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## You Gotta Have Faith

### These Shows Are Why We Look at Art



Bruce Nauman, *Untitled* (1967) © Bruce Nauman/2018, ProLitteris, Zurich

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It was thrilling and reaffirming to see two extraordinary exhibitions dedicated to the work of two exceptional artists last week on my way to Art Basel [see fair report [here](#)]. Each, through its curatorial rigor and flawless installation, made clear just how great each of these artists is.

With the art market scrambling to broaden what had become an overly narrowed scope, the art world has been accelerating into something of a crisis lately. Is too much art being made for too many galleries spread across too many fairs? Has the

hunger for product surpassed the appetite for greatness? Has the proliferation of venues led to watered-down art? Is the market, in its reexamination of overlooked artists of the past, sometimes elevating average artists (and further confounding our definition of greatness)? And is the market coming to a grinding halt for many of those artists that have not been anointed?

Time and circumstance evaporated at the Schaulager in Basel, where the impeccable retrospective “[Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts](#)” is on view (until 26 August; it [opens at MoMA and PS1](#) from 21 October-17 March 2019). For most of us in the field of contemporary art, since Andy Warhol there has been no artist more important than Nauman. In his decades-long practice, Nauman has captured the complexity of art and the psychology of our times incisively; even when the art seems to have been made from a side-glance, it is so head-on. The spirit and content of his art have influenced generations of artists who have followed. And yet, he has remained almost invisible to many collectors who have emerged in the last decade. This is partly due to the nature of what today’s art market currently values, and partly because most of the important Nauman works that have changed hands over these years have done so privately, bypassing the attention that comes with auctions and art fairs (mostly, they have sold to museums and private foundations).



Still from Bruce Nauman, *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii* (2015-16) © 2018 Bruce Nauman/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

This was not an easy exhibition to do well; capturing the spirit, complexity, and great material range of the work Nauman has created in more than half-a-century of art-making. And so this brilliant portrait of Nauman brings about the deepest sense of satisfaction. It reignites one’s faith in the triumph of art over product and in vision over quantification.

It feels like poetic justice to have Nauman’s achievements as an artist—and of our culture over more than 50 years of change and continuity—fulfilled by a team of curators led by MoMA’s [Kathy Halbreich](#), who co-curated the last great Nauman retrospective in 1994.)

This exhibition walks us through almost the entire life cycle of one of the most far-reaching visions of art history, in all its material range from sculpture made of traditional and non-traditional materials, video, drawing, and installation. It charts the emergence of Nauman in the 1960s as one of the leading artistic voices to come after Minimalism—yet who benefitted from its clarity of certainty—all the way through to his recent re-visitation of one of his most important early video works from 1968, *Walk With Contrapposto*. This new 3D version, is a hauntingly disjointed yet characteristically prosaic work—literally an out of body examination of the self and one’s place in the world (or out of it) by an artist nearer the end of life than its beginning. One hopes that it will be part of a magical finale by Nauman, who seems to have much more yet to say.

From the very beginning of the exhibition, through its integration of drawing with sculpture, the show sets the stage for the bifurcation of body and mind in Nauman’s work. Notions of “the artist”, of human touch, of the body as tool and as human essence are presented in work made throughout an artistic career defined by being both physical and psychological, always with rigor, in matter of fact ways.



Installation view of Bruce Nauman, *Model for Trench and Four Buried Passages* (1977) in Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts at Schaulager® Münchenstein/Basel (until 26 August) © Bruce Nauman/2018, ProLitteris, Zurich. Photo credit: Tom Bisig, Basel

The exhibition highlights so many of the iconic Nauman sculptures (iconic, that is, for an iconoclastic artist) with both measure and wonder. It precisely and profoundly defines the critical flip that takes place in Nauman's work in the late 1970s from the body as tool to the body as psychological vessel (a profound and fundamental shift that ordinarily takes place not within a single artist's work but across generations of artists), bringing this into grand scale with some of the most confounding sculptures of Nauman's life.

These works consist of linear and circular trenches; they rest upon or are suspended above one another; they bear so many of the characteristics of monumental sculpture yet also have the deliberately tentative materiality of models and studies. It takes a lot of precision and discipline to make curating this fluid and clear.

Meanwhile, at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery in London, in just about the only medium Nauman hasn't worked, there is a [major survey of paintings](#) by [Tomma Abts](#) which is, well, spectacular. In so many ways, Abts' practice is the opposite of Nauman's: it has been purely focused on painting and, with two most recent exceptions, always in the same size (that of an icon painting), always in the language of geometry.



Tomma Abts, *Fiebe* (2017). Courtesy Private Collection

Yet within her precisely fixed restraints, one finds a breadth, complexity and razor-sharp perfection—not like the perfection of Judd or Vermeer, but a transporting transcendence, where the rational and the impossible are fused into a visual and mental checkmate of space, color and form.

Abts, a cult figure to those of us who cannot get enough of her work, may not be a household name to those whose who collect by the market. She produces little work because of how much singularity, paint and transformation goes into making a single painting. Her work rarely appears on the secondary market, and when it does, it gets snapped up quickly and hardly ever at auction (where one is more likely to find, on occasion, one of her drawings, which are an equally complex and fulfilling corpus of work).

This show, so exquisitely selected and precisely installed, yields a multiplier effect where the whole is much greater than the sum of its parts. Amidst all the noise of the many voices of contemporary art, the rigor, clarity, complexity and beauty of Abts' work makes it so incredibly fulfilling to see such a consistent vision displayed in all its glory, depth and invention.



Tomma Abts, *Jeels* (2012). Courtesy Collection of Sascha S. Bauer

Every painting is a surprise; even the ones I know well, I see here as never before. The individuality of each work—their palettes, often quirkily dissonant and yet impossibly convincing; forms, linear in some, planar in others; surfaces, commonly covered in the scarred pentimenti of each painting's past; their nimble twists of space that pull on every trick of spatial illusion without ever being tricky, but only ever truthful—is brought into full view by the impeccable sequencing of works. The nimble and gentle soulfulness of her work echo in abstraction the work of Piero della Francesca. I can think of no other contemporary artist for whom seeing this much work might bring to full bloom that artist's greatness.

These shows are why we look at art. They cause wall labels and notions of "worth" to evaporate.