

*The Vorticists: Rebel Artists in London and New York, 1914-1918*

Nasher Art Museum, Duke University

September 30, 2010 – January 2, 2011

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In 2009, the Nasher Art Museum of Duke University housed an exhibit of Bloomsbury painting entitled *A Room of One's Own*. This year, the Nasher has given an exhibit of their own to the self-identified antagonists of Bloomsbury, the Vorticists. Following the logic of the Nasher's juxtaposition of the two movements, one realizes both the similarity between their internal organization, and the disparity between their methods, aims and historical fates. Both were loosely organized, London-based experimental art movements—and each can be positioned somewhere between a circle of friends and a coherent ideological unit, stuck in a conceptual limbo linking the emergent model of corporate bureaucracies (e.g., the advertising agency, the humanities department, &c.) and the residual bohemian collectives that come together in cafés and art-schools.

While both shared common sociological ground, any viewer of *The Vorticists* can immediately gauge the aesthetic differences between the two. The Vorticists' ambitions were grander and their methods more confrontational—something reflected in the size and scope of the works in the exhibit and the number of media represented in it. *A Room of One's Own* proved Bloomsbury painting incapable of transcending the post-impressionism of Cézanne and early Picasso (making the painters underachieving relations to Bloomsbury's novelists, biographers, poets and their one very famous economist). *The Vorticists*, on the other hand, contains

painting, sculpture, and photography that equals the verve and daring of Wyndham Lewis's most experimental achievements in prose (e.g., *Tarr* and *The Childermas*).

Considering that Bloomsbury art has made almost no impact on post-1945 painting (as opposed to, say, Virginia Woolf's and Maynard Keynes's undeniable influence on literature and economics, respectively), it is striking how vital and significant much of the work in *The Vorticists* remains for contemporary artists. While Bloomsbury's sphere of influence is now in most cases limited to academic circles, Lewis and company remain compelling to today's musicians, artists and filmmakers—one can see Vorticist traces in Mark E. Smith of The Fall's angular grotesqueries (*Rotting Hill* is his favorite Lewis work), Roxy Music and Bryan Ferry's visual self-presentation (see the cover of *Manifesto*, which mimics *Blast 1's*), David Bowie's icy, low-affect persona (he's a collector of Lewis's paintings). And while basically any conceptual sculptor owes a debt (acknowledged or unacknowledged) to Jacob Epstein and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Vorticism also helped shape the styles of filmmakers Ken Russell and Derek Jarman (most obviously in their biopic of Gaudier-Brzeska, 1972's *Savage Messiah*). Traces of Vorticist technique can also be found in the anti-realist tendencies of modern comic books and graphic novels. In short, it seems anyone looking for an avant-garde charge in the damp realms of British empiricism and "commonsense" seem to have at least taken a glimpse backwards into the vortex.

And the Nasher's exhibit demonstrates why Vorticism still possesses such a spark for contemporary artists and musicians. It rightly highlights their angular, anti-humanist dismantlings of the surface forms of the body, the city, and nature. On display in every work are the ways Vorticism transcended the dead, impressionistic styles still considered vital by

Roger Fry and Vanessa Bell. Yet the exhibit allows one to form a nuanced, multi-leveled response to the work. For example, seeing Lewis's *The Crowd* in person allows the viewer to grasp the movement's alluring blend of aesthetic mastery and philosophical pomposity. It dramatizes the way byzantine urban landscapes and collectivist political movements threatened to eclipse individual agency in the early twentieth century, but also allows recognition of the absurdity of Lewis's proto-Fascist intentions (as represented at the painting's bottom). Here "authentic," giant individuals are literally presented as the only ones with brains, which are grotesquely and ridiculously oversized. Thus, the exhibit at its best renders intelligible both Vorticism's striking formal properties and the comic-book simplicity of its reactionary politics. In a similar way, Lewis's *Timon of Athens* portfolio of lithographs allows one to revel in the staggering intricacies of the work, in the way Lewis managed to overload the foreground with complexity and yet still conjure the image of a realistic dramatic scene through its manipulation of perspective and empty space (something not achieved in the contemporary efforts of the Cubists and Futurists).

