VOICE

Postcards From the Void: Martí Cormand Resurrects Murdered Art

by R.C. Baker

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Adolf Hitler revered the realism of ancient Greece and the Renaissance as the highest standard of art. But, like with so much else in his life, he knew even better what he hated: modernism.

Postcards to AZ: Ernst Barlach, God the Father Hovering. 1922 (2016)
Courtesy Josée Bienvenu Gallery

Hitler's favorite painter, Adolf Ziegler, exemplified the stilted, ersatz classicism that marked the art of the Third Reich. He also presided over the Nazis' "Degenerate Art" exhibitions, and it is to this able pasticheur of mannerist-inspired nudes and color-coordinated drapery that the artist Martí Cormand has metaphorically addressed a series of painted and drawn postcards.

Cormand was partly inspired by the discovery of several expressionist and cubist sculptures unearthed in Berlin in 2010 by workers digging a new subway station. It's not clear how these eleven pieces came to be interred in layers of World War II rubble, but Cormand has based one series of paintings and drawings on a particular sculpture, Portrait of Actress Anni Mewes, a bronze head topped by a smooth carapace of hair (c. 1920, by Edwin Scharff). One painted version captures the scabby green blotches that covered the oxidized relic when it was rescued from the earth; a graphite drawing conveys the dark sleekness of the original surface. In other variations the face is blurred, as if being reborn: In one, it is a featureless emerald bust, while in another the eyes, lips, and nose are smeared like half-modeled clay, hinting at the process of casting bronze. In this last variant, Cormand (who was born in Barcelona in 1970 and now lives in Brooklyn) echoes the breakneck brushwork of Francis Bacon, who insisted on painting the human body even as the majority of postwar artists — believing that the social-realist propaganda of World War II had sullied figurative art — were moving to abstraction. Cormand works on both sides of that divide in the "Anni Mewes" series, in one piece abstracting the sculpture into a lushly painted blob, as if swaddled for transport from its unceremonious grave to the daylight above.

The elegiac beauty permeating Cormand's seven-by-five-inch pictures of these doomed artworks arises less from his skill with brush and pencil, which is itself dazzling, than from the conceptual rabbit holes he navigates. In a speech opening the first "Degenerate Art" exhibition, in 1937, Ziegler proclaimed, "What this show has to offer causes shock and disgust in all of us." Modernist works were hung cheek by jowl and accompanied on the walls by such slogans as "Crazy at any price" and "Madness becomes method." These bilious dog and pony shows, which traveled throughout the Reich, were important milestones in Ziegler's

and other cultural overlords' drive to discredit art that deviated from classical standards. This denigration of any aesthetic that could be perceived as nonconformist or challenging fostered a culture of mediocrity that foreshadowed what Hannah Arendt famously termed the Third Reich's "banality of evil" — all those train schedules and reams of paperwork. Adolf Eichmann, testifying behind bulletproof glass in 1961 (a bland monster in a vitrine), asserted that it was simply his managerial duty to arrange rail transport for millions to the extermination camps, just as other functionaries were tasked with confiscating an estimated 22,000 works of art (and destroying perhaps a quarter of them).

Early on, some of those works were sold at auctions in Switzerland to obtain foreign currency for the Reich. Cormand's pencil drawing of an art handler hefting a Picasso portrait reveals — in the carefully rendered argyle socks and carved frame — a knack for photorealism that would have been prized by the Nazis. But it is his decision to delete the background of the original photograph the piece is based on, concentrating instead on the whimsical juxtaposition of painted head and living body, that lends the work a wistful surrealism. The image reminds us that the no-questions-asked business ethics of the Swiss saved a small percentage of modernist paintings from Fascist bonfires. Swiss banks also reaped a tidy profit, which, later in the war — when looted art was not so easily laundered — was augmented by the melting-down of dental gold pulled from the mouths of Europe's dead Jewry.

The humanist radiance of great art, even in the midst of such brutality, shines through in Cormand's lovely takes on Mondrian, one of which imagines the Dutch master's iconic grid of primary colors blurred almost to oblivion. And the intimate scale of the works in this show conjures a further theme of melancholy: Hitler's struggle to sell his own postcard paintings during his starving-artist phase, in Vienna. It is a mournful exercise to contemplate how world history would have been changed if that city's art academy had deemed the grandiose youth's awkward figure drawings acceptable, rather than rejecting him. Twice.

Once in power, the Führer proclaimed, "Being German means being clear," and he and his minions set about leaching all subtlety from art, a profound misreading of art's essence, which survives by its resistance to absolutes and by always delivering more to a viewer than the artist ever intended. Otto Freundlich understood as much — his Large Head (The New Man), from 1912, owed debts to African masks, Picasso, and the stone monuments of Easter Island. A quarter-century later, his creation landed on the cover of the Entartete Kunst catalog, an aesthetic death sentence that soon caught up with the artist himself: Freundlich was killed in the Majdanek concentration camp, in 1943. The New Man lives on, however, in Cormand's drawing, which conveys the rough plaster surface of that long-lost being more viscerally than the few grainy photographs that survive.

There is little that is "clear" in Cormand's fascinating imagery, which blends contemporary ambiguity with classical skill to rediscover the empathy suffusing early modernist works — and to remind us of their individual fates amid the raging resentments of philistinism.

Martí Cormand: 'Postcards to AZ'
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