MATTHEW HIGGS
MATTHEW HIGGS IS THE DIRECTOR OF WHITE COLUMNS, NEW YORK, AND A REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR TO ARTFORUM. WITH ARTIST PETER DOIG, HE RECENTLY CURATED TWO EXHIBITIONS OF DENZIL FORRESTER’S WORK FROM THE 1980S AT TRAMPS, LONDON, AND WHITE COLUMNS (ON VIEW UNTIL DECEMBER 3 AND DECEMBER 17, RESPECTIVELY).

1. "DANIEL BUREN: A FRESCO" (BOZAR CENTRE FOR FINE ARTS, BRUSSELS) Part retrospective, part autobiography, and part paean to Buren's peers and mentors, "A Fresco" ranks among the best exhibitions I have ever seen. In the exquisite Victor Horta-designed galleries, the artist's signature stripes functioned as a kind of curatorial template for works by Constant Brancusi, Henne Darboven, and some hundred others, each choreographed by Buren with an extraordinary site-specific sensitivity and wit.

2. JACK DRUMMER (BURCHFIELD PENNEY ART CENTER, BUFFALO, NY; CURATED BY SCOTT PROPEACH) This survey of a sorely underrecognized artist's extraordinary late work was a revelation. Using proletarian materials like tar and his signature sheets of dyed rubber, Drummer (1938-2013) created painting-like objects of an often-transcendent beauty. Imagine Monet's water lilies by way of Arte Povera.

3. MARCEL BROODTHAERS (MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK; CURATED BY CHRISTOPHE CHERIX AND MANUEL BOIRA-VILLEL WITH FRANCESCA WILMOTT) This was a year in which exhibitions that took the past as their purview seemed unusually strong, to the extent that such reflective shows fill all ten berths on this list. Maybe historical perspective is especially welcome in an annum horribilis like 2016. In New York, the choice of candidates was especially rich: A partial list of exemplary retrospectives in the city's museums this past year might include those for Bruce Conner, Antonio Lopez, Danny Lyon, Agnes Martin, Lisette Model, Noguchi, and Martin Wong. MoMA's near-definitive account of the work of Broodthaers was a standout among standouts, providing a rare opportunity to consider firsthand the labyrinthine imagination of the twentieth century's most elusive and enigmatic artist-poet.

4. B. WURTZ (BALTIC CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART, GATESHEAD, UK; CURATED BY LAURENCE SILLARS) This wonderful survey, the artist's first, brought together more than sixty works, deftly tracing the forty-five-year arc of Wurtz's one-man art movement: a lo-fi, ecologically savvy, ad hoc aesthetic tendency, as formally ingenious as it is genuinely accessible. Call it post-Minimal folk art.

5. NEO NATURISTS (STUDIO VOLTAIRE, LONDON; CURATED BY JOE SCOTLAND) Inaugurated in 1981 by Jennifer Binnie, Christine Binnie, and Wilma Johnson, the live-art collective Neo Naturists emerged from the subcultural milieu that nurtured such maverick talents as Leigh Bowery, Michael Clark, and Grayson Perry. The group's anarchic performances, replete with nudity and body painting, provided a necessary counterpoint to the more polished aesthetics associated with the Thatcher era, injecting a visceral and subversive spirit into the otherwise austere British cultural landscape of the early 1980s.
LOUIS MICHEL ELSHEMUS (42 CARLTON PLACE, GLASGOW; CURATED BY MERLIN JAMES AND CAROL RHODES): Since opening in 2012, 42 Carlton Place has established itself as an independent-minded space with a curatorial slant toward overlooked or underseen painting. (Previous exhibitions have focused on the work of Clive Hodgson, Adrian Morris, and Christina Ramberg.) As such, it was a highly appropriate setting for a consideration of the life and work of Elshehmu's (1864–1941), the eccentric figurative painter who was famously “discovered” at the age of fifty-three, by Marcel Duchamp. A true pioneer of good bad painting, Elshehmu's has arguably never appeared more contemporary.

DIANE SIMPSON (INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, BOSTON; CURATED BY DAN BYERS WITH JEFFREY DE BLOIS): Drawing freely from fashion, interior decoration, architecture, and mercantile design, the Chicago-based Simpson, now in her eighties, has created one of the most important and idiosyncratic bodies of sculpture produced anywhere over the past forty years. Yet despite this singular achievement, her work remains relatively obscure outside her native Illinois. Ideally, this compact, groundbreaking survey (her first in an East Coast institution) will set the stage for a full-scale retrospective of Simpson's wildly innovative art.

“TEARS SHARED: MARC CAMILLE CHAMOWICZ FEATURING BRUNO PÉLASGY” (FLAT TIME HOUSE, LONDON; CURATED BY MARIE CAIN) This was an annus mirabilis for Chaimowicz: A career survey at London's Serpentine Gallery opened the same week as Cabinet Gallery's new custom-built home, which he helped design; and, with Marie Cain, he organized “Tears Shared” at Flat Time House, former home of the late John Latham. A poignant and immersive mise-en-sceâne, “Tears Shared” showcased the inimitable, fragile, jewel-like art of Bruno Pélassy (1966–2002), setting in motion a fluid conversation among Chaimowicz's, Pélassy's, and Latham's respective projects, in which any clear lines of authorship were gently dissolved.

MARY HEILMAN (WHITECHAPEL GALLERY, LONDON; CURATED BY LYDIA YEE WITH HABDA RASHID): This dense, exhilarating retrospective made clear just how original Heilman's painterly imagination has been over the past five decades. Informed and shaped as much by the subcultures of surfing and punk as by the legacies of late modernist abstraction, Heilman's deceptively casual, essentially nonrepresentational art has always been rooted in personal experience: an autobiographical narrative fully fleshed out by Heilman’s anecdotal commentaries in the exhibition’s revelatory catalogue.

PETER FISCHLI AND DAVID WEISS (SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK; CURATED BY NANCY SPECTOR AND NAT TROTMAN): Beautifully installed in collaboration with Fischli & Weiss, this show underscored the absolute seriousness of Fischli & Weiss's often laugh-out-loud-funny interrogations of our (mostly boring) quotidian lives. Over the thirty odd years of their creative adventure, the duo developed a form of aesthetic Esperanto, a visual language that illuminated a comedie humaine—made it brighter, in fact.