NEW & IMPROVED FOR 2011

FEATURE INCLUDES:

280 LOCAL WINNERS IN SEVEN CATEGORIES
(THAT'S A LOT!) 

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It seems silly, but there are certain markers in life—birthdays, anniversaries, special holidays. For us, the Best of Baltimore issue has always been one of those markers. It’s our way of reflecting back on another great year and seeing just how far we’ve come. We get to celebrate old friends, anoint new favorites, and basically bask in the greatness that is our city. Of course, we always have to change things up a little, just for fun. So this year: Top-10 and Top-five lists! Yup, as an example, we don’t just tell you Baltimore’s best cupcake, but Baltimore’s 10 best cupcakes.

You’re welcome.
ARTS

BY JOHN LEWIS

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ARTS SHOWCASE

MARYLAND TRADITIONS FOLK LIFE FESTIVAL

There may be arts showcases that are bigger or fancier, but none of them can match the diversity and scope of the Maryland Traditions Folk Life Festival. Held at the Creative Alliance in Highlandtown, it features a staggering array of artists and musicians from around the state. This year’s event included Native-American, jazz, blues, Greek, Irish, doo-wop, rock and roll, and Persian music—the Persian National Music Ensemble is based in Rosedale!—along with dancers, screen painters, storytellers, bakers, decal carvers, weavers, boat builders, printers, and more. They’re all incredibly accessible, giving performances and demonstrations and answering questions from festival-goers. It’s impossible to leave this event without gaining a deeper appreciation of the arts and the important role artists play in all of our communities. marylandtraditions.org/festival.

BOUTIQUE GALLERY

End Times Trading Post

Artist Adam Slab has a great eye for detail, and it’s on full display at his Fells Point gallery. Virtually every surface is a piece of art in itself, from the ceiling and floor to the wall stencils, display cases, radiator covers, and counters. Even the locks on the display cases are attention-grabbing, with figures of Indian deities on each of the lock heads. End Times specializes in wearable art—the racks are filled with limited edition T-shirts (some by Baltimore native Aaron LaCrade) and a large case is loaded with customized sports shoes. More of an installation than a commercial space, the shop itself is a work of art. 1709 Aisicenna Street, endstimestrading.jumble.com.

MIXTAPE

BLAGSTARR: THE MIXTAPE

Blagstarr hasn’t fully lived up to his potential over the past year, collaborating with M.I.A. on overwhelming tracks like “Lemme Hump You” and exhibiting a penchant for Prince-like overdubbing as a solo artist (see the Divine EP). But the musician got his groove back with this dynamic mixtape featuring M.I.A., Talib Kweli, Diplo, Mos Def, and Rye Rye, his protegé. It was a welcome return to form that showcased his amped and ample skills as producer, solo artist, collaborator, and DJ—all in one, hour-long blast. blagstarrmusic.com.

MUSEUM

The Walters Art Museum

At a time when museums don’t have the cash to mount blockbuster shows, The Walters collaborated with the British Museum and the Cleveland Museum of Art to produce a sparkling gem, Treasures of Heaven: Complied

BANDS & MUSICIANS

1. Wye Oak: The most influential duo on the local indie scene upped its game with a superbly elegant disc. Civilian, and exhaustive tour. wyeoakmusic.com

2. Celebration: The band split from major label 4AD and began releasing new music via its website with stunning results. celebrationmusic.com

3. Michael Formanek: A formidable presence at Pebbleby, the bassist/composer put together an all-star band for his fantastic Richmond debut, The Rub and Speed Change, emboldening you.com

4. J Roddy Walston & the Business: They’re still the hardest-working rock band in Baltimore—or anywhere else for that matter. jrodwywalstonandthebusiness.com

5. Rye Rye: The catchy “Never Will Be Mine” single with Robyn was a summer highlight that should rekindle interest in her much-delayed full-length disc. ryeeyemusic.com

