Once again, there were so many good submissions for this issue, it was hard to choose. Here are a few that I wanted to share.

Phyllis Rabineau sent the following about two very different exhibitions that shared a common interpretive thread—comic books. First, at Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry, I was startled as I wandered into a less-traveled nook and came across two huge 19th century wooden stagecoaches and a Conestoga wagon, surrounded by enormous graphics in the form of a comic strip. The strip presented a story of travel across the American west with two children as the central characters. Comic-book scenery surrounds the vehicles, comic-book kids sit inside them, and comic thought bubbles float over their heads. It seemed like these behemoth artifacts were orphans of the museum’s transportation collection, having found no obvious place in exhibit narratives that feature other space-hogging gargantuan such as the 1939s Pioneer Zephyr train or the United Airlines Boeing 727. Although the interpretation is fragmented I admired the ingenuity of the graphic treatment, and wondered how long these lonely objects have been tucked in their corner off the mainstream’s beaten track.

I couldn’t help recalling the comic-book theme a few weeks later at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Here, in my all-time favorite museum, when I need a break from the glories of high art I indulge in the guilty pleasure of a luscious costume exhibition. Not infrequently, the experience is both beautiful and quite edgy. This summer’s offering, Super Heroes: Fashion and Fantasy pushed the museum’s content into popular culture, a terrain seldom encountered in those near-sacred galleries. It’s hard to say which components of this exhibition were most outrageous. It included about a dozen original costumes worn by the stars in recent comic-book based movies. (I’m not too proud to admit that I was thrilled to find myself about eight feet away from Christian Bale’s ACTUAL latex Bat suit—a not-so-bad stand-in for the man himself). Each Hollywood costume was merely the starting point for exploring one or another post-modern deconstruction of how we create our identity and self-image in the context of contemporary social and political issues. Batman anchored the section titled “The Armored Body,” and other sections included “The Patriotic Body” (Wonder Woman), “The Paradoxical Body” (Catwoman), “The Mutant Body” (X-Men), “The Aerodynamic Body” (The Flash), “The Virile Body” (The Hulk), and “The Graphic Body” (Superman, of course). Surrounding these iconic characters, the real stars of the show were over-the-top, mostly kinky, couture pieces by the likes of Giorgio Armani, Jean Paul Gaultier, John Galliano for Christian Dior, Dolce and Gabbana, Gianni Versace…. You get the idea. All the big names. Almost as big as the comic stars themselves.

I’ve no idea whether the Met and its curator set interpretive goals for this exhibition, but I’ve absolutely no doubt that it fulfilled all audience goals. The crowd that surged through this exhibition was probably the most diverse I’ve ever seen at this museum—men, women, teens, children, all ethnicities. All excited, all reading, gawking, pointing, and perhaps most important of all (and I’m not being sarcastic), buying in the well-placed Super Heroes Shop. I certainly did.

Eric Seigel sent the following about Elafur Eliasson’s Take Your Time which was installed in the Museum of Modern Art and its Queens annex, PS1, this past spring. First of all, it is kind of a testament to the broad appeal of Eliasson’s work that it would comfortably occupy both of these sites. Somehow Eliasson’s combination of formality and funky interactivity worked in both of these spaces. Starting from the funkiest, the basement of PS1 (a converted schoolhouse that looks exactly like a converted schoolhouse) was the perfect
setting for a wall of vapor in a black box room. The effect was
cooling and very beautiful, and only avoided the kind of corporate
lobby art effect by the kind of loose ends that were
allowed to show, the nozzles for the mist, the slip-proof fabric on the floor.
This is kind of a theme through his work. It is so lovely and
kind of comforting that it verges on a kind of
"smooth jazz" of art. But he always dodges that
problem like a magician who shows everyone
the workings of his tricks.

The highlight of the installation at PS1 was a
huge room (the gym!) with a mirrored disk as a
ceiling. The piece played off of the voyeuristic
"mirrored ceiling" of Las Vegas wedding suites,
but it was set at an angle to the space and
that angle changed over time, with the effect
distorting the geometry of the room in a
disorienting and fun way. Again, the machinery
of the piece, visible above the mirrored disk,
saved the work from a clever effect. As a
science museum guy, I am very interested in
how things are done in exhibitions, and there
was one piece that completely mystified me.
A large room, maybe 30' x 30' was scrummed
to make it a cylinder of white cloth. Standing
inside this cylinder, the visitor watched the
walls and ceiling change color so smoothly
and in such a saturated way that there was the
impenetrable illusion of a sunset happening
outside the cylinder. There was no trace of
lighting fixtures, LEDs or any other artifice. It
was an amazing illusion.

At MOMA itself there were two wonderful
highlights. A small room was set with mirrors
and theatrical lighting fixtures on sturdy
stands. The lighting fixtures were arranged
with the mirrors to cause wonderful and
simple effects. The lighting fixtures took on
the feeling of animals showing off some cool
tricks they had learned. And an amazing
(and eminently copy-able) piece animated
the lofty and problematic central atrium of
MOMA, in which everything looks dwarfed
and intimidated. Eliasson simply took a 40
or 50' length of flexible electrical cable and
put a household fan on the end of it. The fan
oscillated the long cable swooping across the
atrium in long, unpredictable arcs. Brilliant and
the audience was mesmerized.

Now Eliasson's Waterfalls are installed along
the East River, and to tell you the truth, I
haven't even seen them. It was hoped that they
would cause the kind of "splash" (sorry) that
Christos' Gates had made two years ago in
Central Park. But instead, they have become a
few minutes of tourist gawk. It's a tough town.

Here are a few virtual museums to check out
as well. Phyllis Rabineau sent the following:
this imaginary "museum" was constructed
by students at the City University of New
York, and explores complex history content,
race, gender, etc. PT Barnum's lost museum
is the foundation. I got really sucked into it,
but haven't had enough time to explore all the
nooks and crannies. (http://www.lostmuseum.
cuny.edu/home.html)

Gene Dillenberg directed me to The Museum
of Soviet Calculators on the Web (http://www.
taswegian.com/MOSCOW/soviet.html). This
site has more information about old calculators
than I've ever seen, and actually more than I
care to know.

But my personal favorite (maybe I'm biased)
was sent to me by my husband, a music
fanatic—The Museum of Bad Album Covers
(http://www.zonicweb.net/badalbmcvrs/). Here
you can see some of the most terrible album
covers ever printed, and you can even submit
your vote for the one you think is the worst.
And now my disclaimer about this site...not all
of these album covers are appropriate to view at
work or in the presence of kids. Enough said.

Over the next few months, get out there and
check out some exhibitions. If you see any that
are intriguing or noteworthy, drop me a line
(beth@redmond-jones.com) with the details so
we can share them with our other readers in the
spring issue of the Exhibitionist. ☺