

KZ – Kampf – Kunst

(CONCENTRATION CAMP – STRUGGLE – ART)

BORIS LURIE: NO!ART

The works of Boris Lurie have the power to shock.

Many were created more than fifty years ago, but have lost none of their potential to rattle cages, to polarise opinion and to test the boundaries of tolerability.

Boris Lurie's comprehensive and controversial body of work will be presented in the NS Documentation Centre in Cologne as of 27 August 2014.

The exhibition – developed in cooperation with the Boris Lurie Foundation in New York and under the curatorial direction of gallery owner Gertrude Stein – features the first impressive works created directly after Lurie's release from Buchenwald concentration camp, as well as works from the 1940s and 1950s that have never been seen in Europe before. A selection of his impressive sculptural works from the 1970s will also be presented for the first time in the basement.

The profoundly human existentialism and peculiarly European characteristics that inform his works – and, not least, his aggressively political outlook – made Lurie something of an outsider in a New York art world in thrall to abstract expressionism and pop art, a state of affairs that endured until his death in 2008.

Born in Riga in 1924 to a wealthy Jewish middle-class family, the artist experienced the catastrophes and upheavals of the 20th century at first hand. Together with his father, he survived the Stutthof and Buchenwald concentration camps. His mother, grandmother, younger sister and childhood sweetheart were all murdered in the Massacre of Rumbula, near Riga, in 1941.

Lurie described himself as a privileged concentration camp survivor who quickly gained a foothold as a translator in post-war Germany, emigrating to New York with his father in 1946, where he lived and worked for the rest of his days. He never played the victim: the horrors that he experienced were never worn on his sleeve in the artistic circles that he sought out in New York. However, he formulated his resistance to the powerlessness and violence that descended upon and dominated his life during his formative years with a decisive NO.

The NO!art group of artists that he co-founded in 1958 stood in sharp contrast to abstract expressionism and pop art. Imperialism, racism, sexism, rampant consumerism and the nuclear threat were the themes explored by the artist group, who were only together for a few years.

Describing the difficult and frequently ignored position of the polemical group in a later interview, Lurie said: "Back then, art always had to be indirect – we were too subjective and too political".

In addition to numerous poems in Baltic German, Boris Lurie wrote novels and stories. Some of the manuscripts, photos and original documents can also be seen at the exhibition.

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Exhibition opening: Tuesday, 26 August 2014 | 7:00 p.m.

First day open to the public: Wednesday, 27 August 2014



Boris Lurie | Railroad to America | 1963
Collage on canvas | 55.5 x 68 cm
© Boris Lurie Art Foundation, New York, USA

“I got my basic grounding in being an artist in concentration camps like Buchenwald.”

Boris Lurie

Boris Lurie took the shocking image of a photo – taken by the Allies after the liberation of the concentration camps – and combined it provocatively with a voyeuristic image from a girly magazine of the kind that flooded the US market in the post-war years.

The pose of the pin-up girl and the piled corpses of murdered concentration camp inmates shine a spotlight on two worlds that are mutually exclusive in representation and perception. Lurie juxtaposes these images in order to draw attention to the continuing abuses of power and the use of violence and humiliation – as also used in democratic societies.

What may at first glance seem to be a mockery of the victims proves, upon further contemplation, to be a complex interaction between past and present. Lurie's formative experiences from the Shoah period under the Nazi regime enabled him to assess and filter contemporary experiences in his US exile home from a highly sensitised perspective. This work is also a prime example for the vital, provocative and blasphemous potential of the NO!art group. Ignorance, emotional stupefaction and voyeurism are unmasked and brought to light with painful clarity.



Boris Lurie | Untitled | circa 1949/50
Oil on wood | 50.8 x 38.1 cm
© Boris Lurie Art Foundation, New York, USA

“In this snow-covered nothingness I stand, embracing Ljuba, my love. With Ljuba, life would have been different – oh, how different!”

Boris Lurie

This picture had such a special place in Boris Lurie's biography that he bought back the small-scale work from a private collector towards the end of his life. It depicts the house where his family lived in the ghetto in Riga. Lurie showed it free and isolated on the background, like an island in a dark, storm-tossed world. Here, in the yard of the house on Kalnu Street, was where he embraced his childhood sweetheart, Ljuba, for the last time – she died, as did Lurie's mother, grandmother and younger sister, at the Massacre of Rumbula in 1941. In the yard is the bed on which he and Ljuba would sit in his room in the evening for weeks on end when it became too dangerous for Jews to be out on the streets at night.

