

BOOK REVIEW

Bram Dijkstra *American Expressionism: Art and Social Change 1920–1950*
New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003.

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Bram Dijkstra's book *American Expressionism: Art and Social Change 1920–1950* convincingly constructs a new category of expressionism that he sets apart from early-twentieth-century German Expressionism and mid-twentieth-century Abstract Expressionism. "American Expressionism" combines modernism and realism to address compassionately a range of social issues. Dijkstra examines this art, created largely in the United States during the Great Depression, as a "venture into socialist cultural politics" (12). His thesis is that American Expressionist art was produced primarily by immigrants, the children of recent immigrants from Eastern Europe (mainly Jewish), and "forced immigrants" (or African Americans) (12–13).

Dijkstra's book includes ten chapters. In the first, "Erasing a Movement," the author outlines how thousands of artworks produced for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) were physically destroyed and dumped as junk in 1944. This event, according to Dijkstra, was the result of an anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant, and racist environment that was eager to devalue the work produced by outsiders to the elite art world. He documents this idea with plentiful citations from the anti-immigrant writers Madison Grant and Lothard Stoddard and the art critics Thomas Craven and Royal Cortissoz. Dijkstra speaks of a common desire to "eradicate" this "alien" art (17). Chapter 2, "The Corporate Take-Over," continues this account of the repression and obliteration of these American Expressionist artists after World War II by the capitalist-driven art world.

Chapter 3, "The Historical Framework," convincingly analyzes what the author sees as the profound difference between German Expressionism and American Expressionism. German artists such as Max Beckmann focused on "erotic violence," and others, such as Otto Dix and George Grosz, "consistently confused their personal obsessive, eroticized fascination with violence in general and the concept of sex as violence in particular with social concern" (49). In contrast, American Expressionists were concerned with "compassion and communal values" (49) as well as the social environment. They were looking at personal suffering, not a political party line. These artists were far from "even remotely resembling the propagandistic delineation of Stalin's Soviet workers" (49). The Americans also sought to arouse sympathy for the less fortunate. Dijkstra suggests that this socially concerned art balanced what he considers the dominant fascism in America "to keep the country from sliding onto the Nazi path" (51). He contrasts American Expressionism with abstract art or "art as art," which he sees as "abdicating any sense of conscious participation in the complex interplay between self and society" (50). This purely aesthetic art is supported by a powerful, ideological language that encourages artists to make decoration instead of addressing social issues (50).

Chapter 4, "American Antecedents," introduces forerunners, such as Henry Ossawa Tanner, Marsden Hartley, Albert Pinkham Ryder, John Quidor, and others.

Chapter 5, "Depression Economics," discusses several artists, including Ben Shahn, Philip Evergood, John Biggers, and William Gropper, who depicted the impoverished people of the 1930s. Chapter 6, "Fascism of Everyday Life," presents images of oppression and extreme racism both in the 1930s and 1940s. The next two chapters address more traditional subjects, such as portraits of individuals in chapter 7, "Character and Characteristics of Exclusion," and nude female figures and landscapes in chapter 8, "The Body of Nature." Chapter 9, "What We Build Is What We Destroy," looks at art that combines landscape and architecture, as well as images of war. Finally, chapter 10, "The War Inside Our Heads," covers Surrealist-influenced art. Although Dijkstra's book was published before the exhibition began, each of chapters 4 through 10 constitutes a section of the show. These seven chapters discuss specific artists and their artwork, often offering new perspectives and useful information that are rarely available in today's survey books. One powerful artist who certainly has been under discussed is the African American Charles White; another is Joseph Hirsch. John Biggers is well known in some areas of the country as an expressionist artist of the 1950s and later, and I would like to have seen more of his work included.

Dijkstra's thesis is most completely developed in chapter 1 to 3, where the author frames American Expressionism in contrast to German Expressionism and as a new, socially engaged art style that was produced by artists from backgrounds who had heretofore been predominantly excluded from the art world. I would like to have seen additional development of his documentation of racist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Semitic writers in the art world. This is a story that needs to be told fully. Although the rest of the book's chapters discuss specific artists whom the author connects to American Expressionism, granting them a place in American art history, these chapters only summarily reference his initial thesis. We need more discussion of the complexities of the relationships between the outspoken and blatantly prejudiced writers whom he cites and other equally prejudiced, but less blunt, mainstream critics.

Furthermore, at the end of the book, Dijkstra seems to reverse himself by praising abstract art. Repression of the American Expressionists in favor of native-born artists is described as, in part, a result of the actions of Jewish figures such as Alfred Stieglitz and Clement Greenberg.

