

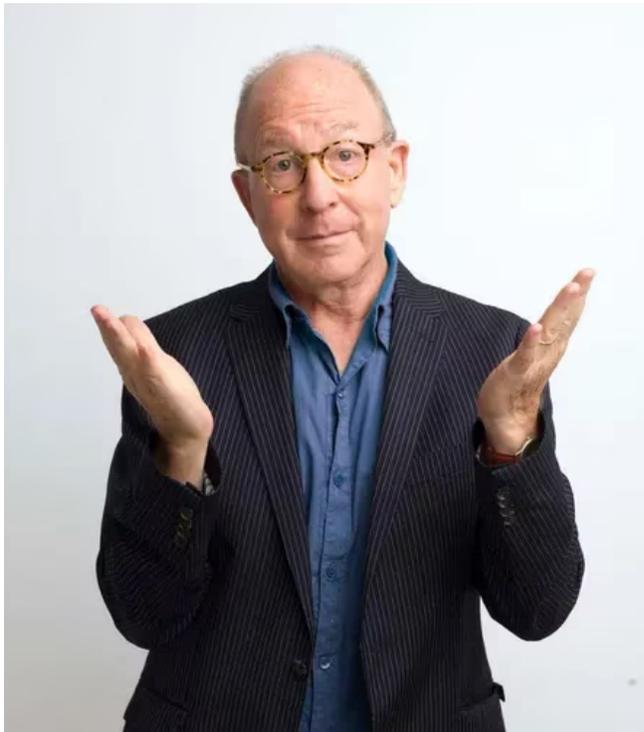
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Tampa Bay Times

We talked to art critic Jerry Saltz before he comes to Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg

The Pulitzer Prize-winning critic gives a talk April 1.

By Maggie Duffy – March 23, 2023



Art critic Jerry Saltz is speaking at the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg on April 1. [CELESTE SLOMAN | Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg]

As part of the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg’s Art Now lecture series, art critic Jerry Saltz will discuss art, artists and his new book on April 1.

Saltz is the senior art critic for New York magazine and its entertainment site, Vulture. He is the author of the New York Times bestselling book “How to Be an Artist” and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2018.

Saltz’s latest book, “Art Is Life,” is a collection of his essays, reviews and profiles spanning 1999 to 2021. It looks at the profound changes in the art world during the 21st century. Not only has the work created

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in the United States been a reaction to political and social events that pervade the century, Saltz also says the art world is now more inclusive to art made by people who were previously underrepresented.

“Everything is now being rewritten,” he said during a phone interview. “It’s the most exciting period in art history in my lifetime, by far ... everyone has skin in the game.”

The Tampa Bay Times caught up with Saltz ahead of his talk to discuss all that and more.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

You talk about how modernism, which was dominated by the work of white men, is coming to an end in the art world. Can you explain what that looks like?

The apartheid of modernism, that actually excluded 51% of the population — women — is falling by the wayside, as well as exhibiting the work of underrepresented artists of color, disabled, queer artists, etc. All of this means that more than half the story that had been left out is now being addressed. As a white, straight male, I’m hearing and seeing voices that I never heard or saw in my whole life, just by women, and they’re telling me stories I never even imagined with a kind of radical vulnerability that is off the charts. It’s very powerful for me, as a man.

How does this change the role of the museum?

This has put real pressure on all museums as it should, and they’re struggling mightily to kind of adjust. They have many audiences. They have the insider art world people like me, who expect one thing, and then they have much wider audiences and it’s been hard, but I would say by and large, they’re doing great. Yeah, even if a lot of curators ... get so political, they forget to look at art. Some people have decided that if it’s about a good subject, the art is good. And this is 100% wrong. You can have a good subject and terrible art. And you can have, you know, a terrible subject and great art. Art is much more mysterious and complicated than good subject matter being good art. Witness 1 million bad movies that have great intentions, but they’re generic. So I think sometimes, curators are earnest and sincere, but as Oscar Wilde said, “All bad poetry is sincere.” They’re just putting the cart before the horse.

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You have a section in the book about the pandemic. How did you see artists and museums fare?

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Well, museums took a gigantic hit — to their membership, their programming and to their funding ... (they) took a huge hit in attendance. They are still trying to recover. And so we have to cut them a little bit of slack. I think they're doing great. I also think that people found places within themselves that are as old as time; that every cell in our body is adapted to be creative, to get us through to survive. There are 5,000 generations behind each one of us. ... And that adds up to creativity and chance. ... In many ways, the pandemic was much shorter than we think it was. Because about 60 days after the United States shut down, the entire country poured back out on the streets to protest the murder of George Floyd. As I wrote, even as the angel of death was among us, kids especially poured out on the street and said, "We've talked the talk long enough now we're going to walk the walk." And so we weren't as isolated and indoors as we might mythologize. ... The art world rolled through this pandemic the way art has been with us since the beginning. It survived and keeps thriving. ... The pandemic is part of art history now, so, we'll see.

Recently there's been a debate about artificial intelligence regarding art. What do you think about A.I.?

Well, I think someday there will be a Francis Bacon of A.I. There's no doubt in my mind. A.I. is a material; A.I. is a tool. Artists use tools and materials and they will figure out how to do amazing things with it. ... So, over time, artists will figure out things to do with it. Right now, it's an exceptionally promising tool. And I cannot wait to see what artists do with it. So I'm as for and against it as I am a pencil. To me, it's just another camera.

What are your thoughts on NFTs?

I think that NFTs are a great way for many artists to make a little bit of money. They can make, you know, a few thousand here and there. ... I made an NFT. I sold that for about \$100,000. However, I also understood that as an art critic, if I made money, that's all people would see. They would not see the process, they'd only see the product, so I gave the money away to Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer (Center). So the money is no longer an issue and I could just partake of the medium so I could learn about it. That's all I wanted to do.

What shows or artists have you seen lately that excite you?

I've seen a handful of shows opening in New York that I found real interesting, of work that I would not have seen, I think, had art history not started changing. For example, I saw the work of a Haitian embroidery artist named Myrlande Constant. She's 51, and learned to embroider and bead with her mother in the wedding dress factories from Haiti. But she made a gigantic formal leap in a certain stitch she uses and also jumped scale and ... she start telling these gigantic narratives of magnificent boat-sized paintings, as it were. She ended up in the Venice Biennale and now just showed in New York at a place called Fort Gansevoort. There's a Chinese artist who's using the ancient art of ... cut paper. But he's made another formal leap and changed subject matter. He's 61, married with two children. The story of his gay life, that of course, it would be dissident in China. His name is Xiyadie — it means Siberian butterfly. It's a secret name. I have barely mentioned subject matter. It's the formal leaps that artists are making and I find that amazing.