

Kurt Schwitters

NAHMAD CONTEMPORARY

Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) is renowned for his Merz collages and constructions, titled after an advertisement for Commerzbank he once cut up, dispensing with the German institution's *com* and *bank*, and leaving only the nonsensical *merz*, which has an odd resonance with *schmutz*, or dirt. This is fitting, of course, for an artist who was a master of appropriating cultural *schmutz*—including, in his own words, “tram tickets, bits of driftwood, buttons, and old junk”—for his work.

At Nahmad Contemporary, twenty-two of Schwitters's collages, made between 1920 and 1947, were on display. Among them, *Ohne Titel (Standrad mit Holz)* (Untitled [Standard with Wood]), 1947, was a fine example of how his art stands uneasily on the border between Cubism and Dadaism, in an ironic and dialectical class of its own. The piece is a shallow relief composed from a *dégradé* piece of perforated timber tacked at an angle onto some cardboard panels; the word STANDARD, printed on a label, is partially revealed through the aperture of the modestly sized slot. The artist turns the notion of Cubist flatness into a kind of deadpan, absurdist joke. This type of perceptual drollery also makes its way into *Herbst* (Autumn), 1942–43, in which three-dimensional fragments of wood, stone, and assorted textiles, with daubs of oil paint here and there, recede into the composition.

Schwitters was denied membership to Berlin's Club Dada, formed in the nihilistic wake of World War I, because of his affiliation with the Galerie Der Sturm, which supported Expressionism and Cubism—movements despised by the antiart group. Yet he eventually came to epitomize German Dada. Indeed, I am arguing that his exquisite works remain stuck in this paradox. For instance, though *Uernd*, 1947, may be Dadaist in spirit, it is also a steadfastly formalist construction of collaged planes in red, yellow, blue, teal, gray, and white. Its aesthetic success, though minor, suggests that Schwitters could never escape his academic training at the Kunstakademie Dresden. Did he become an antiestablishment artist to be in tune with the postwar revolutionary times?

Yet refuse was everywhere in defeated Germany, and the penniless, scavenging Schwitters—perhaps as a matter of practicality—used the remnants of his destroyed country to create his art. Possibly influenced by Duchamp, he used ready-made materials to create works that, in sharp contrast to Duchamp's sense of irony, could be resonant with sentiment. Take *C 50 letzte Vögel und Blumen* (C 50 Last Birds and Flowers), 1946, a funereal thing with images of what appear to be butterfly wings, the tail end of a wasp, and the phrase DESIGN FOR SCARVES, rendered in white and rising from a field of black. The words make one think of mourning veils or shrouds, while the truncated insect pictures suggest a springtime that will never come.

The enigma of Schwitters is that for all his avant-garde credentials and unexpected formalism, he remained a peculiarly romantic artist,

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if, as the scholar Morse Peckham wrote, the measure of “Romantic subjectivism” is “change, imperfection, growth, diversity, the creative imagination, the unconscious . . . the artist watching his powers develop and novelty emerging from his unconscious mind.”

—Donald Kuspit

Kurt Schwitters, *Ohne Titel (Standrad mit Holz)* (Untitled [Standard with Wood]), 1947, mixed media, 10 × 6 3/4".

