



A photograph in a series by Ana Mendieta, “Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints — Face),” 1972, in the “Twisted” section at the Met Breuer.

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Postwar Art Gets a Nervy Makeover

At the Met Breuer, “Delirious” proposes a new version of art history, one short on blue-chip names but with a terrific soundtrack.

By ROBERTA SMITH SEPTEMBER 14, 2017

Big thematic exhibitions are almost always by definition flawed propositions. A curator comes up with a concept — often a single word — and selects work by different artists that lend it substance. Untethered by style, medium or geography, such ventures can seem both arbitrary and amorphous.

But if they give art history a different spin or shape, they can also be valuable, warts and all. This is the case with [“Delirious: Art at the Limits of Reason, 1950-1980”](#) at the Met Breuer, a nervy multimedia survey of postwar art. It is the third large theme show spearheaded by the museum’s department of modern and contemporary art in five years, after “Regarding Warhol,” in 2012 — a messy sprawl of work by artists who for better and usually worse were indebted to Andy Warhol — and “Unfinished,” the weird patchwork that inaugurated the museum’s Met Breuer annex 18 months ago. “Unfinished” reached back to the Renaissance with often fabulous eccentricities and then flamed out in its area of concentration: modern and contemporary art.

“Delirious” has been organized by Kelly Baum, a veteran of the previous curatorial teams. She seems determined to do better — and for the most part she has.

Ms. Baum is trying a new approach to postwar art. Her thesis is that in the wake of the barbarity of World War II, irrationality became a widespread focus among artists, who wanted to “simulate or stimulate delirium,” Ms. Baum writes in the catalog. The word’s Latin roots are “de” (away from) and “lire” (the furrow of the plow) — or in contemporary parlance, to jump the tracks.

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