

## Art Agency, Partners


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## 10 Museum Retrospectives That Need To Happen

### Shows That Could Transform The Way We Think About Art



Joseph Beuys with his work *The Pack* (1969) at the Guggenheim Museum prior to the opening of his 1979 retrospective. Photo credit Ted Thai/Getty Images

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So often museum retrospectives show us artists as we already know them to be. Great exhibitions of this kind can provide a gathering of works of art that we rarely have the opportunity to see. But many, especially mid-career surveys, fail to provide fresh perspectives. More often than not, the same processed story is retold, when there is fresh insight to gain. This has me yearning for exhibitions that might transform the way we think about the art of today and the recent past.

At the top of many people's lists would be a new focus on [Bruce Nauman](#)—likely the most influential artist of the past 50 years, though the market doesn't seem to know it anymore. Now, thanks to the Museum of Modern Art and Basel's Schaulager, where a new Nauman retrospective is currently on view, art historical justice is in sight ("Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts", until 26 August at the [Schaulager](#) and opening 21 October at [MoMA and MoMA PS1](#) until 17 March

2019).

Here are 10 artists I believe are in need of a major retrospective. One caveat: this list was assembled in some haste during two weeks of contra-directional compound jetlag, so please feel free to share your ideas with us—perhaps we can run another article informed by your perspectives.

## Joseph Beuys

Nobody who saw the [Beuys](#) retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in 1979 could forget its thrilling animation of the building, including dozens of sleds, each with a felt roll and flashlight strapped to its back, cascading down the ramp from the back of a VW van. But somehow Beuys has faded from public awareness.

He was a giant of 20<sup>th</sup>-century art on the scale of Picasso, Duchamp and Warhol, but his work is demanding and many museums have struggled to keep its energy—and the artist's aura—alive. Perhaps now the contemporary art world needs a big jolt of magical faith to lift those bits of fat, felt, copper, and cultural rubble, vitrines, drawings, blackboards and olive presses out of the reliquary graveyard and put them back into the mythic realm of the artist as shaman. It's all there, just waiting for vision, guts and mastery to remind us how high an artist can reach.

## Nancy Graves

For several decades, [audiences tended to dismiss](#) the colorfully painted metal sculptures that formed the latter part of Graves' artistic production. For many artists under 50 she hardly even exists. So the time is right to look back again at some of the most radical [sculptures](#) of the postwar period that Graves made starting in 1969— most famously, her lifelike sculptures of camels, which were as rigorous and radical as the contemporaneous work of [Richard Serra](#) (to whom she was then married).



Nancy Graves, *Camel VI, VII, VIII* (1968-69), collection of National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo credit: National Gallery of Canada. Art © Nancy Graves Foundation, Inc/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

These seemingly hyperreal objects were actually the work of an abstractionist who was in her own singular way reinventing sculpture from the inside out, or from skeleton to skin. Her large-scale shamanistic sculptures of bones and feathers, and her films of camels and birds in motion show the eye of an anatomist and an anthropologist, but they were also sculptural and painterly studies that sought to rethink sculpture in a radical, intellectual way.

Graves went on to make paintings which endeavored to reinvent representation, that were about mapping long before

artists like [Julie Mehretu](#). It is time not only to reexamine her better-known historical period but also the later work.

## Lee Krasner

Years ago, I saw an exhibition at [Guild Hall](#) in East Hampton (“[Krasner/Pollock: A Working Relationship](#)”, 1981) that showed the work of Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner side-by-side, year-by-year. It quickly became clear what no one really dares utter: while there was a lot of influence in their partnership, Pollock was the transformer—Krasner the true innovator.



Lee Krasner, *Desert Moon* (1955), Art © ARS, NY. Image © 2017 Museum Associates/LACMA. Licensed by Art Resource, NY

After years of relegating the girls of Abstract Expressionism to the back of the bus, the art market has just started to look again at the work of this exquisite painter. Her work is resolutely inventive, lyrical and (dare I say) pretty. Krasner could throw around the boulders of composition in ways that were often unapologetically feminine.

Willem de Kooning spent his life battling his way out of the shallow space of the Cubists and he made it to the other side. Now it's time to examine where Krasner went in half a century of painting battling the same pictorial demon.

## Jo Baer

Most of the art world abandoned [Baer](#) when she abruptly stopped doing the Minimalist painting that had placed her in the canon of art history (work more rigorous than that of any of her male counterparts). She has since made representational paintings with references to symbolism, landscape and nature. These are the polar opposite of what and how she previously painted, now with gently rendered forms in bright colors in non-linear narratives that are about history, myth, the natural world, war, sexuality, death—pretty much all the big themes.



