

Art News

"You Become Better with Age"

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Betye Saar with her birdcage sculpture *The Destiny of Latitude & Longitude*, 2010.

At what age do people hit their stride professionally?

Categorically speaking, athletes, engineers, politicians, television writers, salesmen, and actresses all have varying norms and shelf lives, sometimes affected by physical attributes or societal expectations. Seemingly immune to ageist perceptions and traditional notions of retirement are artists. A historical look reveals that a striking number have been highly productive and turned out some of their best work late into old age, including Bellini (who died at 86), Michelangelo (d. 89), Titian (d. between 86 and 103, depending on your source), Ingres (d. 86), Monet (d. 86), Matisse (d. 84), Picasso (d. 91), O'Keeffe (d. 98), and Bourgeois (d. 98).

"All the case histories point in one direction—the extraordinary flowering of artistic genius in old age," Thomas Dormandy wrote in his book *Old Masters: Great Artists in Old Age*. While Dormandy rejected the attractive idea of creativity as an antidote to physical or mental decline—"it is contradicted by the facts"—he explored the powerful inner shifts in old age that propelled many artists to new heights, whether it's Monet painting his "Water Lilies" when he was almost blind after cataract surgery, or Matisse

inventing his paper cutouts in his last years when confined to his bed and a wheelchair.

The numerous recent exhibitions of actively working artists age 80 and up would bear out this anecdotal correlation between longevity and creative production. New "Old Masters" who have enjoyed gallery and museum shows over the last year include Wayne Thiebaud (92) at Acquavella, Robert Irwin (84) at Pace, Anthony Caro (89) at the Yale Center for British Art, Malcolm Morley (81) at the Parrish Art Museum, Yayoi Kusama (84) at the Whitney Museum, Alex Katz (85) at the Yale School of Art, John Baldessari (81) at Marian Goodman, and Philip Pearlstein (turning 89 on May 24) at Betty Cunningham. Thornton Dial (85) had a retrospective that traveled to several American museums, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art mounted a survey of Jasper Johns (who turns 83 on May 15), Betye Saar (86) filled a room of the National Academy Museum with her birdcage sculptures, and an exhibition of Claes Oldenburg's (84) work is currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.