

ARCHIVES | 1990

Review/Art; Avant-Garde Dusseldorf In Tumult and in Horror

By MICHAEL BRENSON MARCH 23, 1990

About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems. Please send reports of such problems to archive_feedback@nytimes.com.

One of the strengths of "War, Resistance and Politics: Dusseldorf Artists 1910-1945," at the Jewish Museum, is that it sheds light on Dusseldorf as an avant-garde center. Before World War I, the art in the city was largely identified with its traditional art academy. After the war, artists there began to engage the social and political situation of their country, and that engagement has now itself become a tradition at the Dusseldorf art academy.

The exhibition also exposes an unfamiliar side of German art between the wars. A number of artists in Dusseldorf made paintings that were sensitive to the plight of the Jews. Six of the nearly 40 artists in the show were Jewish, including Gert Wollheim, one of the leaders of the Dusseldorf avant-garde, who fled Germany in 1933 and eventually settled in New York City, and Arthur Kaufmann, who was dismissed in 1933 as a teacher at the School of Arts and Crafts in Dusseldorf and immigrated to New York in 1936.

In addition, the exhibition introduces German artists who may be almost entirely unknown in the United States. Wollheim, who, like Otto Dix, made drawings of war while in the trenches, is one. Adolf Uzarski, who also struggled to find images that could create a graphic sense of the war's harvest of death, is another. The show is worth a visit just for the large charcoal works of Otto Pankok, one of the few members of the Dusseldorf avant-garde in the 1920's who was still making poignant art in Germany in the 40's.

Despite its strengths, however, the exhibition is very problematic. It begins broad and ends narrow. It is both obscure, providing too little information about its artists, works and developments, and heavy-handed in its political agenda. There is no clear sense of whether this is cultural history, an art exhibition or a show about German artists and Jews.

"War, Resistance and Politics" is about two-thirds of a 1988 exhibition organized by the Stadtmuseum Dusseldorf that traced the tradition of social protest among Dusseldorf artists from World War I through the present. That exhibition had a scholarly catalogue. The only publication for the Jewish Museum show is a brochure written by Emily D. Bilski, an associate curator, which does not discuss any work in depth and which makes no effort to place Dusseldorf in the context of more important German art centers like Berlin and Cologne.

The exhibition at the Jewish Museum begins with Wollheim and Uzarski and the trauma of World War I. Then it introduces influential figures in the Dusseldorf avant-garde, including Johanna Ey ("Mother Ey" to her artists and friends). She was born in 1864 and had 12 children, of whom 8 died young. After her divorce in 1910, she opened a bakery between the Dusseldorf art academy and the Old Town. She liked artists and made them as welcome as children. During the war, short of money, she began selling art.

In 1919, Wollheim and Pankok visited her and she put some of their paintings on display in a window. The vehement responses to them clearly convinced her of the power and necessity of art. Soon there was a sign in her window saying: "New Art. Mrs. Ey." She is right in the center of Kaufmann's 1925 group portrait, "The Contemporaries," as formidable as a column and as natural as a tree. In his 1929 "Johanna Ey Sleeping," Peter Janssen painted her like a reclining nude goddess by Velazquez or Titian, except that she is plump, fully clothed and entirely nonsexual: the affection for her is unmistakable.

After pointing out the way artists like Dix (who mastered etching during his four years in Dusseldorf), Will Kupper and Conrad Felixmuller drew and painted the wounds and convulsions of Germany in the 20's, the show breaks down. In the next gallery, which suggests the flagging energy around the time Hitler took over, the art ceases to be direct and becomes allegorical; the paintings need explanations that the show does not often enough provide. The last gallery begins with Karl Schwesig's graphic scenes of Nazi torture of three members of the outlawed Social Democratic Party in 1936, and ends with Pankok's allegories of Nazi Germany and direct expressions of the destruction of the Jews.

The exhibition reflects the hunger for political correctness that has become such a factor in esthetic taste. At the end of the show, there is a sense that the Dusseldorf avant-garde, which is promoted as the subject of the show, was only interesting to the museum insofar as it produced artists whose progressive politics helped them appreciate the nightmare of the Jews.

The exhibition underlines a fundamental conflict within the museum. Can it be both a far-ranging cultural and historical institution of real artistic scope and an institution in which only a special culture and history are served?

The museum might consider dealing with art in artistic as well as in social and cultural terms. The wartime drawings of Wollheim have as much to do with Michelangelo as they do with what he saw. Wollheim's "Soldiers in the Trenches," a painting from 1918, needs to be compared with the sleeping soldiers in Piero della Francesca's "Resurrection." Uzarski's "Dance of Death" lithographs from 1916-17 need to be seen within the long tradition of German involvement with the Dance of Death theme.

The museum might also consider large solo exhibitions. Why not really show Pankok? With their feeling for materials and textures and their graphic gift, his works have power. In "Burning Synagogue" from 1940, one Jew sits in rubble, another stands staring into space with his hands in his pockets and a third, probably a rabbi, stares into an apocalyptic fire like a figure of the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich mesmerized by a vast, fading sky. In "The House of Jews," from 1945, the charcoal work that ends the show, 10 people, young and old, seem to be watching the horrors of history from their windows. The museum might have been able to tell the story in which it was interested through Pankok alone.

"War, Resistance and Politics: Dusseldorf Artists 1910-1945" remains at the Jewish Museum, Fifth Avenue and 92d Street, through May 23.

Ursula von Rydingsvard

Lorence Monk Gallery

568 and 578 Broadway (near Prince Street)

Through March 31

In an exhibition spread over both of the Lorence Monk Gallery's spaces, the wood sculpture of Ursula von Rydingsvard seems to have erupted. There is more variety in size and imagery; there is now a sense of abundance. Ms. von Rydingsvard continues to chop and hack her way to a ritual world of nightmare and enchantment that is very rare at a time when so many artists insist on a self-consciousness that keeps viewers at bay.

Her new sculptures are architectural in their references to thrones, barques, tubs and coffins. They are also figurative in their references to a human presence either just departed, as yet unformed, or necessary for the work to function as an instrument, vehicle or tool. "Nine Cones" consists of nine joined six-foot-tall conical blocks, all built with small chunks of wood, all with the points of the cones on the floor so that the cones suggest a battalion of peg-legged soldiers. In the militaristic, almost storm-trooperlike "Five Mountains," there is also a sense of figures buried inside the wood. And there is a memory of the procession of stone baboons that is a feature of the Egyptian galleries at the Louvre.

Always there are hints of the artist's native Poland and of so many sculptural traditions. "Oj Dana, Oj Dana," more than 12 feet tall and 15 feet wide, is named after a Polish song that Ms. von Rydingsvard often sings while working. Like many other sculptures in the show, this one is related to tribal art, particularly to enthroned figures, but the big bowl-like loops seem almost like Cycladic harps, and from the side, the loops are like the ribs of an old ship. These sculptures allow the imagination to roam.

A version of this review appears in print on March 23, 1990, on Page C00028 of the National edition with the headline: Review/Art; Avant-Garde Dusseldorf In Tumult and in Horror.