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Artist of the week 179: Thomas Zipp

This German artist's fantastical installations show the dreams and nightmares of history's rebels, from Martin Luther to Dadaists



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'Fantastical environments that conflate dreams and nightmares' ... Polymorphous Oratory (2012). Photograph: Alison Jacques Gallery

Thomas Zipp's installations of paintings and sculptures are the heavy metal of the art world: transgressive, blackly comic and trained on what the German artist has described as "the weirdness of mankind". Fascinated by people who go against the grain, try to change the world or buck the system, he offsets historical figures from the wilder side of art and music with those from science, religion and politics.

Zipp creates fantastical environments that conflate the dreams and nightmares of bygone eras. Whether installing the beds, shower rooms and rubber cells of an old psychiatric ward, or creating a black and white interpretation of an iconic surrealist painting, his work has the antiquated feel of old photos or musty sheets. His paintings and sculptures come in a careworn palette of ash white, granite grey and lots of black – as if they've spent the past hundred years darkening in a backroom somewhere.

The lynchpin for it all is the early 20th century, that pivotal moment when modernist artists and scientists imagined a new, better world – and so did the Nazis. Otto Hahn, the Nobel laureate considered "the father of nuclear chemistry", has been a recurring figure in Zipp's work, alongside other German world-changers such as the 15th-century Protestant monk Martin Luther, whose division of Europe, the artist has suggested, makes him a proto-Hitler figure. Disfigured with black scribbles or pins stuck in their eyes in his violent, gothic portraits, these ambiguous icons don't escape history's ire.

The angry moralist is just one role Zipp plays, however: the joker and the ecstatic artist visionary are other favourites. His 2008 show White Dada is a good example of his double-edged approach. Here, Dada-style montages and defaced pictures included a textbook description of electric shock therapy and images of drugs of the medical, non-

recreational kind. Meanwhile, dead plants, including long-stalked poppies, sprouted from vases. Equating Dada's boundary-pushing artistic and narcotic experiments with the psychiatric institution, Zipp suggests that art is yet another box for controlling social aberration.

Why we like him: White Dada's centrepiece was a Victorian-era lecture hall. A dark wood amphitheatre circled a white bust resembling one of Jacob Epstein's machine-age marble sculptures and an incongruous drum kit, where Zipp's band played a screaming set on the show's opening night. But once the gig was over, it left a bad feeling in the gut: modern art's radicalism is lost to the past, and our attempts at non-conformity ring hollow.

High on your own supply: For Zipp, painting is a lot like taking drugs – they both "suck you in and open you up to new points".

Where can I see him? At Alison Jacques, London until 31 March.

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