Jo Baer, *Royal Families (Curves, Points and Little Ones)* (2013). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Thumm

There is perhaps a parallel here to the work of [Philip Guston](#), which also had two radically different phases that took the art world decades to connect. Baer's story is perhaps even more complex in that no one has yet unraveled the late work well enough to fully examine the two halves as the work of this singularly fearless artistic innovator.

Few artists have two such dramatically different phases—and each equally significant—within the same fiercely independent practice as Baer. [Dia](#) will soon mount a retrospective of the first half. Hopefully before too long someone will tell the whole story, make sense of it, and see it as a continuum in culture exploration that has spanned decades of artistic and societal change.

## Giulio Paolini

Paolini doesn't get on airplanes, and so American audiences have missed out on the lifetime of magical rethinking about the ennui of artistic stasis that is the widely concentrated world of the artist.



Giulio Paolini, *La caduta di Icaro* (1981), exhibited at Documenta in 1982 © Giulio Paolini. Courtesy Fondazione Giulio e Anna Paolini, Turin and Lisson Gallery. Photo credit: Nanda Lanfranco, Genoa

Most art lovers don't realize that Paolini was making Conceptual art well before the term was coined. He appropriated art of the past in an entirely different way from how Pop artists appropriated popular culture: he explored the process of viewing by re-photographing photographs well before [Richard Prince](#) and [Louise Lawler](#)—all while playing the sacrificial maker enacting the same death scene with beauty, mastery, and endless invention.

## David Hammons

Hardly a stranger to today's art world and market— the exquisite exhibition of his work mounted at [Mnuchin Gallery](#) in 2016 ("[David Hammons: Five Decades](#)") was something of a mini-retrospective. But we have yet to see a full-on museum retrospective of work by one of the most significant and elusive artists of our times, who has married political rigor with Japanese Zen, humor with anger, life with art, being with nothingness. Hammons has honored the greats of both jazz and painting in one of the most wide-ranging lifetimes of art making since Man Ray—and always on his own terms.



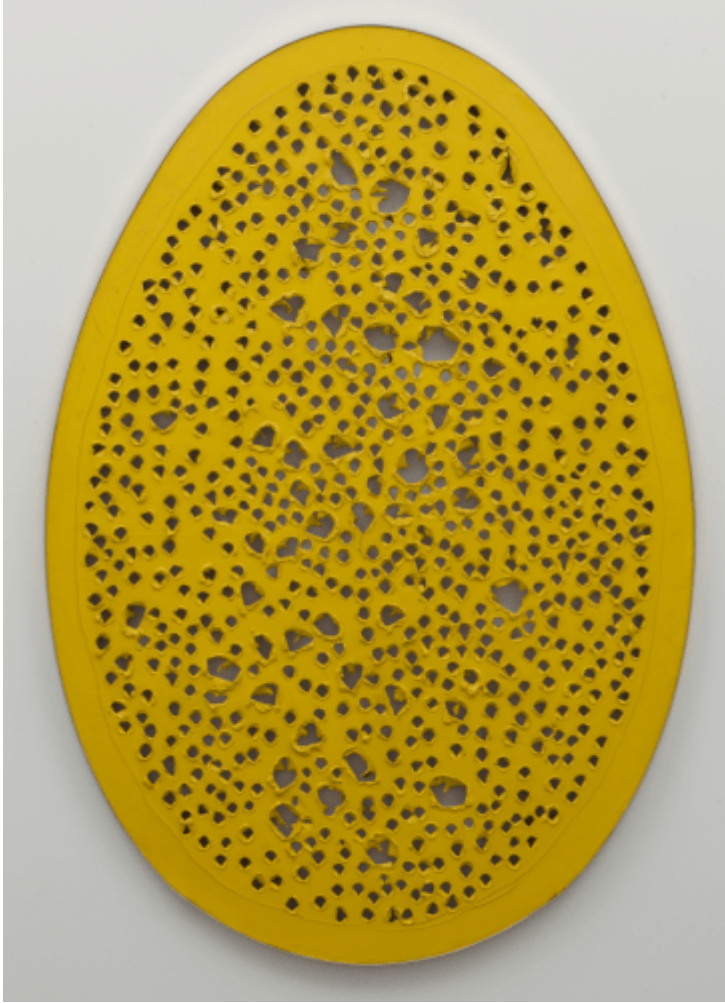
Installation view of "David Hammons: Five Decades" at Mnuchin Gallery (2016). Art © David Hammons. Courtesy Mnuchin Gallery. Photo credit: Tom Powel Imaging

It would be a dream to find the curator and museum that Hammons would entrust to present his big vision on the stage and scale of a major retrospective, to layer a new-fangled version of old-style rigorous art historical insight onto the work of our greatest nonconformist.

