

Exhibit of the week**Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937***Neue Galerie, New York City, through June 30*

"It was one of the most infamous exhibitions of the 20th century; it was also one of the best attended," said Jason Farago in *The Guardian* (U.K.). In 1937, more than 2 million people rushed to see the Munich showing of a touring collection of avant-garde art that the Nazis considered *entartete*, or "degenerate." Max Ernst, Paul Klee, Otto Dix, and Wassily Kandinsky were among the 112 modernists singled out for derision, but while only six of those 112 were Jewish, the organizers used wall labels to pointedly blame Jews for the cultural contagion the show intended to warn against. In revisiting that portentous event, New York's Neue Galerie wisely decided not to re-create the 1937 exhibition. Though the museum's 80-work show feels "a little thin in parts," it excels at illuminating context.

"Context means a lot" here, and the curators don't shy from highlighting paradoxes, said Holland Cotter in *The New York Times*. As the catalog explains, the originator of the term "degenerate art" was Jewish himself, while the Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels deeply admired

*Kirchner's A Group of Artists (1925-26)*

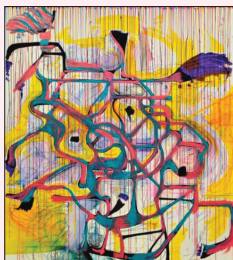
German expressionism before Adolf Hitler ordered him to demonize and destroy it. Painter and printmaker Emil Nolde, who led all artists in the number of his pieces included in the "Degenerate Art" show, later spent years trying to win Nazi Party membership by making anti-Semitic statements. But many martyrs show their faces

here too. An unfinished 1937 self-portrait by the expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner gains symbolic power once we learn that the artist would be an exile and suicide within one year.

Hitler's artistic preferences also win space here, said Peter Schjeldahl in *The New Yorker*. At the same moment that the Munich public was flocking to the "Degenerate Art" show, it was mostly ignoring a simultaneous exhibition dedicated to so-called Great German Art. But Hitler nabbed a triptych from the less popular show to hang above his fireplace, and it appears at the Neue alongside a 1933 Max Beckmann masterpiece whose side panels depict various acts of sadism. The juxtaposition of Beckmann's *The Departure* with Adolf Ziegler's *The Four Elements* asks us to consider whether we'd have known in 1937 which to rate higher. Ziegler's four Aryan nudes are "kitschy enough," but they're also handled well enough that "the pleasure imparted is disturbing." Would tastes have evolved entirely differently if Hitler hadn't inadvertently boosted the expressionists by blacklisting them? We'd like to think not, but "divorcing our thinking about modern culture from the residual consequences of 'Degenerate Art' probably can't be done."

Where to buy*A select exhibition in a private gallery***Joanne Greenbaum**

never waits for thunderbolts. The 60-year-old New Yorker regularly just sets to work instead, trusting that if she keeps adding layers to her various canvases in progress, the resulting images will argue for themselves. Her latest abstract series may be her most effective yet. Each painting hits the eye like a storm, often combining network-like lines, bold color fields, frantic scribbling, and dripping stains to spread energy across all 90 by 80 inches. This is process painting that hints at a mechanical origin but conveys an unbridled life force, like big-screen blueprints that have been pollinated by several garden species all at once. At Rachel Uffner Gallery, 170 Suffolk St., New York City, (212) 274-0064. Paintings are priced at \$55,000 each.

*Untitled (2014)***The Art of Leadership: A President's Personal Diplomacy***The George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, Dallas*

Our 43rd president turns out to be "something of a natural when it comes to making oil paintings," said Roberta Smith in *The New York Times*. Many in the art world may wish to dismiss George W. Bush's creative ability, but the 30 new portraits he's just unveiled at his presidential library prove that he's at least "a decent amateur." If you're expecting old-master-style precision in the likenesses he's created of fellow world leaders, you'll be disappointed. But Bush picked up a brush less than two years ago, and already he's showing "an uncanny ability to translate photographs into more awkward images enlivened by distortions and slightly ham-handed brushwork." His Vladimir Putin appears "suitably stony faced and ruthless," his Angela Merkel "girlishly nonthreatening." Soaking in his perspective is instructive, said Alexandra Petri in

*W's portrait of his dad*

WashingtonPost.com. From W's vantage point, "most world leaders look like terrifying potatoes with red eyes."

The show is at least a brilliant PR move, said Jonathan Jones in *TheGuardian.com*. "Americans do tend to forgive their more controversial presidents," and Bush is helping the public along by taking up a hobby that humanizes him more than any globe-trotting charity mission could. "It's like being nice about the family idiot's latest art project: 'Aw, isn't that sweet, poor George has done paintings of world leaders.'" Never mind that they "look the work of someone you wouldn't trust to mow a lawn without cutting someone's foot off":

Trying and failing just makes Bush more sympathetic. Not that he doesn't sincerely care about being liked, said Douglas Lucas and Amy O'Neal in *Salon.com*. This is a man who "sees the leaders as a child would." He's not aiming to capture how any of his subjects experience the world. Mostly, he's just trying to enumerate other members of the club he once ran with.