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## Kurt Schwitters: A Selection of Collages at Nahmad Contemporary



*Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948), Installation view. All images courtesy Nahmad Contemporary.*

**Kurt Schwitters:** A Selection of Collages

Nahmad Contemporary

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By **JONATHAN GOODMAN**, August 2019

This outstanding show of Kurt Schwitters' collages demonstrates the artist's command of a methodology active in modernism more or less from the start. If we were to reduce the definition of early modernism to a single word, it might be "collage." Think of the use of literature, poetry especially, from languages other than English in T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland," and in the cantos of Ezra Pound, which were first published in 1922 and 1925, respectively. Schwitters, a German artist, first began making his collages as early as 1918. The exhibition at Nahmad Contemporary is nearly beyond praise, in the sense that its group of small collages offers a ready window into the creativity of an artist who is, perhaps, a touch underrated. It is not certain why this is so--but Schwitters was German at a time when modernism was dominated by the French; moreover, his work is small, when large physical size seems still to be taken as a sign of magisterial ambition (try telling that to Paul Klee!). The tightness of the artist's *Merz* (derived from the German word *Kommerz*--in English *commerce*), with its jagged but neatly relating paper elements, often incorporating parts of advertisements, trains schedules, random newspaper wording, has not had considerable influence on later artists.



*Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948), Jubilair, 1947. Collage on paper mounted on card, 10.30h x 8.50w in.*

It is fair to say, then, that Schwitters was an independent, whose visual acuity and preference for a relatively unrecognized process, put him in a place of some seclusion. But as this unusual show makes clear, the collages enact a visual fugue based on the decision to tear pieces of paper and put them together in striking ways. Every once in a while an actual object will be inserted into the composition, thickening the width of the work of art. But, generally, not even the term “low relief” can be applied to Schwitters’ efforts, which usually are experienced as a flat plane (this despite the overlapping of the paper fragments). One can’t help but sympathize with the subtle precision regularly experienced in his output here; a major visual fault, or even a near miss, is not to be found among the examples on view. Maybe, if one wanted to force a critical comment, it might be said that the sameness of the size--the collage’s diminution--leads to a similarity of experience. But then that is true of an artist like Mark Rothko, whose single painterly field, coupled with grand emotion, enabled him to repeat himself with success. Perhaps Schwitters is not so much about feeling, but his practice lends itself to an appreciation of a system that is inspired and moving.



Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948), *C 50 letzte Vögel und Blumen (C 50 Last Birds and Flowers)*, 1946. Collage on paper mounted on card,

6.50h x 5.50w in.

Most of the works come from the mid-1940s, when Schwitters was living in England, shortly before his death in 1948. *C 50 letzte Voegel und Blumen (C 50 Last Birds and Flowers)* was made in 1946. First off, it makes things clear that Schwitters was an artist who was as strong at the end of his career as he was at its start. In this piece, words are paramount--the English phrase “last birds and flowers” occupies the upper left of the collage, while in the middle, we see “design for scarves” and “gas light and”--both sentence fragments are in English. Images are hard to come by and being small, hard to read. But the formal achievement of the work cannot be denied. In another piece, titled *Untitled (Standrad mit Holz) (Untitled [Standard with Wood])* (1947), a piece of driftwood, a rough boat shape with a hole in the middle and its lower end, has been placed on top of a piece of paper with the word “Standard” printed on it, framed by thin cardboard. One is tempted to read meaning into the words Schwitters chose for his collages, but we sense that his decisions were arbitrary, lacking deliberate meaning. It looks like Schwitters was a formalist and not a content-oriented artist.



*Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948), Ohne Titel (Frankreich) (Untitled [France]), 1946-47. Collage and pencil on paper mounted on board, 19.20h x 16.50w x 1.50d in.*

*Ohne Titel (Frankreich) (Untitled [France])* (1946-47) is a beautiful work consisting of tan-colored paper fragments embellished slightly with pencil. In the middle is a cardboard-gray bar angling slightly upwards. We do not know the reason why Schwitters gave the collage the name that he did, but like all the works available to see, this is an effort elegant in the extreme. The torn pieces of paper do include some off-white squares and a couple of slate-blue rectangles with a white line through them. The effect is lyric, not elegiac, indicative of an elegance that must have been hard to realize just after the Second World War. Schwitters' exuberance, slightly restrained, is evident in this wonderful work of art. He pursued exuberance in other ways: *Ursonate (Primary Sonata)*, a musical composition ten years in the making, from 1922 to 1932, is also an exercise in abstract euphoria, like his Hanover home, transformed entirely into an art work and destroyed in 1944. The artist risks rational procedure for an intuition of lyric assertion. This happens in a smaller way, physically and metaphysically, in the Merz compositions, which suggest offbeat patterns that keep creativity alive. This show does justifiable homage to a man who was not accepted by the German dadaists early in the twentieth century and so went his own way, creating art that is permanent and energetically compelling. **WM**

#### JONATHAN GOODMAN

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