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Downtime at New Year? It's Filled

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In the opening weeks of the year, otherwise known as January, my needs are basic. It's dark and usually cold. I want light and heat — if possible combined in strong, unremitting color and conveyed by refreshingly unfamiliar works of art. At least two shows on the immediate horizon promise to deliver.

The one burning most brightly is “Demons and Devotion: The Hours of Catherine of Cleves,” which opens on Jan. 22 at the Morgan Library & Museum. These volumes of hours, or illustrated prayer book, are among the greatest in the Morgan's outstanding collection of manuscripts and will be “disbound” for the occasion, meaning that nearly 100 of its 157 miniatures will be viewable at one time, a rarity. Commissioned by Catherine, duchess of Guelders and countess of Zutphen, around 1440, this manuscript is the work of an anonymous artist known as the Master of Catherine of Cleves. His feeling for harmonious arrangements of jewel-like colors was equaled only by his eye for naturalistic detail. Both were bolstered by an ability to realistically render light and texture that indicates attention to Jan van Eyck and Robert Campin.

These two volumes are also known for their innovative borders and for depictions of everyday life that are considered forerunners of Dutch genre painting. There is also, as suggested by the show's title, an unusual interest in the fiery furnaces of hell, often entered through the maws of monsters that strongly resemble a household feline having a very bad day.

This is also Viola Frey month in New York. I refer to the formidable Bay Area ceramic sculptor who died in 2004 at the age of 70. On Thursday the Nancy Hoffman Gallery in Chelsea opens a large exhibition of sculpture and works on paper, including an enormous tile piece. On Jan. 27 the Museum of Arts & Design will follow suit with “Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey,” a full-scale retrospective.

Frey was the only woman on the male-dominated ceramics scene that sprang up around San Francisco in the 1950s, spread to Los Angeles and included artists like Peter Voulkos, Robert Arneson, Kenneth Price, Ron Nagle, John Mason, Richard Shaw and David Gilhooly. She was an artist of multiple mediums and processes. In the mid-1970s, she made set-up photographs using dolls and porcelain figurines, which she also cast and enlarged, cobbling into bricolage sculptures.

Frey is best known for monumental ceramic figures, calm in expression, in contemporary dress (when clothed); the rough textures and brushy colors of their forms suggest they are escapees from paintings. The long-lost cousins of these creatures include Alex Katz's cutouts and the figurative sculptures of Ann Arnold, William King, Stephan Balkenhol and Claudette Schreuders. Charles Ray's towering mannequins also come to mind. The ferocity, variety and interdisciplinary richness of Frey's art will come as a surprise to many New York art mavens. Even before the show opens, the Museum of Arts & Design deserves credit for thinking outside the New York museum mainstream.

Other shows where the blasts of expertly marshaled color should counter those of winter include exhibitions of Philip Taaffe's works on paper at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea (Jan. 16); Stanley Whitney's new abstractions at Team Gallery in SoHo (Thursday); the paintings of the underknown New York abstractionist Roy Newell, who died in 2006, at Carolina Nitsch Project Room in Chelsea (Jan. 15); and works from the last four decades of Jacob Lawrence's exemplary career at DC Moore, on Fifth Avenue, near 57th Street (Wednesday).

Last but hardly least, Exit Art, on 10th Avenue and 36th Street in Manhattan, will enter terrain that it usually leaves untouched with “New Mirrors: Painting in a Transparent World,” an exhibition opening on January 9 of abstract and semi-abstract painting by seven young artists in which color is the unifying force.