wittily riffed on British artist Richard Long's environmental art — not to mention the artificiality of painting and the white-cube gallery — by covering floor and wall with paintings of grass. Her more dramatic installation "Fatiga material (Material

The year's top 10

- "David Ording: Reconocer" (Carroll and Sons)
- "Not About Paint" (Steven Zevitas Gallery)
- "Daniela Rivera: Growth" (LaMontagne Gallery)
- "Dana Frankfort: HI" (LaMontagne Gallery)
- "Michael Mazur: Black Paintings" (Barbara Krakow Gallery)
- "A Debt to Pleasure" (Montserrat College of Art Gallery)
- "Blanche Lazzell (1878-1956): An American Modernist, Paris to Provincetown" (Berta Walker Gallery)
- "John O'Reilly and Marsden Hartley: Two Kindred Spirits" (Howard Yezerski Gallery)
- "Betty, Charlie, Francesca & George" (Samson)
- "Shellburne Thurber: 9 Wellington Street" (Barbara Krakow Gallery)

Fatigue)," in "Close Distance," had minimalist white canvases holding up what looked like falling architectural beams, positioning painting between art's downfall and its support system.

Also at LaMontagne, Dana Frankfort's delicious text paintings in her show "HI" were so painterly, the words almost lost their meaning in exuberant dances of gesture and color. Her landscape paintings likewise upended expectations. Everything leaned toward the recognizable, and then slithered away so fast that all these paintings spoke of, in the end, was the mystery and possibility of paint and imagination.

There was a similar fervor, not to mention sheer virtuosity, in the late Michael Mazur's show "Black Paintings" at Barbara Krakow Gallery. Mazur died in 2009. He made these works in 2007, contemplating the moral ravages of war. Plucking an extensive array of techniques from his toolbox, including layering, stenciling, dripping, and airbrushing, Mazur created deep, breathable space packed with nightmarish imagery and a magical interplay of

GALLERIES, Page 4