The small-scale oil painting evokes apocalyptic visual worlds ranging from Bosch to Greco, mixed with the stylistic features of Eastern iconography.

The work is a central part of his “War Series”, one of a series of drawings and oil works created after the war, reflecting his impressions right after the Holocaust. In the exhibition, this series will be presented in full and based on a hanging scheme devised by Lurie.



Boris Lurie | Untitled | 1951
Oil on canvas on wood fibreboard | 77 x 92 cm
© Boris Lurie Art Foundation, New York, USA

“When people have nothing to eat, they have no sexuality – but as soon as they were doing better, it became an issue.”

Boris Lurie, in a documentary film, 1995

After completing his “War Series” – which he termed his “private paintings” – Lurie stated his intention of transcending the realistic visual character of his works, seeing illustrative representations as “not really being art”. New York gave him sufficient stimulus for taking in stylistic alternatives and incorporating them in his own work.

The series entitled “Dismembered Women” marks the first attempt to redefine possibilities of artistic expression and, at the same time, goes one step further in processing the artist's memories and experience. The first women in this series – prostitutes observed by Lurie in New York bars – bore the facial traits of the murdered women in his family. Later, the absurdly distorted and fragmented bodies would become more abstract and faceless, eventually mutating into amorphous objects on a monotone, spaceless background. Stylistically speaking, the works are not far removed from Léger's massive bodies, but with the richly contrasting colours found in the picture compositions of the Russian Suprematism movement.

Lurie's ambivalent, obsessive and problematic relationship with women and sexuality, clearly rooted in the dehumanising and humiliating experiences of his youth, can be seen in this picture series.



Boris Lurie | Black Susan | 1962
Oil and paper on canvas | 136 x 132 cm
© Boris Lurie Art Foundation, New York, USA

**“Look down. What do you see? Count the dead! Count the living? What do you hear?
Silence. How can they be counted?”**

Boris Lurie from a statement on the Involvement Show, New York, 1961

Today, it is hard to believe that, during the NO!art group's most active period, no critic thought to subscribe these works to Holocaust survivors. The inference to past traumas appears clear enough today, but this can also lead to one-dimensional conclusions about Boris Lurie's work. Back when they were first created, however, the works were condemned as blasphemous, discriminatory and plain intolerable. Critics with a more positive outlook saw the desperately crumbling images as holding up a mirror to the conflicting morals in Cold War-era America. Strewn with pictures of pin-up girls, which he had phases of collecting and examining obsessively, Lurie's canvases bear witness to an attempt by the artist to liberate himself from obsession and helplessness in both senses of the word. By pasting layer upon layer of paint on the collection of cut-out pin-ups with which he had plastered the walls of his studio – effectively “drowning” them on the canvas in both a figurative and actual sense – he also freed his mind for a new artistic approach that liberated him of the necessity for his art to be of an illustrative nature. Erotic photos from magazines were also used in the mid-1950s by later pop art apologists Rauschenberg and Johns. As a time-immanent phenomenon, they became part of the image canon of contemporary art.



Boris Lurie | No (Red and Black) "Feel-Painting-No with Red" | 1963 | Oil (?) on canvas | 56 x 88 cm
© Boris Lurie Art Foundation, New York, USA

“No means first of all not accepting everything that you’re offered and then is also an expression of dissatisfaction.”

Boris Lurie

It was a clear, resounding NO! that enabled Boris Lurie not only to survive the ghetto and concentration camps, but also summed up his attitude to life like no other word. As an adolescent, his family called him “Boris Why?” – the compulsion for scrutinising every situation seemed to be in his blood.

After the Nazi regime and concentration camps, Boris Lurie refused for the rest of his life to suffer in silence with regard to his traumatic experiences. Drawings and painting – his preferred means of expression since childhood days – initially helped him to come to terms with his hellish experiences in the ghetto and concentration camps. 1958 saw Lurie take a decisive step towards tackling his fate and his attitude to life head on by founding the NO!art artist group and becoming its spiritus rector. His NO! – once he had found and articulated it – was fundamental and all-embracing. His artistic strategies were borne of the anger of observers and participants in social processes that paved the way for abuse of power and incapacitation. In an America that was largely depoliticised in the wake of the McCarthy era, the critical voices of the NO!art group were overlooked by the museums and major galleries. The works were too raw, too brutal and too uncouth – to this day, they have lost none of their potential to rattle cages.



