Tough Times
Looking back at the year's exhibits.
by CAROL KNOWLES

It was one heck of a year for Memphis art. The tougher things got, the more sardonic, surreal, and soul-searching artists became with their works.

Universities, museums, and galleries, also reflective of the times, mounted particularly moving exhibitions. Memphis College of Art's January exhibition, "Close to Home: African American Folk Art from Memphis Collectors," featured one of Hawkins Bolden's untitled scarecrows. Made out of pots drilled full of holes and held together with brooms and frayed fabric, Bolden's deeply textured testament to life conjured bullet-riddled WWI helmets on top of old wooden crosses and Don Quixote fighting injustice atop a broomstick horse.

For its summer show, the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art exhibited 81 of Jacob Lawrence's prints, including his masterworks, "The Legend of John Brown" series. These spare works were poignantly apropos for challenges we face today. In screenprint No. 1, Christ hangs on the cross back-dropped by what looks like fast-moving storm clouds, the wings of a large raven, or an omen — readings that reminded us that Christ's crucifixion was a dark drama about government brutality and warring religious factions as well as the hope for redemption.

"Lichtenstein in Process," on view through January 17th at the Dixon Gallery and Gardens, includes eye-popping, comic-book-inspired collages, etheric landscapes, wry homages to modern masters, and one of the most moving works of Lichtenstein's career, Collage for the Sower.

Lauren Coulson's fall show at Jack Robinson Gallery featured photos taken in Europe. By manually winding the black-and-white film in her inexpensive camera, Coulson made multiple exposures of crumbling statues and eroding architecture and clock towers. These blurred and distorted images were powerful portraits not of grand cathedrals or great generals but of time itself.

Jason Miller filled the rest of Jack Robinson's fall show with kaleidoscopic mixes of digital images that included department-store Santas, Sunday school portraits of Christ, and corporate logos. Initially dizzying, the open-ended symbolism of Miller's "Energy Fortress Series" and his free-flowing "Digital Mandalas" ultimately celebrated humankind's ability to cut through corporate spin and childhood fantasy, to embrace...
what Miller described as "a more open form ... where imagination and spirituality outweigh the need to belong to particular religious sects."

Nine September exhibitions, collectively titled "Greely Myatt: and exactly Twenty Years," celebrated Myatt's sly humor and down-home wisdom in venues as varied as the Clough-Hanson Gallery, the National Ornamental Metal Museum, and the P&H Café. In A Brief History of Sculpture at the Art Museum of the University of Memphis, soap bubbles spilled down the sides of a worn wooden plinth as Myatt took sculpture off its pedestal and suggested that art, rather than being concise or categorical, is effervescent and ever-changing. For his show at David Lusk Gallery, Myatt carved a wooden beam into a freestanding pair of pants titled Like a Lighthouse, which he mounted on a table. This wry, viscerally compelling sexual icon also served as a poignant symbol for the emptiness and isolation we sometimes feel in spite of the stimuli that flow 24/7 in our wired-up, plugged-in, cyber-spaced world.

John McIntire was at his quirky, cutting-edge best in the nearly seamless syntheses of the cerebral, the spiritual, and the sensual that shaped his female torsos in a November show at Perry Nicole Fine Art.

The most resonant metaphors for 2009 were the brambles and weathered branches that worked their way out of underbrush and crossed a sometimes arid, sometimes golden-ochre earth in Jeri Ledbetter's November show of paintings, "Mano a Mano II," at L Ross Gallery. Charcoal washes coalesced into the death throes of some prehistoric beast in Cielo II. Above the creature, in wild scribbles that arced and jabbed across a piercingly blue sky, we could feel both the artist's and the ancient beast's rage for life.