

Fritz Ascher, *Landscape*, 1961. Black ink over watercolor on paper, 14.75 x 17.75 in. (37.5 x 45.1 cm). Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection © Bianca Stock

Fritz Ascher in Hiding: The Inner Emigration of the Artist in Berlin Grunewald and its Consequences

Eckhart J. Gillen
(Translation by Helen Adkins, Berlin)

Among the seven artists within the focus of the *Migration, Identity and Art* project, Fritz Ascher is the only one who did not emigrate. Beginning mid-June 1942, he went into hiding for three years in the Berlin district of Grunewald in the villa of Martha Grassmann, a friend of his mother's.¹ The house was situated close to the Grunewald train station, where the first mass deportation of Berlin Jews started on October 18, 1941, with a transport of 1,013 individuals.² Even if Ascher was spared deportation to a concentration camp and likely death in the gas chamber, the permanent fear of discovery left deep scars on his psyche and shattered his identity as a Jewish artist. This essay explores the consequences of "inner emigration" for Ascher's work and soul. How did he experience the liberation by the Allies, and how did he live through post-fascist West Berlin?

The gravest consequence of the reign of terror in National Socialist Germany for Fritz



Ascher's artistic work was the twelve-year interruption of his practice as a painter and draftsman owing to his persecution and ultimately, his hiding, between 1933 and 1945. As a result, posterity is faced with two entirely heterogeneous visual art complexes. The first creative period of the artist, who was born in Berlin on October 17, 1893, reached from 1909 to 1933; the second began immediately after the end of the war in May 1945 and ended with his death in 1970.

Fig. 1 Fritz Ascher, *Golgotha*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 53.4 x 69 in. (35.5 x 175 cm). Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection © Bianca Stock

This dislocation of an oeuvre into two largely unconnected periods, void of any form of transition, is probably unparalleled in recent art history. The early symbolist-expressionist works with Christian and Jewish themes are followed after the war by vibrant and expressive depictions of trees and flowers as well as portrait studies in ink on paper.

In 1909, the sixteen-year-old Ascher was recommended to the Art Academy Königsberg by Max Liebermann, the influential president of the Berlin Secession and later head of the Prussian Academy of Arts (from 1920). The young man studied in Königsberg until 1912.

In this first phase, his painting was dominated by Symbolism and Expressionism. It was clearly influenced by the painting of Alfred Kubin, Jakob Steinhardt, and Ludwig Meidner. Themes and motifs such as the Crucifixion (*Golgotha*, 1915 [Fig. 1]) or the Golem (*Golem*, 1916 [Fig. 2]), stem from both Christian and Jewish cultures and were clearly created on the fine line between Jewish family traditions and an assimilation to the Christian milieu.



Fig. 2 Fritz Ascher, *Golem*, 1916. Oil on canvas, 71.9 x 55.3 in. (182.5 x 140.5 cm). Jewish Museum Berlin GEM 93 2 0. © Bianca Stock

