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Review/Art; With Faith in Technology and Nature

By CHARLES HAGEN

In the 1930's Theodore Roszak produced a remarkable group of works, including paintings, sculpture, photograms and drawings, which exuberantly express the period's faith in abstraction and technology. As "Theodore Roszak: Constructivist Works, 1931-1947," at Hirschl & Adler Galleries, demonstrates, the artist practiced a sort of home-grown Constructivism, the product of a critical yearlong tour of Europe in 1930.

During his trip he came in contact with the latest trends in European modernism, encompassing Cubism, Surrealism, Constructivism and the Bauhaus's emphasis on the connection between art and industrial design. On his return to the United States, he settled into a studio on Staten Island and began to produce works in which elements taken from those sources were blended in varying proportions.

Roszak avidly incorporated Modernist influences into his art, producing surprising and often strange stylistic amalgams. In a painting made in 1931, shortly after his return from Europe, a fragmented, Cubist-derived still life with guitar is surmounted by a Surrealistic rendering of a human heart, complete with veins and arteries. Surrealism continued to influence Roszak's work, but increasingly he responded to the Constructivists' emphasis on the use of geometric forms and industrial materials. A study for an architectural tower, from 1931-32, unavoidably recalls Vladimir Tatlin's "Monument to the Third International" from a decade before, while other drawings seem to aim at a similar blend of monumental sculpture and architecture.

Roszak's sculpture from this period most clearly demonstrates his debt to Constructivism, as well as the idiosyncratic twists he gave it. In its sleek verticality, "Red Monument to Lost Dirigible" (1939-40) evokes both a missile and a standing human figure, with the intricate construction of thin metal rods and loops at its top suggesting a guidance system or face. Roszak extended this dual reference to figural depiction and industrial form in a remarkable series of works he termed bipolar constructions. In these pieces, several of which are included at the show, he used a sort of double teardrop shape, usually made of painted wood and polished stainless steel or chrome, as the body of the sculpture, with similarly delicate and precise constructions as heads. Elsewhere, Roszak relied more directly on formal elements of lines, planes and flat color to produce rectilinear spatial constructions. Several models included here for works of this sort suggest open-frame De Stijl buildings, with verticals and horizontals played off against one another in rhythmic patterns.

Like many other artists of the day, Roszak was interested in industrial forms not only for their own sake but also as an expression of the utopian possibilities of technology and design. He described one work from 1938 as a "diagram of the unification of architecture and engineering, an idealized conception of man's creative potential." Nowhere is this sense of the utopian possibilities suggested by abstract form more apparent than in the photograms that Roszak produced from 1937 to 1941, 20 of which are included here. Laying bits of wire mesh, plastic and other materials directly on sheets of photographic paper, which he then exposed to light, Roszak produced pictures in which the shadowy, deep spaces characteristic of the process evoke a world of pure form and light.

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, whose emphasis on the importance of linking art and technology had influenced Roszak, regarded photograms as an important extension of vision, and he worked extensively with the process. Roszak's photograms are looser and more open than Moholy-Nagy's, though, in part because of his frequent use of indeterminate curved shapes and glowing, translucent tones. A kind of immateriality hovers over these ghostly pictures, in which a technological process produces otherworldly effects.

As Douglas Dreishpoon notes in the excellent catalogue to this show, the destruction wreaked by World War II destroyed Roszak's belief in the beneficence of technology. He developed a renewed faith in nature, and abandoned the machinelike look of his constructions for rougher, more expressive forms. The works here thus reflect a discredited historical view, abandoned even by their maker. In spite of this, it's hard not to be a little nostalgic for the kind of optimism and faith in the future exuded by these passionate, confident and quirky works.

"Theodore Roszak: Constructivist Works, 1931-1947," exhibition remains at the Hirschl & Adler Galleries, 21 East 70th Street, Manhattan, through April 11. Photo: "Bipolar in Red" (1938), by Theodore Roszak.
