

The Best Art I Saw in 2019

By [Sarah Hotchkiss](#) Dec 19



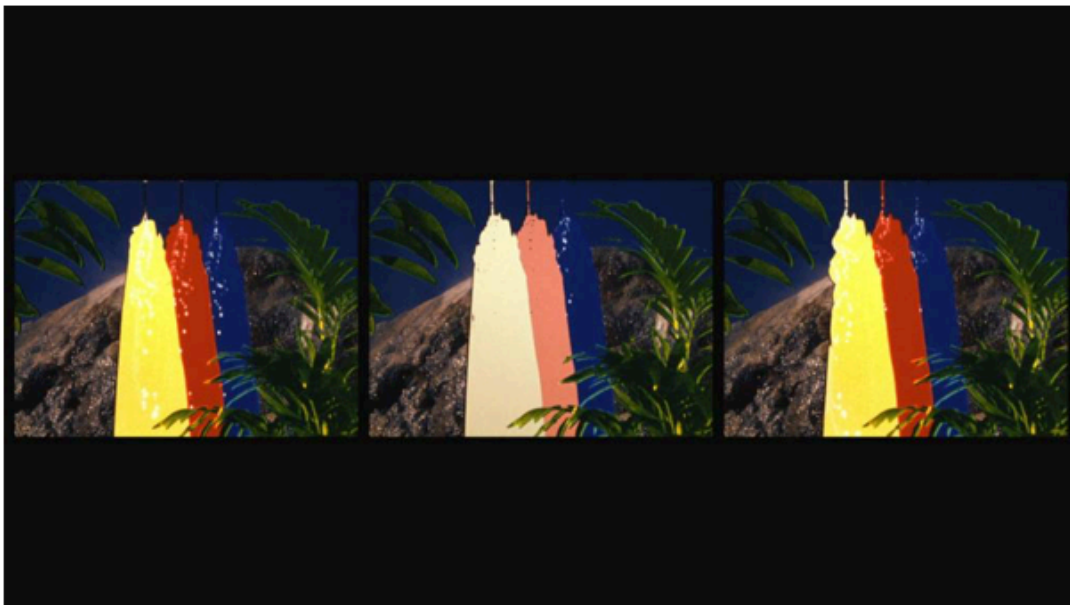
Who knew the last year of the decade was going to be such a rollercoaster? As if seeking to cram as much drama, as many ethical debates and emotional farewells into the end of the 2010s as possible, 2019 stood out as a year of turmoil and reckoning in the Bay Area art scene.

Worldwide, artists, audiences and institutions grappled with the morality of relying on money made through opioid and teargas sales, or the development of surveillance technologies. Locally, we debated the meaning of images—and how to weigh an artist’s long-ago intention against contemporary interpretations. We lost local heroes, arts spaces and community hubs. And we are soon to lose a significant number of irreplaceable pieces of Northern California art. But in answer to all that, in spite of all that, there was: So. Much. Good. Art.

My highly personal, in-no-way-comprehensive list of the best art I saw in 2019 is particularly stacked with video and film work this year. These works, events and exhibitions stood out against a backdrop of general disorder, fortifying me for whatever’s to come in the year ahead.

Best 18-Minute Watching Experience

Pat O’Neill, ‘Saugus Series’



Pat O’Neill, ‘Saugus Series,’ 1974/2014 (composite). (© Lookout Mountain Studios; photo: courtesy Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles; Mitchell-Innes and Nash, New York; and Monitor Gallery, Rome)

I don't know what I expected when I popped into *Three Answers*, an SFMOMA show of Pat O'Neill's work curated by Tanya Zimbardo, but it definitely wasn't to sit with my jaw dropped for 18 minutes while the experimental filmmaker's *Saugus Series* played in front of me. The 1974 film, reworked in 2014 into a three-channel presentation, combines layered clips, everyday audio and sometimes magical film effects that are slightly impossible to imagine doing now, in the thoroughly digital era. At one point, pleasant orchestral music plays as blue, red and yellow paint "pours" over a moving image of a water-covered rock; it's wonderfully surreal. I can only hope this work, now part of SFMOMA's collection, will be screened again and again for years to come.