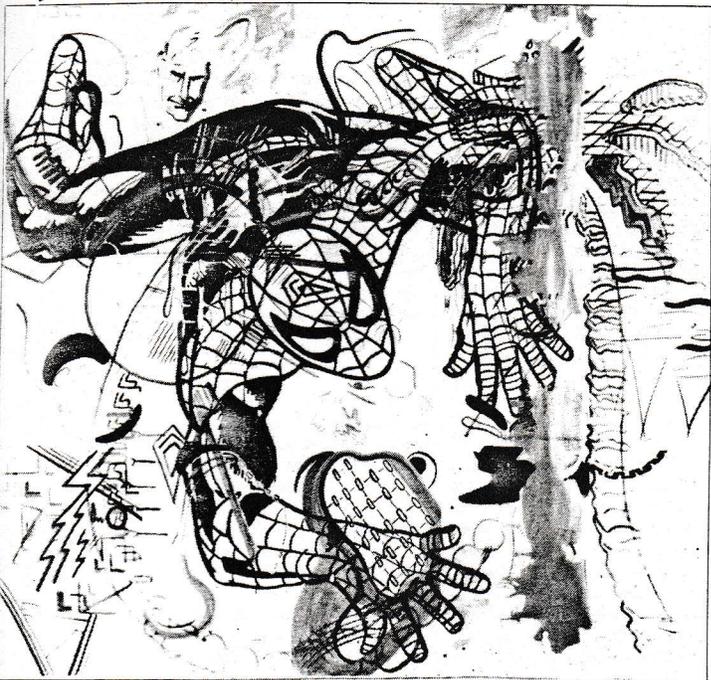


Art

# New German Painting: Collective Berlin



Sigmar Polke, Untitled

by Hunter  
Drohojowska

**Y**ou've read the magazines, heard the gossip, and now, in living color, *New Figuration: Contemporary Art from Germany* offers Los Angeles a first-time opportunity to view a good selection of paintings by 14 of Germany's new figurative artists. Organized by New York art critic Donald Kuspit, the show will be on view at UCLA's Frederick S. Wight Gallery through February 13.

The gallery is tightly installed with some 40 canvases, most painted in the brutal, gestural style associated with Expressionism. This is quite a bit different, however, from being Expressionist paintings. These artists have appropriated the style of Expressionism with deliberation and irony. Their motivations are largely conceptual, as evidenced, oddly enough, by the least expressionist of the artists in the show: Sigmar Polke. The images in Polke's pictures are borrowed from popular culture. One features the comic strip character Spiderman; the other, a scene from *Alice in Wonderland* juxtaposed to a jumping basketball player. The other artists in the exhibition appropriated their style from high culture, specifically the established visual language of the German Expressionists. But they have as little in common with the motivations of their stylistic source as Polke has with a cartoonist. Style is simply a vehicle for the artists' content.

Why choose Expressionism? As Kuspit notes in this January's *Art in America*, the young Germans' decision to paint in the expressionist style was, in part, a reaction against what seemed to them to be the constipated, reductivist attitudes of the American avant-garde. He writes, "To the younger German painters, the American art world seemed by the late '60s... as authoritarian and unthinking in its rejection of painting per se as Hitler in his rejection of Expressionist painting. So why not make a fetish out of painting — and indeed, of Expressionist-type painting? Why not be ironically decadent, by going back to the first truly modern painting Germany had seen?"

The original Expressionist movement, born of the innocent beginnings of this century, embraced the idea of a return to nature, and a primitive state, in order to experience the powers of pure instinct. Their paintings celebrated the existence

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of savages and animals uncorrupted by the civilized world. Today, however, there are no such virgin territories, either physically or psychologically. The most remote islands have television; the collective mysteries of the mind are analyzed in monthly best-sellers. Today, nature is culture. The German artists recognize this and they paint both nature and human nature as transformed by social and political forces. As Kuspit explains in his essay to the exhibition catalogue, "The new German Expressionism understands that what is repressed today is recognition — let alone understanding — of the historical social forces that shape the reality of existence down to the last detail of its appearance." These artists know that no raw, unmediated, primal condition still survives. They recognize that "society determines all expression, not just the form, but even the content of the most expressive expressions."

**T**his attention to the conceptual motivations of the Germans is not to say that these aren't good paintings. You'll see dynamic surging paint, lascivious lascivious paint, but all in the service of content.

Anselm Kiefer's *Paths VII* displays an array of heads, serious German personalities, rendered sloppily in the tones of blood and earth over a background of woodcut portraits. Markus Lupertz' beautiful still life *German Motif* depicts the soldier's helmet and a spade plunged into the soil, on an enormous scale. A.R. Penck's enigmatic visual language of figurative symbols literally covers entire canvases, as in *Siege and Capture in*

*Beirut #2*. (As just one of the artists who came west from his native Dresden, East Germany, his work primarily deals with political division and oppression.) Jorg Im mendorff's *War of Styles (Cafe Deutschland)*, one of an allegorical series begun after political discussions with Penck, features a decadent club scene of candle-lit tables and chairs, vacant but for fighting figures in the background and a character, who may be the artist, distributing manifestos. Helmut Middendorf's *Guitar* shows the enormous instrument to be dominating the city skyline. His other rock singers, twisted and howling, are painted on stage in the lurid colors of neon at night.

In Rainer Fetting's *View*, a slim figure of brilliant blue stands nude and distraught before a picture window, the mountainous landscape looming beyond. Salomé paints homoerotic scenes, including a self-portrait in women's stockings and heels, his legs bound in barbed wire. Others in the exhibition include Georg Baselitz, Michael Buthe, Karl Heinz Hodicke, Bernd Koberling, Troels Worsel, and Franz Hitzler.

These new German artists have received substantial critical praise and acceptance in this country. It is easy to understand why after seeing this much of the work together. Initially, there is the attraction of the figurative painting itself, in free-flowing, anarchist rages of colors, overwhelming viewers with an insistent monumentality. Yet this form is in service of content, and once the attention is captured by a sensuous and sensational presence, the viewer will also find identification on a personal, political and psychological level.



Helmut Middendorf, *The Singer*

Even the brief descriptions of these works convey their powerful content. This is the real world, seen without blinders and without much idealism. Not journalism, nor social realism, but ideological paintings reflecting the needs and aspirations of a self-destructive society.

These artists work from their background, living in a war-torn nation divided against itself. What would viewers from America, or elsewhere, have in common with such pictures? Everything. The situation of a divided Berlin, the city

where many of these artists have lived and worked, acts as a metaphor for the schizophrenic, self-hating condition of the world. The themes explored in these paintings are just as clear and present in Los Angeles or New York, Paris or Rome. The new German paintings have such currency because they speak to any viewer's unconscious knowledge of historical and psychological reality. As Kuspit states in his catalogue essay, "We all inhabit Berlin." ■

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