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The New Criterion

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George Grosz, *Nude in Dunes* (1948), courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York

Many people have asked me how the art world is doing in the economic downturn. I am sorry to report that the art world died in early August. This tragic event was not unexpected, nor was it unwelcome. The previous several months had been rough. The end came as a blessing.

After the death of the art world comes its afterlife. The silly season that stretched for nearly a decade will give way to more sober reflection. Galleries will continue to close. But we also know that some galleries will survive, thanks to their intelligence and sensitivity to the emerging mood. Several are off to a good start.

One artist whose antennae were always attuned to changing situations was the German Expressionist George Grosz. The artist is now the subject of a museum-quality exhibition at David Nolan. The business of good gallery-making begins with the education of the eye. With twenty-nine Grosz paintings and drawings and a 280-page catalogue, David Nolan is now running his own class in Grosz anatomy.[\[1\]](#)

In the 1920s Grosz lampooned the excesses of the Weimar Republic, corrupt and blind to Germany's darker forces. He singled out Adolf Hitler for ridicule when the Führer was little more than a failed artist. A one-time member of the Communist Party, Grosz also repudiated his leftist allegiances after a visit to the Soviet Union. Hitler and Stalin came to appear to him as two sides of the same war machine. Rightly so. Yet perhaps most surprisingly, Grosz developed an unalloyed exuberance for the United States. This romanticism emerged first through his reading of popular American literature and developed in dialectical opposition to his pessimism towards the deteriorating European climate.

When an invitation came in 1932 to teach a summer course at the Art Students League, Grosz booked passage the next month on the ocean liner *New York*. He arrived to the fanfare of the American press. He wrote back to his wife: "I love you, America. I feel like this is my country, I belong here." He soon decided to emigrate with his family to New York and did so early the next year. Two weeks after his arrival, SA troops stormed his flat and studio in Berlin and declared him an enemy of the regime.

Anti-Hitler, anti-Stalin, pro-America—the trifecta of political astuteness, but a victory that has complicated Grosz's legacy. Anti-Hitler, good. Anti-Stalin, tolerable. Pro-America, beyond the pale. As Klaus Mann, an exile in Paris, complained in 1936: "He has changed; a very long, very passionate battle has left him tired. He has become apolitical—or is at least trying to be... . He no longer draws: he paints."

Grosz lived and worked in the United States for twenty-five years. He became one of the earliest high-profile refugees from Hitler. Yet while his audience expected the caustic illustrator to turn his pen against his new homeland, Grosz went about exploring other sides of his artistic vision. The nudes and landscapes that resulted are the revelations of the Nolan show, along with the dense allegorical work he developed in paint.

Grosz could apply his talents for drafting to many styles. The show ranges from black-and-white wartime illustrations to satirical send-ups of Hitler (*So Smells Defeat* [1937]). He worked his way through the Old Masters, Breugel in particular, by creating pressure-cooked paintings like the infernal *Retreat (Rückzug)* (1946) with swirling fires, twisted barbed wire, and a shot-up brick wall that has a three-dimensional texture in oil. In *Cain or Hitler in Hell* (1944), a pile of human skeletons climbs up Hitler's leg.

That Grosz had a flip side to his dark vision makes him a more complex and interesting artist. His "romantic" American landscapes are as true to their own time and place as are his dystopian images of Europe. Grosz lived on Long Island and vacationed on Cape Cod. He adored the beaches and often painted his wife, Eva, in nude and sometimes erotic scenes in the dunes. The rolling sand and wispy beach grass in Grosz's landscapes become fecund allegories for a land of milk and honey. As he wrote to his brother-in-law in 1950, "What do you have against the dune paintings and nature studies, they are part of the whole oeuvre—if I hadn't done them (with passion and love, too), I would not have been able to paint my imaginative pictures, because 'invention' is only derived from nature." He was right. Drawings like *Dunes at Wellfleet* (c. 1940) and *Dunes Cape Cod* (1939) are among the best works in the show, and to be blind to them is to be blind to Grosz's entire vision.