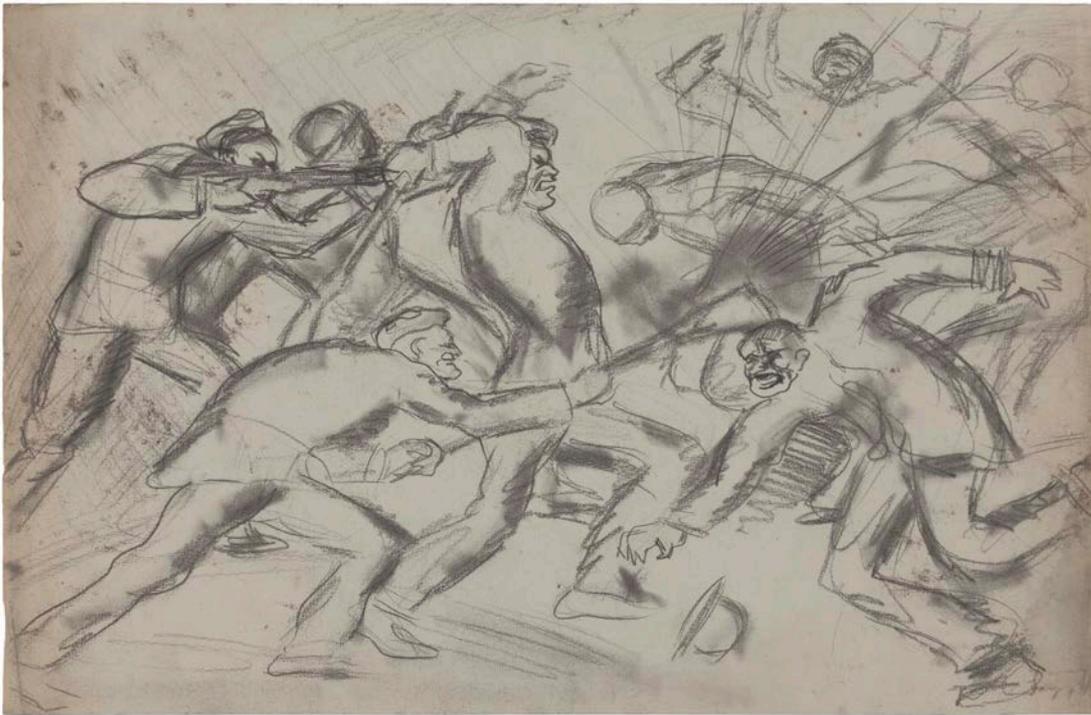


Fig. 3 Fritz Ascher, *Men Fighting*, ca. 1918. Graphite on paper, 12.8 x 20 in. (32,4 x 49.6 cm). Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection © Bianca Stock

At the end of World War I, we see a concentration of wild scenes of violence as in *Men Fighting*, 1918 [Fig. 3], and entangled and writhing figures with their faces contorted in fear (*Figural Scene*, 1918 [Fig. 4] and *Figural Scene*, 1918 [Fig. 5]).

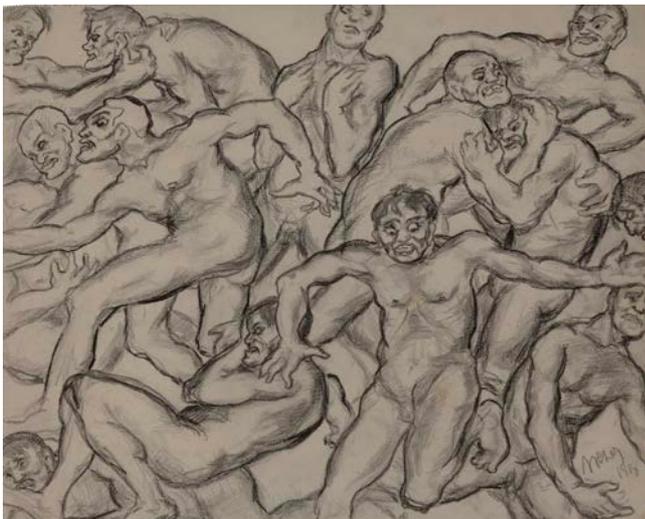


Fig. 4 Fritz Ascher, *Figural Scene (Inferno?)*, 1918. Graphite on paper, 12 x 14.6 in. (30 x 37 cm). Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection © Bianca Stock

