



CADE TOMPKINS PROJECTS

# ARTFORUM

## “The Anxious Eye: German Expressionism and Its Legacy”

National Gallery of Art West Building | Sixth Street and Constitution Avenue, NW

February 11, 2024 - May 27, 2024

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April 5, 2024



Orit Hofshi's 'Time . . . thou ceaseless lackey to eternity' (2017). quadriptych, woodcut and rubbing with colored pencil and grease pencil additions on handmade Kozo and Abaca paper, overall 6' 8" × 13' 10"

In Max Beckmann's woodcut *Group Portrait, Eden Bar*, 1923, a mustachioed man is flanked by two women, the trio nervy, dislocated. Set in a popular Berlin bar, the scene is cramped, the figures heavy. Each stares out in a different direction, avoiding eye contact. If this is a party, it's one the guests are edging to leave.

Beckmann, one of the artists featured in “The Anxious Eye,” a new show of more than one hundred German Expressionist prints and drawings, wanted to tame “the terrible, thrilling monster” of life, to “beat it down” in works of ravishing clarity.

So, too, did Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, whose lemon-yellow lithograph *Tanzpaar* (Dancing Couple), 1909, sparkles in the show. There is a brilliant tension about the scene, the dancers improbably fluid, cipher-like. Kirchner, one of the founders of the artists' group Die Brücke, strained against the effervescence of Impressionism and the stringency of academic painting. The effect is haunting, potent.



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“I was always alone,” Kirchner observed in 1919. “The more I mingled with people, the more lonely I felt.” His subjects are indistinct and, often, veiled. In a 1914 street scene, Kirchner’s figures are splintered and set against spindly palms. **The disorienting picture anticipates Orit Hofshi’s woodcut *Time... thou ceaseless lackey to eternity*, 2017, the show’s jolting denouement. Amid a marvelous web of line work, Hofshi sets piles of rubble against a frenetic, saffron sky. The bloodied maroon ground is broken by the facade of an ornate synagogue, burned by the Nazis in 1942.**

The show of prints is splintering, raw, and sober to the last. Razor-sharp, they cut through to the psyche, and pulse with fervor. “A painted or drawn hand, a grinning or weeping face,” Beckmann pronounced, in 1918, “that is my confession of faith.”