In general, the exhibition soft-pedals the political problems raised by the group, especially Lewis. Its delimitation to the 1914-1918 period somewhat justifies this approach, but it can also be argued that the seeds for the later political positions were already implicit in much of the early art and manifestos. This depoliticization makes for a more appealing exhibit insofar as it allows the spectator to engage with the works directly, but leaves the context for the work under-narrated, for a casual observer could go through *The Vorticists* and leave without a good sense of the group's alternately reactionary and radical politics. They would learn about these in the exhibit's excellent catalogue (edited by Mark Antliff and Vivien Greene), but the subject matter should have been emphasized more in the exhibit itself. For example,

*The Vorticists* covers World War I and *Blast 2*'s alignment of stylistic experimentation with British nationalism, but breezes past the implications of a militarized aesthetic and focuses instead on the pathos of Gaudier-Brzeska's death. In dealing with the Great War, it emphasizes his beautiful but unrepresentative statement (later quoted in Pound's eulogy), in which Gaudier describes how he turned a Mauser rifle into a work of art:

I broke the butt off and with my knife I carved in it a design, through which I tried to express a gentler order of feeling, which I preferred.

BUT I WILL EMPHASIZE that MY DESIGN got its effect (just as the gun had) FROM A VERY SIMPLE COMPOSITION OF LINES AND PLANES.

(*Blast 2*, 1915, p. 34)

This has the effect of echoing without qualifying Pound's ideological claim that the group's political positions were always as subtly-thought through as their art—it lets the Vorticists seem both “gentle” and gun-metal strong at the same time. The Vorticists, however, were not the leftists of the Frankfurt School, working on utopian “messages in a bottle” for a more hospitable future era—and a more thorough, less pat presentation of their politics would have deepened the exhibit. Again, Antliff and Greene's wonderful catalog addresses these issues in detail, but such matters are left under-accounted for in the displays.

On the subject of technical innovation amongst the Vorticists, the exhibit attempts to debunk the conception of Wyndham Lewis as the movement's mastermind. His pieces still outnumber any other single artist's, but are distributed throughout, as opposed to the major groupings allotted to the work of Coburn, Gaudier-Brezska, Wadsworth and Epstein. This

approach, however, reorients assumptions about the movement's leaders and followers only insofar as it dramatizes the way Lewis's techniques migrated into different media and in the process transformed into something qualitatively different—Wadsworth streamlined Lewis's angular lines into something cleaner, flatter and less baroquely detailed, Etchells routinized the shapes into pure geometric assemblages (often using graph paper to do so), while Coburn spiritualized the basic form of Vorticist painting by turning the fixed image of the photograph into a frame haunted with the ghosts of wobbly alternate stills. Nevinson, at best only ever a fellow-traveler of the Rebel Art Centre movement (his *Marching Men* and *Returning to the Trenches* are both included), continued reducing bodies into abstract lines of force, but also re-humanized them, giving realistic faces to otherwise abstract figures.

The work of Jessica Dismorr, Dorothy Shakespear, and Helen Saunders is grouped together in a small section, which unfortunately marginalizes their work. Admittedly, the pieces are not the most impressive in the collection, but are more than equal to the middle-of-the-road ones of Etchells, Wadsworth, and Lewis himself included more prominently in the exhibit.

In sum, *The Vorticists* presents a depoliticized, sanitized version of its subject matter, but one that makes a strong argument for the range and power of their revision of the traditions of visual art. By thrusting the political and philosophical context for the works into the background, the exhibitors have foregrounded the vitality and relevance of England's only genuinely avant-gardist art movement, and that is undoubtedly a worthy achievement.

*The Vorticists* runs at the Nasher until the beginning of January, 2011, after which it will be sent to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice and in June to Tate Britain in London.

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