## Lucio Fontana

There was a large-scale [Fontana retrospective](#) at the [Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris](#) in 2014 which had a thoughtful premise. But, perhaps due to a lack of major loans, the show did not quite fulfill the need for a major retrospective of this, one of the most important and innovative artists of the past century.

Fontana is to postwar European art what Pollock is to postwar American. If we can consider the detonation of the atomic bomb as having unleashed the potential in painting for the frenzied energy of a Pollock, then the exploration of outer space paralleled Fontana's piercing the canvas to explore what he called "fourth-dimensional space". Fontana did so much—and in so many different ways—from 1949 until his death in 1968, and yet so few of his great experiments and byways in painting are known or proportionally valued.



Lucio Fontana, *Concetto spaziale, la fine di Dio* (1964). The Rachofsky Collection. Art © ARS, NY

[The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) is planning a Fontana retrospective early next year. It is my hope that the exhibition will be given enough space to take us through the magic, range and poetic mastery of this visionary pictorial explorer.

## **Mario Merz**

I am giddy about the fact that the great [Marisa Merz](#), who has spent decades making some of the most beautiful, heartfelt art in the refuge of her Turin studio, is finally getting her due, thanks to the magnificent retrospective recently organized by Connie Butler of the Hammer Museum and [Ian Alteveer](#) of the Met ("[Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space](#)", 2017). But somehow the work of her life partner Mario, whose artistic greatness shined brightly (and to which she subjugated herself) has fallen into a kind of sad obscurity.



Mario Merz, *Unreal City, Nineteen Hundred Eighty-Nine* (1989). Solomon R Guggenheim Museum © 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome

Merz, whose artistic life began when he was an imprisoned anti-fascist in postwar Italy, made multi-media sculptures, installations, and yes, even paintings that redefined the very landscape of art. We know this is not the most likely moment for a white male artist to be foregrounded. But, the memory of a great Guggenheim retrospective now 25 years ago ("[Mario Merz](#)", 1993)—where his art consumed the building like plants do a jungle, his [grand igloos](#) and sweeping neon Fibonacci numbers vying for attention with lizards and even a motorbike—remind me that, now more than ever, we need to see the scale of life in art and belief worth fighting that comprise Merz's vision.

## Saburo Murakami

[Saburo Murakami](#), one of the [Gutai](#) greats, is known to most for photographs of the artist leaping through a series of unpainted paintings. But the evolution of his work from 1954 to 1970 tells a beautiful, rigorous and profound story of the end of painting in a way that no other artist's work does. Roll over [Ad Reinhardt](#): there's a guy on the other side of the world who also made the last painting. But, instead of turning the point into an exquisite existential chess move, he simply stopped painting after that—another kind of radical.





Murakami Saburō, *Passing Through* (1956) © Murakami Makiko and the former members of the Gutai Art Association c/o Museum of Osaka University

## **Domenico Gnoli**

The current exhibition of Domenico Gnoli at [Luxembourg & Dayan](#) makes me greedy to see it all (“[Domenico Gnoli: Detail of a Detail](#)”, until 14 July). Americans never knew what to do with Gnoli, whose paintings made in the 1960s were deliberately old-fashioned in look. While not conforming to any of the stylistic or formal norms of the day, he managed to have strong relationships with both Minimalism and the hyper-real works of an artist like [Chuck Close](#), who sought to bring representation back into painting through a way of looking that was as much about abstraction.



Installation view, "Domenico Gnoli: Detail of a Detail", Luxembourg & Dayan, New York. Photo credit: Andy Romer, Courtesy Luxembourg & Dayan, New York and London

But it is also somewhat diminishing to compare Gnoli to any of his contemporaries, as his work is in a world of its own, characterized by its deeply profound presence. His painting of a bedspread is the landscape of life and love, his paintings of a shoe are giants of lives lived, and his final painting of a long curl of his wife's hair is both a harbinger of mortality as a strand of a DNA chain that has been broken and a softly enveloping ladder of desire and comfort we should all wish to be able to climb. I want to see all 100 of his great canvasses. We are at a time when this intentionally old-fashioned esthetic could look new and contemporary again.