6. Ponytail: This is something of a twosie, with the band crafting its gloriously spazzy art-rock and guitarist Dustin Wong emerging as a compelling solo act, as well. myspace.com/ponytailazumes

7. Manuel Barruecos: One of the greatest classical guitarist in the world, Barruecos releases consistently excellent recordings on his Teneo Music label, including this year’s Tablao CD: asmenaco.com

8. Shodekeh: The city’s premier beatboxer continues sharpening his skills through a wide range of artistic collaborations that include Ethel Ehat, Towson University’s dance department, and the BSO. myspace.com/shodekeh

9. Archersun: You’ve got to love a band that can play a stellar set at the Zappa statue dedication and record a transcendent version of the Jimi Hendrix classic, “The Highwayman,” that would make Johnny Cash weep. archersun.blogspot.com

10. Dan Deacon: Deacon hasn’t put out much new music lately but if you’re scoring the new Francis Ford Coppola film, as Deacon is, you make the list. myspace.com/dandeacon

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Theaters

Everyman: After 26 years, Everyman continues to change and grow—(Shakespeare) was particularly impressive last season—which bodes well for its upcoming move to the Westside. 1779 N. Charles Street, 410-763-2030, everymantheatre.org

Centerstage: Longtime artistic director Ira Lewis went out triumphantly with an excellent production of Porter’s The Homecoming, and a new era begins. 722 N. Calvert Street, 410-323-0030, centerstage.org

Single Carrot: Excellent ensemble acting and bold programming have made Single Carrot an essential part of the local theater scene. 130 W. North Avenue, 443-944-9250, singlecarrot.com

Hipodrome: This gorgeous venue is still the city’s mecca for Broadway musicals. 131 N. Rainbow Street, 410-447-4900, france-montparnasse.com

Strand: With its emphasis on female playwrights and relevant social issues, this company adds another dimension to Station North’s flourishing theater scene. 1823 N. Charles Street, 443-874-4017, strand-theater.org

ACQUISITION (1920) PURCHASES GLOBE COLLECTION

Late last year, Globe Poster announced it was closing after 82 years, and it seemed the city would forever lose a beloved institution. Over the years, Globe designed and printed day-glo saturated posters for virtually every African-American musician of note—from Howlin’ Wolf and James Brown to Prince and Tupac—and that legacy and design aesthetic, which was developed right here in Baltimore, was in danger of extinction. At the eleventh hour, MICA purchased Globe’s extensive collection of printing materials for use by their printmaking and design students. And they went one better by hiring Globe co-owner Bob Cicero to teach a graduate printmaking class, thereby ensuring that Globe’s style will be passed along to future generations of printers and poster designers. MICA, 1300 W. Mount Royal Avenue, 410-669-9200.

ONLINE GRAPHIC NOVEL

Steve Ogden’s Moon Town
As the pages and panels of this serialized novel mount, Ogden’s...
PHOTOGRAPHER

SOFIA SILVA:

Sofia Silva's recent exhibit at the C. Grimaldis Gallery, *Meditations on the Landscape of Desire*, was one of the best photography shows in recent memory. Devoid of all people and focusing on the artificiality in the environment around us, her panoramic shots of parking lots, shopping centers, housing subdivisions, and industrial parks underscore the beauty and banality of consumer culture. And, like William Eggleston's best work, they're simply gorgeous photos, well composed and thoughtfully chosen shots that show us our world in ways that allow us to stand back and actually see it. sofiasilva.com.

PUBLIC-ART PROJECT

Lighting the Bromo Seltzer Arts Tower

You might have noticed something strange and wonderful happening at the Bromo Seltzer Arts Tower in June. As part of the iconic building's centennial celebration, artist Kelley Bell projected a fantastic array of shapes and colors onto the clock faces at night. Bell's piece turned a fixture on the local skyline—one that lots of folks likely take for granted—into an arresting piece of public art that will hopefully inspire similar projects in the future. Bromo Seltzer Arts Tower, 21 S. Edraw Street, 443-874-3596.

