

NSU ART MUSEUM

FORT LAUDERDALE

RADICAL ART AS RESISTANCE IN NAZI-OCCUPIED DENMARK

War Horses: Helhesten and the Danish Avant-Garde During World War II

On view at NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale
May 17 – September 27, 2015



Image: Egon Mathiesen (1907-1976), *Helhesten 1*, no. 2 (May 10, 1941), front cover (Forsiden), Courtesy of Carl-Henning Pedersen & Else felts Museum © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / billedkunst.dk (image above is a modification of the journal's front cover)

Fort Lauderdale, FL – April 20, 2015 – ***War Horses: Helhesten and the Danish Avant-Garde During World War II*** is the first museum exhibition to focus on the Danish avant-garde group, Helhesten (The Hell-Horse). The group was established in Copenhagen in 1941 by leading modernists of the period who courageously created expressive abstract art and exhibited and published a journal together throughout the German occupation of Denmark from 1940 – 1945. The exhibition, which examines the significance of Helhesten by exploring how and why European modern art was made during the rise of Fascism, includes 120 paintings, works on paper and sculptures by artists such as Ejler Bille (1910-2004), Henry Herrup

(1907-1983), Asger Jorn (1914-1973), Carl-Henning Pedersen (1913-2007) and others, and will be on view at NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale from May 17 through September 27, 2015.

The artists who founded Helhesten were active in Paris and Germany before the war and were devoted to perpetuating aspects of Surrealism, Dada and German Expressionism. Their reinterpretation of these movements and interest in Nordic mythology, ethnographic objects and folk and children's art combined to manifest a unique style during the war that included the use of brightly colored, spontaneously applied pigment to depict fantastical subjects. Many of the Helhesten artists became part of the radical post-war Cobra art movement (named after artists from Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam.)

Although the Helhesten artists worked with gestural abstraction at the same moment as the New York School artists who would later be labeled Abstract Expressionists, the Danes did not know of the Americans' work until after the war. Unlike their American counterparts, the Danish artists rejected complete abstraction in favor of semi-figuration and whimsy in their compositions and held to a belief in the inherent value of art for everyday life. This "new realism" as they defined it, purposefully challenged the brutality of the Nazi regime and its condemnation of so-called degenerate modern art by celebrating humanistic and universal commonalities, tongue-in-cheek humor and collectivist creativity.

The exhibition includes more than 90 works from NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale's outstanding collection of Helhesten art, which is the largest in the United States, and was donated to the museum by Meyer B. and Golda N. Marks in 1988. The exhibition also reconstructs the most important exhibition staged in Denmark during World War II, *13 Artists in a Tent*, which opened on May 17, 1941. *War Horses: Helhesten and the Danish Avant-Garde During World War II* is organized by NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale in partnership with the Carl-Henning Pedersen & Else Alfelt Museum, Herning, Denmark, where it will travel in 2016. Its curator is Kerry Greaves, University of Copenhagen Department of Arts and Cultural Studies Novo Nordisk Foundation Mads Øvlisen Postdoctoral Researcher.

Among the exhibition's highlights are:

Ejler Bille's bronze sculpture, *Store maske (Large Mask)*, 1944, in which the artist experiments with the dynamic interplay of geometric

and two- and three-dimensional forms in creating a comical, human-like figure with stubby, flat arms and feet.

Henry Herrup's *Untitled, Illustration for Jens August Schade's Fun in Denmark (Sjov i Danmark)*, 1945, depicts a scene from Shade's famous fairy-tale-like poem, *Fun in Denmark*. The whimsical and sensual forms convey qualities similar to those of the poem while maintaining its quality of child-like wonder.

Asger Jorn's *Untitled*, c. 1941. The ideas of European Surrealists fascinated Jorn, and the lively colorful, abstract forms in this work, transform an ordinary barrel into a thing of beauty. In its fusion of the ordinary with high art, the work aspects of later twentieth-century art movements, such as Pop art.

Carl-Henning Pederson's *Eventyrbillede (Fairytale Picture)*, 1943, depicts a menagerie of elongated, floating forms and bright colors and abstract shapes that engage the viewer in a world of fanciful imagination.

Exhibition Funding The exhibition is supported through a grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, as part of its Knight Arts Challenge with additional funding provided by Jan and Dan Lewis, and Linda J. Marks and Stephen R. Marks.

Catalogue An illustrated catalogue featuring essays by Kerry Greaves, Michael Leja and Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, will be available at the Museum Store.

Related Events:

Art Talk: A New Realism: Abstraction and Nationalism in Denmark during World War II

Saturday, May 16, 6 pm Unlike the rest of occupied Europe, in Denmark, modern artists continued to experiment with formal abstraction as well as ideas of nationalism during the war. Exhibition curator Kerry Greaves will explore the role this experimentation played in the development of modern art and our evolving understanding of the war.

Exhibition Opening Reception

Saturday, May 16, 7 – 9 pm

Free for members, NSU students, faculty, employees, children under 12; \$15 non-members. RSVP required: 954-262-0204 or moareservations@moafl.org.

Mini Muse for Families Saturday, June 13, 3 – 4:30 pm Program for children ages 5 – 10 includes exhibition tour and hands-on art project inspired by the work of Danish artists. \$5 for members; \$10

non-members. RSVP required: moareservations@moafl.org or 954-262-0204.

NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale

Address: One East Las Olas Boulevard, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301

Website: nsuartmuseum.org

Phone: 954-525-5500

Hours: 11 pm–5 pm; extended hours Thursdays until 8 PM; Sunday 12–5 pm; Closed Monday. Free Docent tours Thursday 2 pm and Saturday at 3:30

Admission: Free for members, NSU students, faculty and staff and children under 12; \$12 adults; \$8 seniors and military; \$5 Students (13-17) and non-NSU college students.

About NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale Founded in 1958, NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale is a premier destination for exhibitions and programs encompassing all facets of civilization’s visual history. Located midway between Miami and Palm Beach in downtown Fort Lauderdale’s arts and entertainment district, the Art Museum’s distinctive 83,000 square-foot modernist building, which opened in 1986, was designed by renowned architect Edward Larrabee Barnes and contains over 25,000 square feet of exhibition space, the 256-seat Horvitz auditorium, museum store and cafe. Studio art instruction for all ages is offered at the Art Museum’s acclaimed AutoNation Academy of Art + Design. Bonnie Clearwater, who became NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale’s Director and Chief Curator in 2013, directs its international exhibition program, which aims to challenge viewers’ perceptions of the world around them. In 2008, the Art Museum became part of Nova Southeastern University, one of the largest private, not-for-profit research universities in the United States.

Exhibitions and programs at NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale are made possible in part by a challenge grant from the David and Francie Horvitz Family Foundation. Funding is also provided by Nova Southeastern University, the Broward County Board of County Commissioners as recommended by the Broward Cultural Council and Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention & Visitors Bureau, and the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Cultural Affairs and the Florida Council on Arts and Culture. NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums.

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