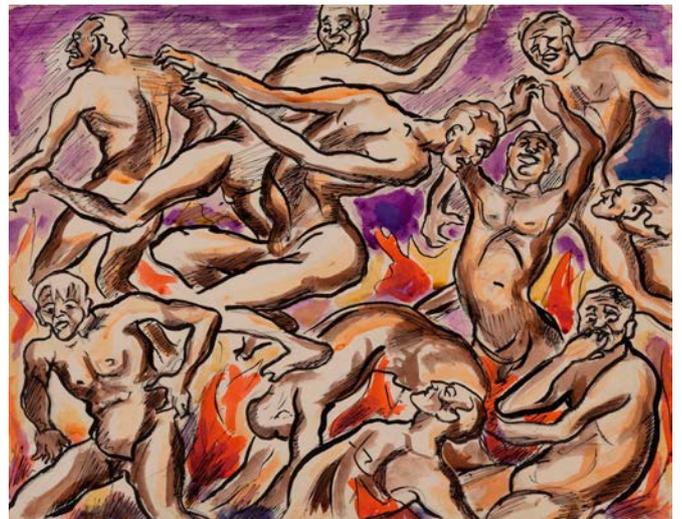
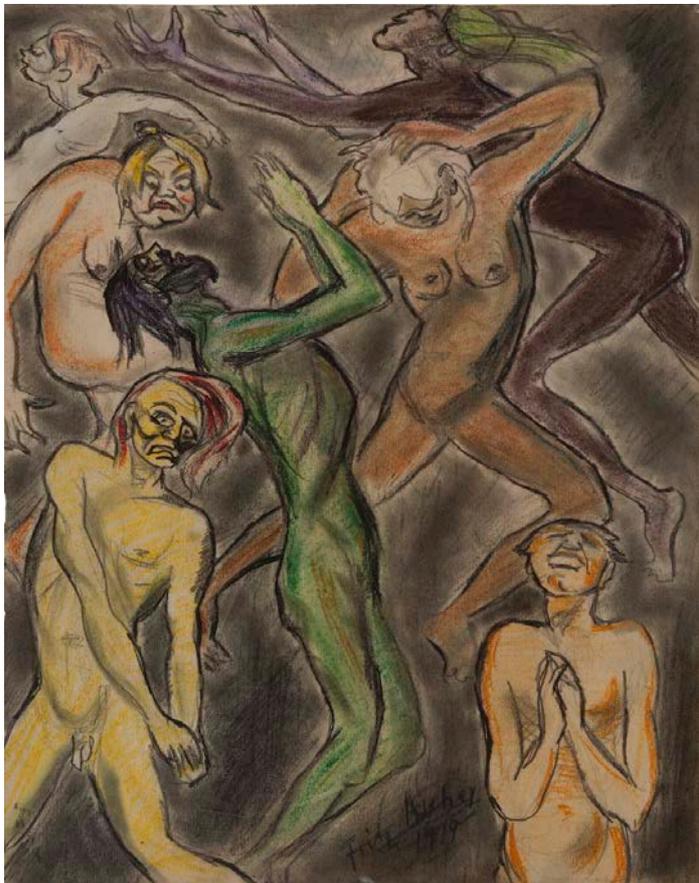


Fig. 5 Fritz Ascher, *Figural Scene (Inferno?)*, 1915. White gouache and black ink over watercolour and graphite on paper, 18.2 x 23 in. (46 x 58.5 cm). Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection © Bianca Stock



Fig. 6 Fritz Ascher, *Man Running*, ca. 1918. Graphite on paper, 9 x 11 in. (23.2 x 28.5 cm). Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection © Bianca Stock



A Man Running (1918) flees for his life with eyes wide open in fear [Fig. 6]. In an oilstick drawing, a *Study for the Tortured (Temptation of St. Anthony)*, 1919 [Fig. 7], the naked saint is surrounded by a group of raving maenads and grotesque male figures.

This is followed by images such as *The Tortured* [Fig. 8] from the 1920s, a depiction of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian in dismal colors. In the paintings of the 1920s, a melancholy *Bajazzo (Clown)* appears repeatedly as if in a basso continuo. He would seem to be an embodiment of the artist's alter ego.

Fig. 7 Fritz Ascher, *Study for the Tortured (Temptation of St. Anthony)*, 1919. Colored oil stick and graphite on paper, 13.8 x 10.8 in. (35 x 27.5 cm). Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection © Bianca Stock



Fig. 8 Fritz Ascher, *The Tortured*, 1920s. Oil on canvas, 59 x 79.4 in. (149 x 200 cm). Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection © Bianca Stock

With the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of the Reich on January 30, 1933, this phase of productivity finds an abrupt end. In his reparations payment file, Ascher comments with caution on this deep cut and subsequent total surrender of painting with caution: "From '33 on, circumstances did not permit me to continue with painting and until '38 I devoted myself to literary work (through poetry)."³

With the nationwide boycott of Jewish department stores, retail businesses, banks, physician's offices, and law firms that was organized by the National Socialists on April 1, 1933, the aggressive anti-Semitic line of attack of the new regime became unmistakably apparent. Owing to a rather reserved public response, the SA troops broke off the measures on the same evening, but from then on, the defamation and pogrom of German Jews relentlessly continued.

In contrast to his two sisters, who were initially protected due to their mixed marriages with "Aryan" husbands, Ascher felt persecuted immediately. He assumed that he had been denounced to the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party) as politically and artistically suspect. He anticipated that his expressionist paintings that encompassed Jewish motifs (*Golem*, 1916) enabled him to be identified as a Jew and adept at modern art, which was ostracized as "degenerate."

