

The Defining Artworks of 2020

BY THE EDITORS OF ARTNEWS

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For much of this year, galleries, museums, and art spaces across the world were shuttered by Covid-19. Although art remained locked away from public view, that didn't mean artists weren't busy at work, crafting paintings, sculptures, photographs, films, videos, and more that spoke to the mood of 2020. Whether in the form of film anthologies released digitally or protest-minded projects that took place outside the walls of art spaces entirely, artists continued to mine new territory and, in the process, redefine what art could be.

This list below surveys the 20 works that came to define this year. Included in it are new works responding directly to the pandemic and the ongoing Black Lives Matter protests sparked by the police killing of George Floyd at the end of May. Some works created to address such topics were fleeting and glimpsed only for a short period of time; others are permanent and will likely be seen by many in the years to come. By tackling collective fears and structural change, these pieces made us hopeful for a world that could look very different in 2021.

Also included on this list are a few works made well before 2020 that were seen anew. Viewed in light of Covid-19 and calls for accountability, these works may signify something entirely different than they once did, but they are no less meaningful than they were before.

To look back on the past 12 months in art-making, below is a survey of some of the most important artworks made or presented in a new light in 2020.

17**Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is. . . (Man with a Camera)* (1983/2009)**

Photo : Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York/©Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In the hours following its triumph over Donald Trump in the Presidential election last month, the Biden-Harris campaign team released a video thanking voters and calling for unity in the days ahead. The video features shots of Americans from different backgrounds posing behind empty picture frames—a direct reference to one of the most seminal pieces in performance art history, Lorraine O'Grady's 1983 performance *Art Is...* In the first iteration of the piece, participants carried empty gold picture frames during New York's annual African American Day Parade, periodically leaping from the float to invite the community to cast themselves as framed artworks. In a statement posted to Instagram, O'Grady said she'd given the campaign her blessing in advance, writing, "I gave to them and they gave to me." —*Tessa Solomon*