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Universities presented outstanding exhibits

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There were lots of outstanding exhibits this past year and nine of the best were organized by three of our university museums -- Duke's Nasher Museum, North Carolina Central University's Art Museum, and UNC's Ackland Art Museum.

It is a minor miracle that NCCU, with its minuscule budget and staff of two, stands shoulder to shoulder with these larger sister institutions. It happened because Kenneth Rodgers, director of the museum, is willing to be a one-man band. Single-handedly he organizes each exhibit -- from borrowing the objects, to researching and writing the catalogues, to personally checking the mailing lists. Because of the work he does and the reputation he has built for his tiny museum, I award him my "Blue Award" for 2009.

Despite a tough economy there are positive things going on in the Triangle. Our university museums regularly deliver important diverse shows. Our new state Museum of Art is on schedule to open its doors in April. A vibrant art community is growing on East Main Street inside the Golden Belt campus, and our commercial galleries are hanging on.

One of my wishes in the foreseeable future is to see more important public art. For example, if the various factions in Durham would decide where its heart is, maybe the city could commission an artist to mark that place with a significant piece of art. It's not an impossible idea.

Below is my choice for the Best Art Exhibits in the Triangle for 2009.

North Carolina Central University Art Museum

"Benny Andrews and the John Lewis Series." The exhibition brings together two heroes, Andrews, the artist and recorder, and Lewis, the fighter for the American way of life.

"Ruth Russell Williams." A North Carolina primitive, whose charming scenes make us believe "back then" was a "better time."

"Ernie Barnes: Homecoming." Durham native Barnes (1938-2009) became a successful professional football player, while hiding his passion to paint. Ultimately he did paint, and his images of athletes and African-Americans made him more successful as a painter than as a ball player.

Ackland Museum of Art

"At the Heart of Progress: Coal, Iron and Steam Since 1750." Prints and posters of coal and

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its relationship to the Industrial Revolution; the focus reminds us of "the Faustian bargain between humanity and carbon."

"Celebrating Sherman Lee." Lee, an acknowledged expert in Asian Art, retired to Chapel Hill and helped build the Ackland's important Asian collection. This exhibition includes the museum's finest examples.

"The Guardian and the Avant-Garde: Seymour Lipton's 'Sentinel II' in context." Lipton was an influential American artist in the 20th century. A gift of one of his pieces has become the centerpiece of the museum's modern permanent collection, bringing the disparate parts together in a new and more coherent way.

Nasher Museum of Art

"Video Quartet." On a 14-minute loop Christian Marclay sets four video screens side by side flashing snippets of film classics -- the common thread is sound and music.

"Beyond Beauty." A mind-boggling tour of photographic artifacts that are now a part of Duke's Special Collections Library. The show reminds us of a great university's ability to attract important collections with assurance they will be permanently protected.

"Picasso and the Allure of Language." Closing Sunday. In this exhibition Picasso is a partner to the art as often as he is the sole innovator; he uses words and language as elements, as influences and as collaborators. The books, papers, and art objects are part of Yale University's holdings, another great university with huge personal collections put under its care.

Somerhill Gallery: "List Collection from Lincoln Center." Original prints by nationally famous artists, like Helen Frankthaler and Chuck Close, were commissioned by Vera and Albert List to raise funds for Lincoln Center and to sell at affordable prices.

Golden Belt: "Bailout Biennial." Organized by elin o'Hara slavick, cynicism, political satire and art came together in a smart, up-to-the minute show. Every object was not of the highest quality, but the intent was to make the audience think, and that happened.

Gregg Gallery, North Carolina State University Museum: "Tomas Sayre: New Work." Sayre cuts a shape out of the earth, fills it with concrete, and creates beautiful earth sculptures. Seen inside, their scale is awesome.

Durham Art Guild: "Tama Hochbaum, photographs." Hochbaum pushes her medium to its limits; she wants us to believe her images can replicate movement and she comes close.

Hayti Heritage Center: "Marilyn Griffin: 'Asante Sana' (Many Thanks)." Large one-of-a-kind handmade dolls dressed in velvet and satin, dripping in jewels. Some are three-dimensional and stand alone; others are relief sculptures and hang like tapestry from the walls. I view them as fine art, not craft.

Durham Art Guild: "55th Annual Juried Art Show." Closes Jan, 22. The show is beautifully hung and the internationally famous Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons chose work of superior quality.

Blue Greenberg's column appears each week in Entertainment and More. She can be reached at blueg@bellsouth.net or by writing her in c/o The Herald-Sun, P.O. Box 2092, Durham, NC 27702.