



Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910-1983), *Steel-Imperial City, June 1978, 1978*, Oil on cardboard, 33.75 x 29.50 in, SKU: EV8587. Courtesy of Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York.

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Hilma af Klint Proved That “Popular” Doesn’t Have to Mean “Stupid”

After the Guggenheim’s smash success, 6 artists who could become intelligent blockbusters.

Think of the typical museum's idea of a "blockbuster" exhibition, and you might recall a parade of populist pandering—from Tim Burton at MoMA to James Franco at MOCA—or predictable, well-worn surveys of famous white men. And yet the hottest show in recent memory had zero celebrity appeal and no household names: a [Guggenheim survey of the paintings of Hilma af Klint](#), an early 20th-century Swedish artist who is now [credited with inventing abstraction](#). As critic Ben Davis has [noted](#), the stars aligned in interesting ways to make this the museum's most popular show ever, benefitting from both af Klint's dramatic biography, a newfound hipster interest in the occult, and a snazzy line of branded merchandise. (Davis's colleague, meanwhile, has pegged [Agnes Pelton](#) as the semi-forgotten artist likely to ride a wave of af Klintian interest.)

The smash success of af Klint at the Guggenheim is good news for anyone who has faith in the public's appreciation for serious art. Whitney chief curator Scott Rothkopf, [writing on Instagram](#) during the show's final days, was delighted. "Sorry Picasso & Giacometti," he said. "THRILL to see af Klint mobbed near the end. The whole museum field should take note instead of chasing obvious blockbusters. Our audiences are smarter than we are and how incredible that the most popular show ever at the museum is an early 20th c, largely unknown abstract, woman artist."

We wondered: What other worthy artists might be able to repeat the left-field popularity of Hilma af Klint at the Guggenheim? (Davis himself volunteered the obscure 20th-century Greek photographer Nelly's, a complicated figure responsible for "[gloriously cheesy](#) nude goddess figures on the Parthenon," but who also had [a fraught relationship](#) with her country's fascist government.) Of course, there's no scientific way of predicting who might be the subject of tomorrow's thoughtful blockbuster show. But with the help of some savvy insiders, we've assembled a short list of names that are worthy of marquee status.

Eugene Von Bruenchenhein



Eugene Von Bruenchenhein (1910-1983), Untitled, 1940's, Gelatin silver print, 9 x 7 in, Inventory #: 9701. Courtesy of Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York.

A star of the so-called “outsider art” community, the Milwaukee-based artist left behind a sprawling and mysterious body of work when he died in 1983. That included psychedelically tinged paintings of impossible buildings, and a series of elaborate, staged portraits he took of his wife (he was obsessed with her to the degree of using strands of her hair to craft his own custom paint brushes). Von Bruenchenhein was the subject of a survey at the American Folk Art Museum back in 2010, and another in 2017 at the Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin—but the climate seems ripe for a higher-profile

blockbuster in New York or Los Angeles. “He’s unparalleled, even in the outsider milieu,” says Andrew Edlin, who represents the artist’s estate. “From the ceramics to the photographs to the chicken bone [sculptures] to his poetry and architectural paintings. He’s like the Leonardo of outsider art: he did everything, and did it all well.”