UP NOW

Kurt Schwitters

Tate Britain
Through May 12
Bernard Jacobson
London

Born in 1887, Kurt Schwitters was a Dadaist doyen when he arrived in Britain from Nazi-occupied Norway in 1940. His collages and paintings had appeared in group shows in New York and all over Europe, and his works had turned up in the infamous "Degenerate Art" show of 1937.

When he stepped off a ship in Scotland, Schwitters was bundled off to an internment camp for Germans and Austrians on the Isle of Man. Resilient and disciplined, he made the most of his detention, and continued to work notwithstanding an acute lack of materials. One of his paintings from that year, *Untitled (Roofs of Houses in Douglas, Isle of Man)*, 1941, which appears in Tate's large, fascinating show on the artist's life in Britain, depicts rain-slicked rooftops. Somber, atmospheric, muddy, and executed on floor linoleum, it looks nothing like the crisp, stylish abstractions he made earlier in Germany, but it points to where this adaptable artist's work was headed.

Released in 1941, Schwitters stayed in Britain until his death in 1948. Living in London, he constructed collages from bus tickets, candy wrappers, newspaper clips, and other bits of daily detritus, a hearty selection of which are on view at Tate. These are enactments of life during the rationing years, documentaries of the mundane with playful but respectful winks at the artist's adopted country. Other pieces on view have a satirical bent, including *En Morn* (1947), a send-up of a wartime morale poster that announces: "These are the things we are fighting for." They are more literal than the collages Schwitters made before the war, which are often grouped under the category of "Merz," along with sculptures, periodicals, sound poems, and installations—more like multimedia illustrations than the exquisite compositions the Nazis so hated.

Schwitters's pioneering talent for combining image and texture was on display at a small but wide-ranging exhibition of collages and assemblages at Bernard Jacobson Gallery, with works dating as far back as 1920. Highlights like *Mz 26, 45 Sch.* (1925–26) reveal the tension and mystery the artist was able to conjure with a few nifty cuts and excisions, particularly in his early pieces.

The Tate show, meanwhile, also includes a number of paintings in which Schwitters used a pointillist technique or Kandinsky-like abstraction. Some have great presence and sensuality, but it is easy to see how London's postwar avant-garde thought his work a bit dated; indeed, British critics and artists largely ignored or disdained him, and he had only one solo show during those years. Poor, perhaps disheartened, but ever energetic, he turned to painting and selling (to tourists) conventional landscapes, flowers, and portraits of his neighbors in rural northwest England where, from 1945 on, he spent most of his time.

The Tate show makes a good case for Schwitters's influence on Pop artists who came up in the 1950s, including Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi. Yet Schwitters's work in Britain still seems like a footnote to his German career, as he repeated old pictorial languages to ever-dimmer effect. Once brilliant examples of the Bauhaus spirit, the collages he made in his final years are disorganized and scattered, and his late landscapes seem like the work of a Sunday painter. ***—Roger Atwood***

Kurt Schwitters, *En Morn*, 1947, tracing paper and paper on paper, 23¼" x 18½". Tate Britain.

'Movement and Gravity: Bacon and Rodin in dialogue'

Ordovas
London

According to the catalogue for this mesmerizing exhibition, Francis Bacon once declared that Auguste Rodin was one of only three true sculptors that had ever existed, along with Michelangelo and Brancusi. This first-ever pairing of works by the two artists presented three paintings by Bacon alongside three of Rodin's bronze "Iris" sculptures, shedding new light on the extent to which the British painter was influenced by the French sculptor.

Francis Bacon, *Three Studies from the Human Body*, 1967, oil on canvas, 77¾" x 58⅛". Ordovas.

As art historian Martin Harrison notes in his catalogue essay, Bacon produced his *Lying Figure* (1959) while living in St. Ives, Cornwall, as one of a series of five paintings directly inspired by Rodin's *Iris, messagère des dieux* (1890–91). Set against flat horizontal planes of gray, black, and turquoise, the painter's writhing nude has a sculptural dimension, achieved with thick, vibrant impasto. The figure's muscular leg—thrust upwards into the ether—mirrors the taut, splayed limb of Rodin's dynamic sculpture.

In *Miss Muriel Belcher* (1959), Bacon curiously placed the subject's head in the lower half of the canvas, framed by a