Lifeworks

Monsters of scientific reason

The 1930s: The Making of the “New Man”

Curator: Jean Clair

National Gallery of Canada

June 6–Sept. 7, 2008

Goya was only half right. His famous etching, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* showed a man slumped over in sleep being swarmed by ominous winged creatures. Abandon reason, he said, and you risk unleashing a world of nightmares. The drawing was created at the time of the Napoleonic Wars and Goya had no shortage of evidence to support his idea.

A hundred and thirty years later, during the political turmoil of the 1930s, another Spanish artist, Salvador Dalí, supplied the other half of the equation: reason, even when it's wide awake, can produce monsters. His assertion is given gruesome graphic life in a painting featured prominently in this exhibition: *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans*, an assemblage of human body parts stranded in a barren desert landscape.

In the century between Goya and Dalí much had changed. Religious belief was waning and science was in its ascendancy. Dalí was prescient enough to understand that an unquestioning faith in science could have horrific consequences. Totalitarian governments were using their cachet to give the impression of inevitability to their dubious political theories. Populations were propagandized into thinking that the “New Man” sketched out on their blank slates would be the god-like offspring of Darwinism, biology and eugenics. Into this toxic mix fell a generation of artists who had to make a difficult choice: create work to support the regnant ideology and survive, or risk penury or death by staying true to their art.

In Germany, the artists who survived adhered to the Nazi conception of great art — realistic paintings and sculptures

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Salvador Dalí, *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)* (1936). Oil paint on canvas. 99.9 × 100 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950. Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí/SODRAC (2008).

in the classic form of ancient Athens. Those who painted abstraction or in a modernist style were vilified and persecuted as “decadent.” Italy and Russia took a slightly different approach: artists of all stripes, even modernists, were conscripted into promoting the regime’s agenda.

From our distant perspective the 1930s looks like a gigantic lab experiment in human behaviour: communism, nazism, fascism, virulent nationalism and fierce protectionism. This exhibit explores the role artists played during that turbulent period and how the era’s preoccupation with science influenced art.

If that sounds like an ambitious undertaking, it is. There’s a wide range of work here — 206 paintings, prints, photographs and sculptures — divided into 9 categories (Mother Earth, Crowds and Power, etc.). Wrapping your mind around how each subsection ties into the main theme can be a challenge.

The other dilemma is that prop art by its very nature is second rate. How much dreck should be included? Too much and the quality of the show is compromised. Too little and it looks, wrongly, like most artists were heroic critics of the regime. Overall the curators have achieved a commendable balance and it’s a relief to

see that most of the great artists ended up on the right side of history.

In a sense the show is a kind of unblockbuster. There are no masterpieces here. What you see are good pieces by big names — Picasso, Giacometti, Miro, Kandinsky — chosen because they fit into its thematic framework. Impossible to borrow, Picasso's *Guernica* would have been the ideal painting to headline the exhibit but you'll have to settle for some preparatory pencil sketches.

The greatest pleasure of the show though is seeing wonderful, imaginative works by artists who defied authoritarian regimes often at the risk of their lives. Not least among them are the collages of John Heartfield, the German satirist whose savage attacks on the Nazi leadership in the magazine *A/Z* look amazingly contemporary. His photographs, assembled with pre-photoshop technical finesse, still retain their sting and power.

A series of portrait photographs by

August Sander examines a side of Germany that the Party worked hard to conceal. These are definitely not the megalomaniacal panoramas of Leni Riefenstahl (an edited version of *Triumph of the Will* runs in the small cinema) but intimate, introspective portrayals of common, everyday *Volk*. The sombre shots of unemployed men, coal porters and secretaries are in stark contrast to the bucolic fantasies of artists like Oscar Martin-Amorbach who painted sturdy ploughmen tilling the soil of the Fatherland. Sander's heartbreaking photographs of "Victims of Persecution" were taken before the war. Later he found out that these "were people who either emigrated or breathed their last in the gas chambers."

How does science fare in all this? It's a concept-driven show and its success depends in large measure on how convincingly it makes its point. There's plenty of work that is at least nominally scientific. In the section devoted to the Surrealists, radical reinterpretations of the human body by Oskar Schlemmer and Victor Brauner are fascinating and at times hilarious. One of Brauner's drawings features a naked figure whose shell-shaped fist hovers over its genitalia. A label helpfully notes: "Escargot Masturbateur."

Some of the best works are the organically shaped (and by implication, scientific) sculptures of Jean Arp. Displayed in the same gallery as the botanical photographs and microscopic slides of plant and animal cells, it's tempting to impute a link. But as any science geek will tell you, correlation doesn't necessarily mean causation. Arp might have dreamed up these shapes entirely independently. Not that it matters; they're gorgeous anyway.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the impact of science on art resides in the last room. Here are drawings scratched out in the concentration camps by inmates and war artists. Two of the most powerful are by a Canadian, Gershon Iskowitz, who later became a highly regarded abstract painter. His drawing of a group of ragged, skeletal prisoners, huddled together at Buchenwald is an eloquent testimony to the idea that reason, too, produces its own monsters.

Alan King BA

Visual artist and art critic
Ottawa, Ont.

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Christian Schad, *Portrait of Dr. Haustein* (1928). Oil painting on canvas. 80 × 55 cm. Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. Estate of Christian Schad / SODRAC (2008).