

Art in America

Exhibition Reviews

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WALT KUHN
DC Moore

Sexual humiliation, anger and homoeroticism are unexpected themes in shows of early American modernists. But Walt Kuhn (1877-1949) was an artist who subverted expectations.

When Kuhn's militarily hatted showgirl was quoted by David Salle in a 1986 painting, *Blue Paper*, its juxtaposition with naked women posing in submissive postures emphasized Kuhn's subliminal psychosexual content. Suddenly Kuhn became interesting to a new generation of young artists, who didn't have much opportunity to see his work.

DC Moore remedied this recently with an in-depth Kuhn exhibition encompassing 45 paintings and works on paper made between 1918 and 1946. While the show contained early illustrational work of an imagined Old West, and derivative still lifes and figures influenced by modern masters, it focused primarily on late, reputation-elevating and mesmerizing paintings of performers, including the bizarre, 6-foot-high *Trio* (1937).

Though academically trained in Munich to paint in a dusty realist manner, Kuhn readily assimilated modernism's emphasis on flat colored forms and planes. A natural impresario and self-promoter, he gained early prominence as one of three organizers of the historic 1913 Armory Show, which allowed him to become a trusted advisor to wealthy collectors, important dealers and curators. But Kuhn also befriended circus performers and showgirls, who posed for his paintings and appeared in the variety shows and theatrical events he wrote, directed and produced.

After years of suffering comparisons to his more mature colleagues from the Armory Show, he changed his focus following a nearly fatal illness in 1925. In the mid-1930s, no longer held back by trendy flatness and anemic Cubism, Kuhn achieved a psychologically expressive life and dimensionality in the characters he painted. And through subtle tonal mastery and inventive facture, he could still indicate modernism's formal structures.

Appearing stunned to find themselves half-naked in the outlandish and absurd costumes Kuhn designed and had sewn by his wife, Kuhn's rouged women, like the metallic bustiered and helmeted one in *Showgirl in Armor* (1943), make for attention-grabbing paintings. In *Girl from Madrid* (1942), a señorita sulks menacingly with cocked brow and crimson puckered mouth. Blood-colored roses flow from her long, dark locks onto her milky bosom, and her concealed hands could easily harbor a whip or knife.

By the late '30s, Kuhn was portraying his characters not as professionals performing a role but as people passively made-up, costumed and thrust into a hazy monochromatic space devoid of any context that could justify their presence. These paintings hover in a netherworld between Neue Sachlichkeit portraits and psycho-surreal fantasy, giving them a uniquely contemporary atmosphere



Walt Kuhn:
*Portrait of the
Artist as a Clown
(Kansas)*, 1932,
oil on canvas, 32
by 22 inches;
at DC Moore.

and linking them with Picabia's narrative experiments of the '40s.

Here, glowing paintings of men bristle with sexual tension. *Portrait of the Artist as a Clown (Kansas)*, 1932, sets the tone. Kuhn depicts himself in a creamy pleated cape and matching hat, slightly askew, his hairless chest revealed by the plunging neckline of a surgical-scrub green blouse. His jaw is clenched, and his blue eyes glare warily from behind white make-up.

Whether wearing an ivory body stocking with spangled collar and grasping a cape as displaced phallus, as in *The White Rider* (1946), or like the white-faced *Roberto* (1946), pink-clad, tensely clutching a bench and poised to spring, Kuhn's guys could just as easily portray rent boys as circus performers. Kuhn spends as much energy constructing the elaborate light playing across their crotches as he does on their facial expressions, which in both cases is quite remarkable.

Peripatetic and knowledgeable, Kuhn was a sophisticate purportedly seeking a slightly unrefined and corny ideal of raw American life. Widely viewed as secretive, he harbored a dark sensibility that we have come to value, as the mysterious nature of these strange paintings becomes gradually apparent.

—Dennis Kardon