In this threatening situation, Fritz Ascher constantly changed his place of residence, living in various Berlin boarding houses at Schlachtensee, on Kurfürstendamm, and finally in Potsdam, and at different addresses in Steinstücken and Babelsberg. This distressing situation forced him to abandon painting and drawing altogether.

Following his mother's death on October 17, 1938, under unclear circumstances, he was arrested in his Babelsberg apartment during the November pogrom also known as *Kristallnacht* and interned in Sachsenhausen concentration camp near Oranienburg. Thanks to the efforts of his friend Gerhard Grassmann, who was a lawyer and the son of Martha Grassmann, he was released on December 23, 1938. A short time later, he was arrested a second time, retained in the Potsdam police prison for six months until May 15, 1939, and subsequently placed under police supervision. He had to report to the Schmargendorf police station three times a week and once a month to the police headquarters at Alexanderplatz. An attempted emigration to Shanghai—his reservation for a sea passage had already been confirmed in July 1939 by the Atlantic Express GmbH travel agency—was thwarted by the Gestapo and the tax office [Figs. 9, 10].⁴ After a stay in the Jewish Bavaria Clinic due to appendicitis and myocardial weakness, he was tipped off by Heinrich Wolber, a Polizeiwachtmeister (chief police constable), that he was to be imminently deported. Thereupon, on June 15, 1942, Fritz Ascher went into hiding in the house of Martha Grassmann at 26 Lassenstrasse in the heart of the Grunewald villa colony. According to a statement by Mrs. Grassmann, he lodged there “in a small space in my cellar” and “during air raids, he was locked into the caretaker’s potato cellar.”⁵ In the last days of the war, on April 15, an air raid destroyed most of his paintings from the time before 1933, which he had left hidden with friends.⁶

The NSDAP had already confiscated his parents’ villa in 1941, and in 1942 the “Reichsführer-SS” (Reich Leader Protection Squadron) became the new owner. Instead of being paid his share from the sale of the villa, he found his assets officially seized in March 1943.

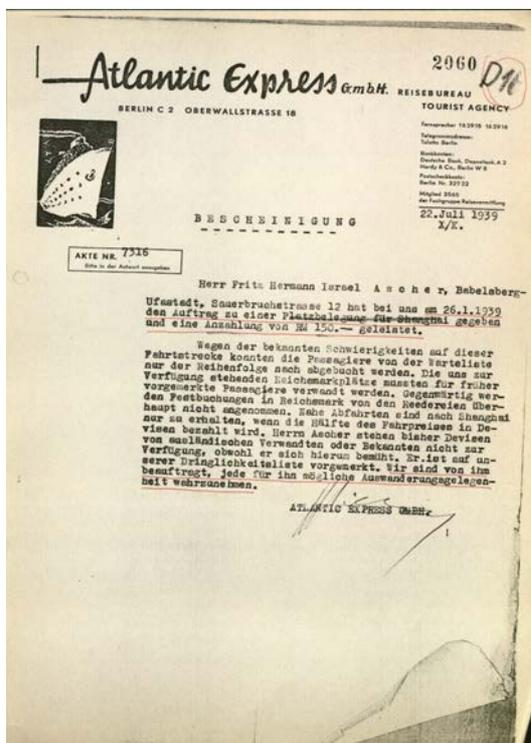


Fig. 9 Fritz Ascher's reservation for a boat ticket to Shanghai, July 22, 1939. LABO Berlin (Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten, Abt. I – Entschädigungsbehörde), File no. 002 060, D16

