The top 10 art museum exhibitions of 2016, plus the worst trend of the year

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In chronological order of their opening, these were the 10 most engaging art museum exhibitions that I saw this year within L.A.’s immediate orbit. Three are still on view.


For a generation of young artists flanking World War II, tiny Black Mountain College in rural North Carolina would become the prime incubator of America's avant-garde culture.


Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) has gone from being an American pariah to America’s sweetheart, a result of his dogged determination to close the long-enforced gap between photography and art that this sprawling two-museum show exposed.


The shameful World War II internment nearly erased the extraordinary Modernist legacy of Japanese American photographers, working primarily but not exclusively in L.A., which this long-awaited exhibition beautifully restored.

“Agnès Martin,” Los Angeles County Museum of Art

In gently crafted, stripped-down Minimalist canvases, Agnes Martin (1912-2004) created an entirely distinct, largely unprecedented artistic vocabulary for spiritual consciousness.
“Marilyn Minter: Pretty/Dirty,” Orange County Museum of Art

In the 1980s, Marilyn Minter’s visually exhausting paintings and video projections began to shuttle between lusty, orgiastic cravings and the poignancy of inevitable human loss.

“Non-fiction,” The Underground Museum

With just 10 works by eight artists, the small storefront museum managed to relate a powerful story on the theme of violence against African Americans, both flagrant and subtle. On view through May.

“Peter Krasnow: Maverick Modernist,” Laguna Art Museum

After the trauma of World War II, Peter Krasnow (1886-1979) made paintings driven by fierce color — abstractions that, in the face of death, rejoice in life.


In the landscapes paintings of Theodore Rousseau (1812-1867), seen in his first American retrospective, nationalism met naturalism and French identity fused with the land.

“John McLaughlin Paintings: Total Abstraction,” Los Angeles County Museum of Art

John McLaughlin (1898-1976), Southern California’s first momentous postwar artist, was among the most profound avant-garde painters to work in the United States in the aftermath of the cataclysm that was World War II. On view through April 16.

“Renaissance and Reformation: German Art in the Age of Dürer and Cranach,” Los Angeles County Museum of Art

German state museums in Berlin, Dresden and Munich lent more than 100 paintings, sculptures, drawings and decorative objects from their magnificent collections for this probing survey, a celebration of the imminent 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s Protestant Reformation. On view through March 26.

**Worst trend:** Running nonprofit art museums like for-profit businesses.

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