

# DAVID NOLAN **NEW YORK**

527 West 29th Street New York NY 10001

Tel 212-925-6190 Fax 212-334-9139

info@davidnolangallery.com

www.davidnolangallery.com

**artnet**<sup>®</sup>



George Grosz, *God of War*, 1940

## GOTHAM ART & THEATER

by Elisabeth Kley

November 10, 2009

The German artist George Grosz so despised the savagery of World War I that he tried to commit suicide in 1917 and was later almost shot for desertion. His ruthless caricatures of the 1920s captured the perversity of Weimar Berlin, filled with profiteers, prostitutes and poverty-stricken cripples and amputees. When Hitler came to power in 1933, Grosz emigrated to America where he lived until 1958, the year before he died.

The United States, in a way, was one long anticlimax for Grosz. He watched, helplessly, the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust from afar. Much of the artwork he'd left in Germany was destroyed in the Nazi incineration of "degenerate art." Many have thought that his work became weaker in the U.S. and the relatively bucolic landscapes and nudes he made in Cape Cod (hoping, perhaps, for sales) didn't help his reputation.

"George Grosz: The Years in America: 1933-1958," Sept. 16-Oct. 31, 2009, at David Nolan Gallery, however, demonstrates conclusively that Grosz continued making unbelievably powerful and bitterly satirical paintings and drawings throughout his entire career. "I start to paint a nude, sun, dunes, Arcadia and grass, a good fine imagination," he said, "but alas, the more I go on with my work, it changes and all of a sudden there is fire and ruins and mud and grim debris all over. . . as if somebody more knowing and utterly destructive is leading me on."

Grosz's works on canvas do feature dribbles and slashes of piled-on paint that can bring the purposeful decadence of late de Chirico to mind. *God of War* (1944), for example, an almost sickly image of a bearded heavenly titan who glories in human suffering, is rendered in fluffy brushstrokes of pink, blue and white. *Cain or Hitler in Hell* (1944), in contrast, is a portrayal of an enormous Fuhrer sitting on a rock in a blackened inferno with sweat running down his forehead, in front of a heap of tiny skeletons.

Even after the Nazis were finally defeated, Grosz remained pessimistic. In *The Grey Man Dances* (1949), an image of absolute frustration, a figure with an open skull and torso cavorts in front of a ragged flag and a pair of red buildings. His ears are covered with blocks of wood, his mouth is sewed shut, and spirals of barbed wire surround him. Grosz's nihilism is even more all-pervasive in *The Painter of the Hole II* (1950), a portrait of a bug-eyed artist obsessively creating representations of rips. Tubes of paint litter the ground, rats crawl over canvases, and the sky behind him shines through the hole that pierces his elongated forehead.

The latest works in the exhibition, two examples from a group of 40 photomontages, are as purely Dada as anything Grosz made in the Weimar era. *This is a Man?* (1957) features a pair of huge breasts and a strange twisted face meticulously pasted over a banal photo of a bathing beauty, turning her into a grimacing monster. Grosz died of a heart attack in Germany the next year, after a long night of carousing.