ARCHITECTURE VIEW: 'LES REALISMES' --PARIS'S SUPERSHOW AS GRABBAG A
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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

'Les Réalismes' —Paris's Supershow As Grabbag

The blockbuster exhibition called "Les Réalismes" that has been packing them in at the Beaubourg in Paris since last December will close on April 30; after that it will move on to Berlin. The blockbuster has already become something of a Beaubourg tradition; "Paris-New York" and "Paris-Moscow" not only received deserved international acclaim, they also took the Beaubourg out of the category of architectural novelty and tourist attraction. In a sense, the building took on substance, proving once again that the meaning and value of architecture is as much concerned with what is contained as with the container itself.

This latest supershow, however, has met with mixed reviews. "Les Réalismes" is a huge, controversial exhibition concerned with certain trends and products of the 20 years between the wars, from 1919 to 1939, in Europe, Britain and the United States. It deals with a kind of art that existed outside of the abstract "isms" of the modern movement and the avant-garde. In addition to large amounts of painting and some sculpture, it contains an extremely ambitious architecture and design display, in keeping with the Beaubourg's predilection for comprehensiveness. This section has been generally ignored.

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The design material affords a remarkable record of those two decades through buildings, furniture, graphics and decorative and industrial products. It offers one of the most extensive presentations of the kind of "revisionist" near history that is currently very much in vogue. This is the 20th-century work that paralleled modernism and was ignored by those making official taste and writing the official histories, and it is offered for serious consideration.

We are shown vast quantities of unknown and little-known buildings and artifacts. There are drawings, photographs and models of the "modernistic" buildings disdained by the protagonists of the "true" modern or International Style; examples of the Art Deco and commercial industrial design derided and dismissed by the Bauhaus; a large helping of the mortuary-like monuments that served the totalitarian regimes of Hitler and Mussolini; and all manner of eclecticism from futuristic innovations to Hollywood kitsch.

The selection, which has a remarkable and somewhat unsettling range, often seems capricious or arbitrary. But with the incredible amount of work to choose from once the floodgates to the recent past are opened, a certain randomness is inevitable. Much of this is new material being shown for the first time, and it is of very real interest to the art historian. But in spite of the earnestness of the undertaking and the overwhelming amount of effort involved, the impression persists of a scattershot and inconclusive mix of stylishness, trivia, curiosities and dead ends. It left me filled with admiration for the boldness of the intention, and extremely uneasy with the result.

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The challenge of this unconventional mass of buildings and objects is awesome, but the critics have been too busy arguing about the rest of the show to take it on. The very personal viewpoint of the realist theme in the painting and sculpture section, organized by Jean Clair, has been controversial in a way that the more objective documentation of the relationships between Paris, New York and Moscow, was not. The architecture and design selection is the work of the Beaubourg's Centre de Création Industrielle, and the connection with realism, and in particular with M. Clair's kind of realism, is particularly tenuous and troubling.

On a recent Paris visit, I found "Réalismes" an extremely curious show that aroused strong and conflicting emotions. It contains some beautiful painting, and a lot of odd and unexpected painting, much of which is permeated with a kind of calculated nastiness that, I assume, is intended to be a leading indicator of our times. One would expect, since the show is devoted to a body of work that rejected the abstractions basic to the modernist revolution, that at least one of the realisms included would be the continuing academic tradition of the natural world and the persistence of conventional representation values.

But not only is academic realism conspicuously absent, there is nothing about this show that is so benign. These paintings are united by a manipulative, exploitative use of the representational — not in the interest of transmitting basic visual messages, but as the conveyor of other kinds of messages contrived for visual impact, shock value or questionable memorability. There is a great deal of tour-de-force painting that is, in the end, banal. The art itself is often secondary to the strained, special effects.

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As in the case of *pompier* classicism, or 19th-century anecdotal painting, it takes a superior talent to turn this kind of thing into art, whether the themes, as here, involve the careful recall of historical styles or the cherished symbols of decadence of the Weimar Republic. Only in the work of a George Grosz, or a Giorgio De Chirico, or a Balthus, do style and commentary, art and emotion, become a consummated esthetic. Those artists will not have to move over in the art histories of our time for much else that is here. Too many of the messages are far less profound and enigmatic than they pretend to be, in spite of their considerable surface skills.

Unfortunately there seems to be no way for the architecture and design to hook into the rest of the show. Academic realism would have provided a logical bridge, because in architecture, the obverse of modernism is the Academy. The Beaux Arts was the inheritor of tradition; it dealt with the world of recognizable and familiar forms.

The only thing of which one can be sure is that an exhibition of such traditional values is not what anyone had in

Continued on Page 30

A view of the grand salon of the Normandie, in the architecture and design section of "Les Réalismes" exhibition at the Beaubourg in Paris

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Continued from Page 27

mind. With the help of the voluminous and weighty catalogue, I have been trying to find out what was in anyone's mind, or what the building and design section, in particular, is really meant to be. The display has been called "fascistic," because it features a great deal of material from the Hitler and Mussolini years. At the entrance is a dramatic model of the Palace of Culture constructed in 1939 as the showpiece of Mussolini's 1942 International Exposition. The exposition never took place, and the building still stands like a hollow-eyed ghost in the fairgrounds on the outskirts of Rome. Like a De Chirico urban image made solid, it is an unusually surreal and seductive object.

There is a great deal of design and graphics in the service of Nazi propaganda, and the impact is admittedly much stronger than that of the anti-Nazi documents also present. But this is not a fascistic show. The material includes frivolous and fashionable Deco from France and the United States, those odd, early 20th-century historical hybrids from Scandinavia and the Low Countries, and a fair amount of exotica of one sort or another. The display is, to say the very least, intensely eclectic.

One looks in vain for some unifying thread or interpretive clarification. The one theme that is used does not solve the problem; in fact, it is largely responsible for what is wrong with the show. The treatment of much of this material is predominantly in terms of political history and ideology. For German National Socialism and Italian Fascism politics are inescapable; the "difficult dialogue" between eclecticism and modernism in the service of the Italian state, for example, is explored in a catalogue essay. But when "Propaganda and Production," and "Power and the Environment," are followed by "Culture and the Popular Resistance," and all else seems to fall between the dialectical cracks, the device becomes inadequate.

With these basic difficulties of definition and selection — plus making sense of a mazelike installation — the show's problems become truly formidable. The relationship between art and politics is as controversial as it is inevitable; but it will not do as a substitute for the serious scholarship that is needed to sort out this kind of esthetic grabbag. In this case, the reach at the Beaubourg has been both too large and too limited. The show goes down to defeat in spite of the heroic efforts of an expert and dedicated staff. ■

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