EXHIBITION

MATERIAL GIRLS

Featuring work by eight contemporary black women artists, this delightful show at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum succeeds by repurposing everyday objects and materials into stunning artwork. Its many highlights include Chalkie Booker transforming strips of rubber tires into captivating sculpture that coils, curves, and twists into the imagination; Renée Stout turning commonplace furniture, knick-knacks, and charmes into sacred spaces and shrines; and Baltimore's Joyce Scott binding, weaving, and assembling pieces that exude both political awareness and personal truth, pictured. And Karen Hnessinger does wonders with pink plastic shopping bags. Reginald F. Lewis Museum, 830 E. Pratt Street, 443-263-1000, africamerican文化和.org.
ALL-STAR CURATORIAL TEAM
MATT GROENING, GARY PANTER, AND REBECCA HOFFBERGER

AVAM's Rebecca Hoffberger scored a major coup when she got Simpsons creator Matt Groening and artist/comics legend Gary Panter to co-curate the What Makes Us Smile? show with her. Besides bringing some very real star power to the exhibition, Groening and Panter contributed something out of the ordinary (even for AVAM) curatorial choices that added a few extra smiles. The dynamic duo's inclusion of artist Pedro Bell (best known for his classic Parliament/ Funkadelic album covers) and a tribute to MAD magazine were particularly inspired and dovetailed nicely with witty and whimsical paintings by local visionary John Root Hopkins and other knee-slapppers. Topping it off, Rev. Altor's "unflattering" portraits of the all-star curators were quite a hoot, too. AVAM, 800 Key Highway, 410-244-1900.

PUBLIC PROGRAMMING
Enoch Pratt Library
Central Location
Where else could you, over the course of three months, hear financial guru/philanthropist Eddie Brown, Teach for America founder Wendy Kopp, consumer advocate Ralph Nader, rapper Prodigy, poet Andrei Codrescu, National Book Award winner Jaimy Gordon, and Senator Barbara Mikulski speak? For free!

TRIBUTE BAND
Technicolor Motor Home
For years, Steely Dan didn't tour because their songs were too darn difficult to replicate onstage. And when they did tour, they had something of an orchestra in tow. So it was surprising to learn that a local group was tackling such elegant and beloved pop music. Led by Crack the Sky keyboardist Glenn Workman, the band not only plays selections from every Steely Dan album, it does so with the necessary precision and passion, horns and back-up singers included. TMM proves you can buy a thrill-just check out one of their shows at The Recher or 8X10. technicolormotorhome.com

COFFEE-TABLE BOOK
MAKING HISTORY! MARKING ARTMFXCA

This book is an inside job, in that it was produced by MICA to commemorate its long history, which stretches back to 1826. As such, it could be more than an elaborate prouc piece, but this volume far exceeds any narrow-minded expectations. In fact, it raises the bar for all future institutional history books. Doug Frost, MICA's vice president for development emeritus, did his homework to craft a well-researched, highly readable narrative that traces the school's evolution from the Industrial Revolution to the digital age. And he examines that evolution within the context of the city's history, which broadens the scope of the book to make it a must-have for local history buffs. It also doesn't hurt that it's lavishly illustrated with tons of archival photos and gorgeously designed by MICA's Abbott Miller and Jeremy Hoffman. mica.edu.

TOP FIVE

1. John Waters: Waters put a witty and intelligent spin on the memoir with Role Models, a multi-layered look at his influences: desenblondnews.com
2. Laura Lippman: The just keeps getting better, as her new novel, The Most Dangerous Thing, attests: lauralippman.com
4. Michael Kimball: One of the funniest guys around were he, one of the saddest and most poignant books that you'll ever read: michael-kimball.com
5. Stephen Dixon: What Is All This?, an enormous, and economically justified, short-story collection proved, once again, that Dixon is a master of the art of fiction.