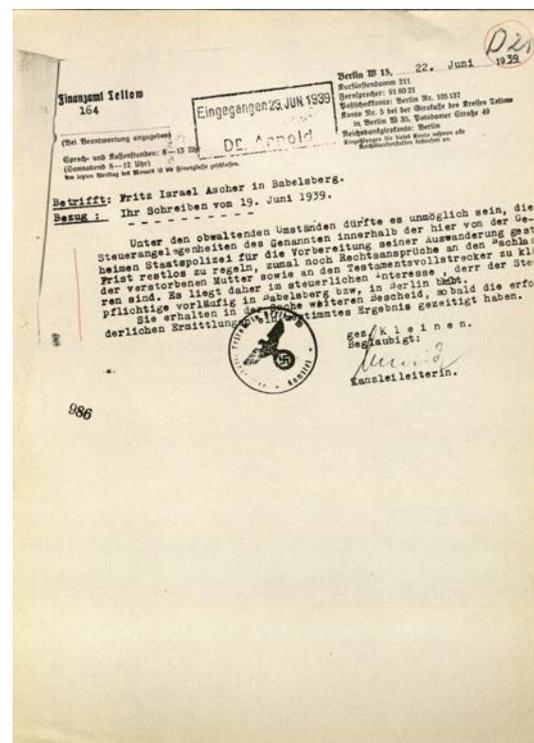


Fig. 10 Letter from tax office to Fritz Ascher refusing him to leave the country, June 22, 1939. LABO Berlin (Landesamt für Bürger- und Ordnungsangelegenheiten, Abt. I – Entschädigungsbehörde), File no. 002 060, D21

Ascher's hideout was right in the lion's den. All around Martha Grassmann's house, Nazi big shots had occupied the "Aryanized" villas of expelled Jewish publishers, department store owners, and entrepreneurs. Indeed, Heinrich Himmler resided at 22 Hagenstrasse; the leader of the Deutsche Arbeitsfront (German Labor Front), Robert Ley, moved into the property at 29 Bismarckallee; and Field Marshal Erwin von Witzleben lived in the immediate vicinity at 19/21 Lassenstrasse. Numerous Nazi institutions, such as the Race and Settlement Office, the NSDAP, a Gestapo office, and the Reichsgästevilla (Reich's guest villa) took up locations in the villa colony. It therefore borders on a miracle that Fritz Ascher—irrevocably trapped in his hideout and condemned to immobility and isolation in the eye of the storm that was leading to the collapse of Europe—was able to survive at all, and could then, immediately after the liberation by the Allies, rise again as a painter and graphic artist with his elemental late work, like a phoenix from the ashes.

In the weeks following the *Verordnung über die äußere Kennzeichnung der Rassejuden* (Police Decree on Identification of Jews) by means of the *yellow star*, on September 30, 1941, the last Jewish emigrants left Berlin and fled via Lisbon to South America.⁷ At that time, Jews were banned from all parks and open areas, and from April 1942, they were barred from using any vehicular means of transportation.⁸ Besides the so-called *arisch versippte Juden* (Jews married to Aryans), of which 5,000 managed to survive, a further 5,000 Jews went into hiding in Berlin like Fritz Ascher did. They were so persistently hunted down that at the end of the war, only about 1,400 emerged from their hideouts.⁹

Fritz Ascher was persecuted from 1933 onward, first of all because of his Jewish origins and political stance. We do not know to what extent his expressionist painting style played a role in this. The files fail to reveal why he was denied membership in the *Reichskammer der bildenden Künste* (Reich Chamber of Fine Arts, located from 1934 onward near Lützowplatz, Blumeshof 5/6), which was equivalent to a total professional ban and exclusion from exhibitions. We do not know whether at that time he was already in contact with Karl Buchholz, who from 1934 to 1941 dealt in ostracized art, primarily Expressionism, in his gallery at Leipziger Strasse 119/120. Buchholz was one of the gallery owners to be commissioned by the Nazi authorities to sell confiscated "degenerate" art abroad in exchange for foreign currency. In 1936 Buchholz had to dismiss his Jewish business partner, Curt Valentin, who then opened a branch of the gallery in New York in March 1937 under the name of Buchholz Gallery/Curt Valentin.¹⁰ When his gallery on Leipziger Strasse was bombed out in November 1943, Karl Buchholz moved his mail-order bookstore and gallery to makeshift quarters in the Grunewald villa colony. It is there that in 1946 he showed thirty paintings and gouaches by Fritz Ascher in the artist's first exhibition after the war.

Until around 1934, Expressionism was still more or less tolerated by the Nazi authorities. With the support of Goebbels, the painter and deputy district leader of the Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (National Socialist German Students' League) (NSDStB), Otto Andreas Schreiber, opposed a ban on Expressionism and organized the exhibition *Dreissig deutsche Künstler* (*Thirty German Artists*) in the Ferdinand Möller Gallery in Berlin,¹¹ which opened on July 22, 1933. The defense of Expressionism as an appropriate style for the Third Reich was based on a clear commitment to the racial and violent anti-Semitic policies of the Nazi regime.