Boris Lurie | Amerique / Lumumba Dead “Lumumba...is...dead” | 1960/61 | Oil and paper on canvas | 182 x 198 cm
© Boris Lurie Art Foundation, New York, USA

“You will find no secret language here [...] no hushed muted silences, no messages beamed at exclusive audiences [...] Our only master is truth.”

Boris Lurie from his statement on the Involvement Show, New York, 1961

The work “Lumumba is Dead” was shown at the NO!art group's Involvement Show in New York in 1961.

In the large-scale collage with a prominent reversed swastika taking centre stage, Lurie – in addition to countless superimposed pin-up photos – projected the newspaper headline LUMUMBA IS DEAD. The work references the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected prime minister of the Republic of the Congo. Lumumba's struggle for the political and economic independence of his country conflicted with the economic interests of former colonial power Belgium and other Western countries. In this highly politicised work, Lurie explores the phenomenon of exercising violence in totalitarian systems. Through the girly pictures found in American men's magazines of the time, Lurie – with scant heed for political correctness – moved into the dangerous area where his own revulsion meets obsession. The demons of his past are reflected in the present circumstances. Violence and the reckless exercising of power at all levels of society are mercilessly unmasked in Lurie's works, blended into a dense amalgam on a visual level.



Boris Lurie | Suitcase | circa 1964

Assemblage: Collage of oil and paper on a leather suitcase | 38 x 58 x 17 cm

© Boris Lurie Art Foundation, New York, USA

“But with men like Lurie, Goodman, Fisher and Tyler, the work hits you like a rock hurled through a synagogue window. Smash! – And a hundred emotions follow in its wake, blasphemy, violence, hatred, release, fear, disgust, anger.”

From Seymour Krim's introduction to the NO!show at Gertrude Stein Gallery, 1963

Boris Lurie earned harsh criticism for his Shoah-themed works of 1963/64. He was accused – understandably enough – of mocking Holocaust victims, of using cheap, calculated provocation to attract attention. No one ventured to think that some of the members of the NO!art movement might be victims themselves. In Lurie's angry approach, which completely subverted all aesthetic criteria, the suitcase of the deported, disenfranchised and displaced is strewn with the coarse graffiti of the street. The bright yellow Star of David is affixed to the legs of a pin-up girl; the NO! appears in various forms; pictures of the recently liberated concentration camp inmates are juxtaposed with newspaper headlines. Emblazoned more clearly than anything else is “ANTI-POP”, the clear stance taken against the increasingly influential pop art, which was fast becoming the favourite of influential collectors and large museums.

It is Lurie's anger and moral outrage about past and present evils that are reflected in the coarse style of his work, its sarcastic references anticipating many tendencies to come in the 1980s.



Boris Lurie | War Series 67 [The Way of Liberty (?)]
circa 1946 - [?] | two pages: [R] ink on paper
[V] blue pencil on paper | 26 x 19.7 cm | © Boris Lurie Art Foundation, New York, USA
© Boris Lurie Art Foundation, New York, USA

“My sympathy is with the mouse, but I feed the cat.”

Boris Lurie

The Way of Liberty (?): Boris Lurie – whose family used to call him “Boris Why?” – added a bracketed question mark to the title of this work. Scrutinising all events and circumstances saved his life, but at the same time prevented him from sitting back and tolerating his surroundings. The burning questions remained the driving force behind his uncomfortable art. In this pen-and-ink drawing, Lurie’s memories of concentration camp, deportations and fatal escapes merge together with impressions from the refugee camps and his own journey into a new, different reality.

To begin with, New York could only be a superficial liberation for the young man who, in the America of the late 1940s and 1950s, witnessed only silence and disinterest towards the victims of the Shoah. “Forget about the past, you are in America now” – this was the line to be toed by the immigrants, who barely even discussed the horrors of the past with one another.

This drawing, along with 87 other works, belonged to the “War Series”, which Lurie saw as being his “private pictures”, and which were not produced with a view to being exhibited or shown to other people. With a divergence of styles and materials, Lurie created a gallery of memories, bearing belated witness to the worst yet most formative years of his life.