

Martí Cormand

Josée Bienvenu

In 2010, workers beginning the construction of a new subway station of Berlin's city hall made a series of unexpected discoveries. First, they came across the remains of the city's original hall, dating back to 1290. Then they found something more recent but equally extraordinary: eleven early-twentieth-century sculptures missing since World War II. All the works, by artists including Otto Freundlich, Naum Slutzky, and Marg Moll, were on the Nazis' "un-German" blacklist; several had also been included in "Entartete Kunst" (Degenerate Art), the notorious 1937 touring exhibition commissioned by Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels and curated by Hitler's favorite German painter, Adolf Ziegler. The recovered sculptures—which may have been hidden by a resident of the address beneath which the finds were made in order to save them from destruction—were among the subjects of Spanish-born American painter Martí Cormand's "Postcards to AZ."

The "Degenerate Art" exhibition holds an enduring fascination as an example of political propaganda directed against modernist cultural production. Designed to promote the Third Reich's doctrine of racial purity, it reframed the work of numerous significant artists as immoral or nonsensical. Cormand reframed his own staging of this episode as evidence of a Nietzschean "eternal return"—of history as repetitive cycle. The idea is itself perennial, but bears repetition.

The exhibition at Josée Bienvenu was divided into three parts. The first consisted of three pairs of small graphite drawings reproducing—with near-absolute precision—images from the Third Reich publication *Deutsche Kunst und Entartete Kunst* (German Art and Degenerate Art, 1938). The book juxtaposes examples of artworks denounced by Ziegler as misguided and malformed with others that were held up as more civilized. In one, an expressionistic portrait drawn by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff is paired with Ziegler's own uptight alternative; in another Otto Dix's grinning *Fraulicher Ideal* faces off against Franz Eichhorst's weary *Bauernfrau*. Aping the look of tipped-in plates and excising all text, Cormand's diptychs are intriguing in their meditation on the very utility of reproduction and comparison.



The show's second section was made up of a display of numerous postcard-size oil-on-board paintings, again arrayed on slim shelves. Though also based on works labeled degenerate by the Nazis, these were not always simple reproductions; they also incorporated veiled and distorted views of their subjects, redolent of damage and loss. There's a suggestion in them too of the incompleteness and inconsistency that results from sourcing images online. Some works, like Rudolf Belling's 1925 sculpture *Female Head*, are represented with fidelity, while others appear to be victims of imperfect recall or actual physical harm. The unknown subjects of some paintings show blurring or partial erasure, clinging to existence through the barest trace.

The third and final part of "Postcards to AZ" was made up of two larger versions of works also represented at postcard size. *Postcards to AZ: Karel Nistrath: "Die Einfaltigen/The fatuous ones" 1924 no. 2, 2016* and *Postcards to AZ: "Emy Roeder: Schwangere, 1918" no. 3, 2016*, are both depictions of figures. The subject of the first has had its head lopped off, leaving a stark metal rod projecting from its neck; the second is rendered in broad strokes within a precisely outlined silhouette. Again, the impulse to document and preserve grinds against not only the violence of history, but also the poverty of memory—personal, institutional, and societal—itsself. —Michael Wilson

Martí Cormand, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, picture of a woman/ Adolf Ziegler, study of Hertha, 2016, diptych, graphite on paper, each 12 x 8 1/2"