

Art review

Mad world mirrored in 'degenerate' work loathed by the Nazis



Magic Realism
Tate Modern, London
★★★★★

Jonathan Jones

In a self-portrait that he sketched in the 1930s George Grosz is getting ready to paint a model in his studio. As she does her hair, standing with her back to him and us, naked except for a translucent green slip that half-covers her buttocks, seamed stockings and shoes, he grins lasciviously, squeezing a phallic paint tube. What a degenerate.

I mean that precisely. In 1937 Grosz, like many of the artists in Tate Modern's often eye-popping new display of early 20th-century German art, had his works held up for mockery and revilement by the Nazis in their Munich exhibition Entartete Kunst - Degenerate Art.

Magic Realism, a free display that has the depth of an exhibition, makes you see what scared the Nazis about modern German art. The Degenerate Art exhibition is remembered today simply as an attack on "modernism". That's a bloodless misunderstanding. The reason the Nazis called modern art degenerate is that avant garde art in Germany after the first world war

really did revel in the perverse, the decadent, the depraved. It is still shocking today.

Otto Dix's 1922 watercolour Lustmord - Lust Murder - depicts a slaying Jack the Ripper figure as he poses demonically by the woman he has killed. The artist relishes the contours of her dead body. He, Dix, is the true murderer, for he has created this scene, his brush lingering over blood-stained flesh. An eerie 1924 drawing by Rudolf Schlichter portrays the artist sitting down, contemplating two dead women who hang from his ceiling.

What sickened the imaginations of these artists? Dix was a machine gunner on the Western Front who came back from the war with a terrible sense of the fragile flesh we are. He was to record what he truly saw in grisly prints of worm-infested skulls, bodies on barbed wire. His images of sexual violence could be understood as post-traumatic nightmares.

Grosz makes the same confusion of war and civilian life, sex and death explicit in his 1916 painting Suicide. A prostitute holds up a flower at a window as a young man lies self-slaughtered in the street. The jagged cubistic composition sends everything spinning off in fragments. Reality has been blown apart and death has poisoned desire.

That mixing of eros and thanatos, sex and death, has shaped the image of "decadence" in art and literature



▼ Avant garde decadence: George Grosz's watercolour Self-Portrait with Model in the Studio
PICTURE: ESTATE OF GEORGE GROSZ



at least since Charles Baudelaire published his poetry collection Les Fleurs du Mal in 1857.

The Weimar Republic, a fledgling German democracy established in 1919 only to be undermined by economic disaster and overrun by Hitler, has long been pictured as "decadent".

Magic Realism does nothing to overturn the Cabaret image - it even has a section called Cabaret. Yet the sensual, provocative art of Weimar's jazz-filled nights is full of freedom and possibility as well as perversity and darkness.

The biggest discovery here is Jeanne Mammen. Her images of Weimar women are liberated

Above, *The Beggar of Prachattice* by Conrad Felixmüller; left, *Heinrich Maria Davringhausen's The Poet Däubler* GEORGE ECONOMOU COLLECTION; TATE

and hedonistic. Two women with sleek, short hair lounge smoking and daydreaming in her 1929 watercolour *Boring Dolls*; prostitutes are portrayed as defiant working women in her 1930 work *Free Room*.

The curators see her imagery as a riposte to the male artists in the show but to me she seems to have a lot in common with Dix. In his series of etchings *The Circus*, gender fluidities abound in a fantastic playground of sexual experiment. The Tamer is part man, part woman and part lion.

For too long, art history has tended to crush this raw art with cold, technical language. This display is a past that feels like our present. The art here holds up a mad mirror to a mad world. It is degenerate with a vengeance.

Magic Realism: Art in Weimar Germany 1919-33 is at Tate Modern, London, until July 2019

Art review

Surprising, touching, alarming

Herstory
Touchstones Rochdale
★★★★★

Adrian Searle

For a long time, a painting by Jessica Etchells in Rochdale Art Gallery was presumed to have been by her brother, the artist and architect Frederick Etchells. Jessica, born in Stockport in 1892, had studied at art school, moved to London and worked both for Roger Fry's Omega Workshop and, later, Wyndham Lewis's Rebel Art Centre. It was only in 1980 that the painting was identified as being her work. Now, this lowering still life hangs next to two works by the American artist Sherrie Levine - one is a photograph titled *Untitled (After Walker Evans)*, the other a drawing *After Henri Matisse*.

Levine plays on authorship and originality, and on the supposed singular vision of the male artist. There is something poignant about the juxtaposition with Etchells. There's a lesson here, retold and expanded in *Herstory*, an exhibition of work by women artists, combining loans to Rochdale by the Sandretto Re Rebaudengo collection in Turin and works from the museum's own collection.

Rochdale (the gallery was renamed Touchstones in the 1990s) has a minuscule exhibition budget, and these loans by the philanthropist Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo give the gallery a lift.

Featuring works from the 1970s to the present, *Herstory* is often surprising, touching and occasionally alarming. American photographer Catherine Opie's 1994 self-portrait, in which she is at once both objectified and self-possessed, passive and aggressively confrontational, is a BDSM queering of conventional portraiture.

Across the gallery, exposed skin in Shirin Neshat's portrait of a woman in a chador has been over-drawn with fragments of poetry in Farsi.

Neshat's theatrical image of empowerment hangs next to Paulina Olowksa's terrific painting of an Algerian, *Ouled Nail Woman*, a parody of 19th-century orientalism.

Herstory feels a much bigger exhibition than the two rooms it occupies. Full of variety, humour and confrontation, women objectified, invisible women and women refusing to disappear, its stories have no end.

At Contemporary Forward, Touchstones Rochdale, Greater Manchester, until 29 September

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