Other contradictions in the book also compromise Dijkstra's argument. I was troubled by the author's decision to divorce the artists from the communist ideas that were integral to the production of socially conscious art, especially in the 1930s. While I agree that only a few of these artists, such as Hugo Gellert, Joe Jones, and Louis Lozowick, for example, followed a strict party line, most of the immigrant and African American artists discussed in the book had some loose affiliation with Communist Party principles. Both groups of artists were acutely aware of their class position in the economic structure of capitalism and for that reason placed their art in the direct service of revealing oppression. Their paintings of impoverished people existed within a network of activities and other artworks, creating a framework that suggested larger economic forces at work that transcended the individual. Their art was meant to arouse people to fight against the tyranny of capitalism, not simply to record misfortune. In fact, many of these artists were trained at John Reed Clubs, which were run by the Communist Party.

Dijkstra refers to “social realism” and an “expressionist world” as distinct from the “ ‘Marxist propaganda’ their detractors insisted they were painting” (107). And later: “No one, not even the most dedicated socialists among these artists wanted to turn the United States into a totalitarian state” (111). In this sentence Dijkstra assumes that the goal of Communist-trained artists was a Stalinist state. He omits entirely the collective proletarian movement that sought to empower workers as a primary source for much of the work. He acknowledges that William Gropper “tried to document the struggles of American labor” (133). Dijkstra also refers to him, O. Louis Guglielmi, and Hugo Gellert as among the most militant American Marxists of the period, but they were by no means “ ‘Communist dupes’ ” (133). And by using socialism, Marxism, and communism as synonymous terms, Dijkstra manages to obfuscate a clear affiliation. Indeed, those artists were not Communist dupes, but they actively cooperated with Communist-affiliated organizations in producing their work. Much of the resulting art was reproduced in *New Masses*, a publication of the Communist Party. Dijkstra himself falls into the trap of seeing black and white, of labeling Communists as an evil influence—the same claims used by detractors of his artists. It would appear that the author wants to avoid the “taint” of Communism, rather to engage fully the ways in which those important ideas positively affected the artists’ interest in and ability to represent the misfortunes of society. Another contradiction in the book, related to the first, is that it almost exclusively discusses paintings produced by individual artists. There is little reference to the powerful sense of community among the artists during the Popular Front and the American Artists Congress, as well as on the government art projects. The truly communal commitment in the 1930s resulted in production of collaborative work: anonymous prints, posters, and murals. Of course, that omission results partially from the fact that this book accompanies an exhibition of oil paintings. It is impossible to exhibit murals except in reproduction, and only rarely, as in the case of Biggers, does Dijkstra reproduce these works in his book.

I also found it problematic in chapter 2 that the author jumped directly to the 1940s in terms of the idea of corporate domination without considering the importance of the Museum of Modern Art in New York throughout the 1930s. The museum’s board of directors was dominated since its first exhibition in 1929 by capitalists who were intent on running a marketing campaign both for American and European art. Furthermore, the celebration of apolitical abstract art and the denigration of recognizable subject matter began as early as 1936 in response to Adolf Hitler’s attacks on modern art and the Red hunts of the Dies Committee, the predecessor of the Joseph McCarthy’s House Un-American Activities Committee. And Greenberg’s essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” which theorized the elevation of an apolitical avant-garde, was written in 1939. Dijkstra’s thesis that American Expressionism is a product of immigrant Jews and African Americans falls apart when he includes in his discussion many artists who are purely “Nordic,” without any apology for the contradiction or a discussion of their relationship to the “immigrant” artists whom he sets up as the central figures in the book. His inclusion of paintings of female nudes and landscapes, works by modernist artists in the Stieglitz circle such as Arthur Dove, and Surrealist art departs from his immediate focus to organize all of the artists from the 1930s and 1940s. He also neglects to integrate the prominence of the three great Mexican muralists in the development of politically engaged art in the 1930s. Only José Clemente Orozco gets a small black-and-white

reproduction, but Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, who were also of crucial importance, are omitted. Dijkstra seems to be pursuing a pedigree in the United States for his artists, wanting to integrate them with the mainstream mid-century artists like the Stieglitz group.

On the other hand, Dijkstra's boldness is refreshing as he outlines anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, and racist feelings in the American art world. There is no question about the arbitrary exclusions of certain artists for that reason. As we slowly move toward revising art-history books, American Expressionism will help that process. It deserves a place in our libraries at least for its beautiful, hard-to-find illustrations of lesser-known, socially concerned artists who have, indeed, been left out of the canon. Dijkstra begins to correct that omission, as he provokes us to pick up his arguments and pursue them further.