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February's Must-See Art Shows in NYC and Beyond

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At the beginning of the year, my news-junkie father told me that he'd finally let all of his subscriptions expire. Between the LA fires, the losses of David Lynch and Marianne Faithfull, the Trump inauguration, multiple terrorist attacks and an overwhelming number of plane crashes, the world had become too overwhelming to bear. I don't blame him. To date, 2025 resembles one of those horrifyingly nonsensical Medieval depictions of Hell. But even as Elon Musk sets out to seize control and make the government as dysfunctional as Twitter, one thing he can't control is our capacity to look. Our attention is highly sought after, although we rarely value it accordingly. We frequently buy into our own algorithmic dead-ends out of convenience or boredom or lack of imagination about where else to turn. It really isn't enough to "touch grass," we also need to seek new ways of engaging with the world that don't place the Internet at the center of our consciousness.

There are more beautiful and interesting things per square mile in New York than almost anywhere else on Earth. A large chunk of them also happen to be totally free. Like bumping into a stranger on the street, encountering an artist isn't always an immediate pleasure. Some paintings are glittering at first glance but gradually reveal themselves to be dull, while some "ugly" work can reveal itself to be extraordinarily rich in humor and personality and feeling. By holding up an artist's vision of the world and squaring it with your own, you exercise the agency of your senses in a way that social media rarely encourages. At its best, it can grant you an expanded perspective of the world, that's consoling in part because you're not alone in experiencing it.

Here are some shows worth seeing this month in NYC and beyond:

New York City

Chelsea

Nathalie Djurberg & Hans Berg - [Only For the Wicked](#) - Tanya Bonakdar

The Swedish animation duo make painstakingly realized and utterly freaky fairy stories. Think [Alexander Calder's Circus](#) on steroids or *Wallace and Gromit* on a full-blown acid trip.

Mark Leckey - [3 Songs From the Liver](#) - Gladstone

A wild show that's somehow about listening to NTS radio, revelatory pandemic walks, smashed-out bus-stop glass, and gloriously mapping the ancient world onto the everyday.

[Steve McQueen](#) - Dia Chelsea

The British filmmaker launched his career in Hollywood off the strength of his video work in the 90s, now he returns with an exhibition showcasing his films *Sunshine State* (2022) and *Exodus* (1992-1997) as well as a new series of photography, *Bounty* (2024).

Downtown/SoHo

Cory Arcangel, Theresa Duncan, Oliver Payne - [Crust Shmup/Totally Fucked/Chop Suey](#) - Smilers

An exhibition dedicated to three pioneers who explored the creative potential of video games as an art form.

Kim Hastreiter - [My Amazing Friends](#) - Jeffrey Deitch

There's been a lot of work in the past few years about friendship, but few are able to call on the breadth of extraordinary peoples that founding *PAPER* goddess, Kim Hastreiter has assembled for her forthcoming show at Jeffrey Deitch.

Pap Souleye Fall - [INANUTSHELL](#) & [HIDDENINPLAINSIGHT](#) - Blade Study & Stellarhighway

The multi-media artist has a unique way of weaving and piling on material and references into busy, super-compelling assemblage. I never expected to see a giant cardboard peanut in a gallery but now I have and it was wonderful

Paul Mpagi Sepuya - [TRANCE](#) - Bortolami

The photographer has always taken an exploded view of the studio set-up, so that we're given off-kilter portraits of the artist's process. More dicks than first appear.

Tabboo! - [Early Works](#) - Karma & Gordon Robichaux

Encompassing painting, drawing, collage, and fashion, the artist and drag legend's exhibition of early work is simply too fabulous to be missed.

Uptown/Brooklyn/Queens

[Caspar David Friedrich: The Soul of Nature](#) - The Met

The most iconic artist of the Romantic era, who reached for the sublime, [launched a thousand memes](#), and majorly inspired *Nosferatu* is given a major retrospective of his work.

Dietmar Busse - [Fairytale 1991-1999](#) - Amant

The long-time cult fashion photographer and artist gets his first institutional solo show, a collection of editorial and personal work spanning one of the hottest eras of downtown New York.

Marlon Mullen - [Projects: Marlon Mullen](#) - MoMA

The push and pull struggle between being an art world insider and outsider plays out in Marlon Mullen's paintings. The disabled artist's solo show at MoMA is a major showcase and locates his colorful riff on art magazines firmly and undeniably at the center of the art world.