

FIRST NIGHT

Visual art review: Magic Realism: Art in Weimar Germany 1919–33 at Tate Modern

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These works, full of energy and rage, are intriguing, but don't expect much beauty



The Beggar of Prachatice by Conrad Felixmüller features in the Tate exhibition

THE GEORGE ECONOMOU COLLECTION/DACS

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The impact of the First World War and its aftermath on German art is the subject of this fascinating show. The phrase “magic realism” was first used in 1925 by the art critic Franz Roh, to describe a contemporary artistic realism that nonetheless cast “a magical gaze opening onto a . . . transfigured reality”.

As this exhibition shows, it was distinguished by an outward-looking, outspoken view — on the chaotic politics and economic hardship of the era; on the scars of war that marked land, body and mind; on the all-too visibly transfigured — and disfigured — reality that the country now faced. It's also full of energy (all right, rage). A few works, such as the more polished portraits, make the point that even in this era of profound angst, people still wanted to buy nice pictures. Overall, though, it is profoundly unsettling.

Curators pick out recurring motifs such as the cabaret or the circus in the work of artists fascinated by their mix of fantasy and reality, glamour and dissolution. Otto Dix's Circus series in particular captures its sense of liberty and abandon, but also its sordid side. A darkness, or an uncanny strangeness, pervades — there's certainly nothing you would describe as joyful, although I enjoyed Prosper de Troyer's incredibly cool portrait of Erik Satie. Rudolf Schlichter's *Lady with Red Scarf*, a portrait of his wife, Speedy, is undeniably beautiful — a rarity here.



The Acrobat Schulz by Albert Birkle (1921) and Rudolf Schlichter's *Lady with Red Scarf* (1933)
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Alongside the slightly tortured stated themes (“From the visible to the invisible”, “On the street and in the studio”) the representation of women is a recurring subject. Women in Germany were granted the right to vote in 1918, the day after the Armistice (a good day, perhaps, to bury what some people considered bad news); their emancipation would gather pace during the Weimar era. This coincided with the perceived emasculation of men, either by the direct effects of war or their inability to work as unemployment grew.

This may explain why the sexually motivated murder of women was a weirdly prevalent theme — here represented by Schlichter’s chilling *The Artist with Two Hanged Women* and, more upsettingly visceral, two works by Dix entitled *Lust Murderer*— in one, a killer dances with the leg of his still-spurting, dismembered victim. It’s horrible.

Elsewhere, however, is Otto Rudolf Schatz’s *Moon Women*, in which two naked women (except for sensible shoes) stand in powerful poses more normally associated with clothed men, their direct, smiling gaze seemingly acknowledging their liberty. Rudolf Dischinger’s witty *Backyard Balcony* takes a headless classical nude (also missing one hand) and has her leaning jauntily on a doorframe, as if she has popped out from the sculpture studio for a cheeky ciggie. One of the best discoveries (for me) was the graphic work of Jeanne Mammen, whose images of women getting on with their own business have a wit and dynamism all their own. There is little beauty in this exhibition, but it’s an intriguing insight into the other side of a story we’ve been obsessed with since 1918.

The exhibition runs to July 2019