

## German painting

80s Berlin, wild youth and their "bad art"



Rainer Fetting (1949) 'Van Gogh and Wall Sun', 1979. Emulsion on nettle, 212 × 271 cm. In the collection of Thomas Ammann Fine Art AG, Zürich

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THE 1980s are undergoing a revival in Germany. New-wave looks, garish party outfits, sequined glam mini-dresses and geometrical prints in neon were highlights of Berlin's Fashion Week in July. And "B-Movie: Lust & Sound in West Berlin", Mark Reeder's breathtaking documentary about West Berlin in the "frenzied but creative decade...from punk to the Love Parade", from 1979 to 1989, is currently luring cinemagoers. As Mr Reeder, originally from Manchester, said about moving to Berlin back then, "everything and anything seemed possible."

That zeitgeist also fired the imagination of another group of artists. West Berlin attracted painters such as Rainer Fetting, Helmut Middendorf, Salomé, and Bernd Zimmer. Inspired by the unconventional life in the liberal city with its low rents, the painters escaped from the narrow-mindedness of conservative provinces. The lack of

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curfews (common in West German cities) and conscription (Berlin was not officially part of West Germany, but under four-power control) attracted free spirits. The hunger to experiment and create something different from concept and minimal art of the post-war era was great. The intense and dynamic painting style the young artists developed was often labelled as "neo-expressionist", "Heftige Malerei" ("fierce painting") or sometimes just "bad painting", an originally critical designation some of the "bad" painters happily began using themselves. In 1977, four of the "Junge Wilde" ("Wild Youth") founded the art gallery Am Moritzplatz in the Kreuzberg district, which became a hot-spot for exhibitions and happenings.

Last month, Germany's oldest civic museum, Frankfurt's Städel Museum, opened a spectacular exhibition of the era's painting. West Berlin was not alone. Painters such as Albert and Markus Oehlen, Ina Barfuss, and Martin Kippenberger made Hamburg a centre of "fierce" painting, as the likes of Hans Peter Adamski, Jiří Georg Dokoupil and Gerhard Naschberger did the same for the Rhineland (Cologne and Düsseldorf in particular). About 90 works by 27 painters reflect the large spectrum of the themes that bothered an art movement that was all but homogeneous.

The show starts with portraits and self-portraits, huge, powerful, intense, self-confident and provocative. As no other, Jiří Georg Dokoupil's self-portrait from 1980—a devil's face with blood running from the nose and decorated with the words "sex, drugs and rock 'n roll"—embodies the spirit of the time. Werner Büttner's "Self-portrait masturbating in the cinema" (1980) and Luciano Castelli's "Berlin Nite" (1979) are brash expressions of sexual and homosexual liberation.

Gay fantasies and rebellion against prevailing moral standards are also the subject of Salomé's gigantic canvas "Babylon" (1978). Recalling the almost apocalyptic fear of homosexuality at the time, Salomé told journalists at the opening that "the world will perish because people kill each other in wars, but not because of gay sex." His joint piece with Mr Castelli "KaDeWe" (1981), which features naked men strung in a row like fresh meat in the food section of Berlin's posh KaDeWe department store, still evokes controversy.

Berlin's division could not help but leave its mark on the painters. "My studio was at Potsdamer Platz, still no-man's-land in those days. From my window I saw the Wall and the television tower in East Berlin," says GL Gabriel on the inspiration of her "View to the East" (1982). Dimly, East Berlin's skyline emerges from behind the Wall, covered in red by the evening sun. Mr Fetting, also had a studio-window view of the wall, but his "First Painting of the Wall" (1977) exudes a sense of calm and peace.

But those young rebels were anything but unpolitical. Albert Oehlen's "Führerhauptquartier" (Führer's Headquarters) (1982) and Martin Kippenberger's key work "For the life of me I can't see a swastika in this" (1984) are examples of what Germans call their *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or coming to terms with the past. When not dealing with the past, they certainly enjoyed the present: Helmut Middendorf's "Electric Night" (1979) and "The Singer" (1981) reflect West Berlin's eclectic night life.

The era's art has fallen "through the cracks of discourse", says Martin Engler, the head of contemporary art at the Städel. His show makes a compelling case for taking a second look.

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