



Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Woman in a Green Jacket*, 1913, oil on canvas, 31 5/8 × 27 5/8".

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

NEUE GALERIE NEW YORK

The women traipsing through the painted worlds of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner are as kaleidoscopic as his colors. Some are birds of paradise—chartreuse-skinned acrobats, strumpets in black stockings, begonia-pink ballerinas—who seem to exist for our delectation alone. Others are portrayed as individuals as stormy and complex as the artist himself. Take the subject of *Woman in a Green Jacket*, 1913: She appears wary, even resentful, with tight-set lips and narrow, apprehensive eyes. The angle from which we view her suggests that we are straddling her thighs as she lies back, squinting up at us as though our gaze is a harsh, invasive light.

Relations between the sexes fascinated Kirchner, who was born in 1880 and began his career in Dresden, where he founded the German Expressionist group Die Brücke in 1905. His studio became the nexus for a bohemian cabal of artists and models who took a dim view of monogamy and other bourgeois values. Building on the innovations of Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, and Edvard Munch, Kirchner depicted urban tableaux, cabarets, landscapes, and domestic scenes in traffic-stopping shades of nonnaturalistic color that pulse and burn. A compact but enlightening survey at the Neue Galerie charted his volatile creativity—which also found expression in sculpture, photographs, prints, pastel drawings, and textiles. Presumably inspired by Kirchner’s high-keyed palette, the exhibition’s designers painted the walls flamingo pink, teal, and turquoise—hues that gelded the lily as much as they gilded it. Pieces that would have looked radiant in a subtler setting appeared dull in competition with the galleries themselves—but this choice was the only crime against taste in an otherwise excellent show.

In 1911 the artist moved to Berlin, where he painted some of his best works: metropolitan scenes laced with acerbic eroticism and signs of social transformation. In the celebrated canvas *Street, Berlin, 1913*, two courtesans in feathered hats share a conspiratorial smile as they sashay down an avenue the color of seared tuna. Urgent diagonal strokes articulate a crowd of angular men in black coats and top hats, one of whom studies a storefront window. At the time these works were made, the city’s chief of police was cracking down on the new vogue for racy displays of pantyhose, corsets, and wigs, and had recently begun arresting shop owners for moral indecency. The era also saw the dawn of electric streetlights, and the early lamps hummed loudly and were glaringly bright: The city depicted in Kirchner’s canvases was literally vibrating.

Kirchner resented comparisons to other artists, and his obsession with being a pioneer often led him to backdate works so they would seem more revolutionary. Given his insecurities, it would probably please the prickly neurotic to know that his own influence crackles on in the psychosexual art of some of today’s best figurative painters, Nicole Eisenman, Faith Ringgold, and Dana Schutz among them. Like these contemporary chroniclers of personal angst and social cataclysm, Kirchner had a gift for capturing unspoken transactions between people, as well as deals gone wrong within one’s self. A portfolio of jagged, claustrophobic woodblock

prints from 1915—made during the artist’s nervous breakdown and his World War I military training—illustrates the story of a man who sells his shadow to the devil. The pieces were hung to brilliant effect within a dark, closet-size gallery that heightened the character’s anguish. Kirchner battled addictions to absinthe and barbiturates, and spent several years in and out of Swiss and German sanatoriums before taking his own life in 1938. The alienation lacing certain works makes the intimacy in others all the more potent. In *Tower Room, Fehmarn (Self-Portrait with Erna)*, 1913, the skewed angles of the blue space and brown furniture make the artist (sitting clothed) and his longtime lover (standing nude) seem as though they are the only still points in the vortex. The magnetism between them appears to be all that’s holding the rest of the world together.

—Zoë Lescaze

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