Already during World War I, the art critic Karl Scheffler wrote in his book *Der Geist der Gotik* (*The Spirit of the Gothic*) in 1917: "If one goes through the history of German art in the last hundred and fifty years, it becomes apparent that the Greek ideal of perfection has

indeed sustainably promoted a third- and fourth-hand art . . . ; at the same time, however, it has threatened genuine creative forces. . . . The style of a people is the imprint of its will, its particular characteristics . . . and must therefore be accepted as fate. . . . The Greek individual creates the forms of serenity and fortune, the Gothic individual the forms of unrest and suffering. . . . This style . . . is an act of time and race."¹²

It is against this background that the disconcerting statements by the German Expressionists confirming their support of the First World War and their weakness for the national revolution of the National Socialist movement must be understood. Thus, on the one hand, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was a pacifist, an anti-Wilhelminian bohemian artist, who, on the other hand, saw himself as a “reviver of German art,” a “new Dürer,” and hoped for the NSDAP’s rise to power. His correspondence and writings repeatedly comprise statements of the kind found in a letter of 1930 addressed to the young couple Elfriede Dümmler and Hansgeorg Knoblauch: “I now always read the *Völkischer Beobachter* (People’s Observer) and recently, a very interesting article about modernism. There, I find my opinion spelled out word for word, namely that art comes from race but is of international impact. Oh, has it finally dawned on Germany that the museums are totally infiltrated by Jews? That it is undignified to always put foreigners up first in exhibitions? Should the struggle that we are waging for the recognition of art nurtured on German soil finally lead to victory and be implemented by the National Socialists? But will they be able to understand my work? That would be wonderful, and the swastika, the magical emblem for progress and eternal aspiration, has long become ours.”¹³

Many museum directors, art historians, and publicists who were not necessarily National Socialists also made the case for Expressionism as a unique, national German art form, which, born out of the inferno of World War I, was legitimized to express the spirit of the “newly awakened” Third Reich more authentically than the garden arbor painting of *völkisch* art. Reference was often made to the frontline experience of painters such as Franz Marc, who had fallen for Germany during the war and were national heroes. As late as 1936, there was still talk of the “barely justifiable prejudice” with which forms of Expressionism as a whole were “dismissed as un-German, Jewish-intellectual machinations.”¹⁴

Thus, the absurd attempt was made to distinguish between German and “Jewish-intellectual” Expressionism. Werner Haftmann, responsible for the first three editions of *documenta* in Kassel, beginning in 1955, and later director of West Berlin’s National Gallery, also adopts this stance when he writes in his best-selling book *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, first published in 1954, that Nazi ideologues had declared modern art to be “a Jewish invention designed to corrode the ‘Nordic spirit’ . . . although there was not a single Jew among modern German painters.”¹⁵ It does not occur to him that many important German modern painters were Jews, a fact that he neither considered in his book nor did he honor them by showing their works at the *documenta*: no Otto Freundlich, whose sculpture *Der neue Mensch* (*The New Man*) was on the cover of the *Degenerate Art* exhibition catalog and who was murdered on March 9, 1943, in the Lublin Majdanek extermination camp; no Max Liebermann; no Ludwig Meidner; no Felix Nussbaum, who had been awarded the Rome Prize at the German Academy Villa Massimo together with Arno Breker in 1932/33 and who was murdered in Auschwitz on August 9, 1944; no Gert Wollheim; no Friedel Dzubas, who had to flee Berlin in 1939 and exhibited with the Abstract Expressionists in New York—and no Fritz Ascher.¹⁶

At the same time, however, the invocation of a connection between artistic disintegration of form in Expressionism and the social crisis that led to the “Degenerate Art Action” in 1937 was not something only invented by Nazi ideologues, but was also very popular in many non-National Socialist circles. After the Great Depression that began in the late 1920s, nineteenth-century Classicism, Romanticism, and Realism were increasingly revered as the steady anchors of a preindustrial era. Frank Matzke acknowledged in 1930: “From all sides nineteenth-century Realism is once again coursing through our veins.”¹⁷ Young authors were called upon to restore “clarity and purity, integrity and simplicity to the chaos of the present world.”¹⁸ Overcoming inner and outer chaos was a central task for this generation as it attempted to find its bearings. In 1930, Bernhard Diebold wrote that the forms of classicism, as “counter-style to the Romanticism of yesteryear, which for our time was called ‘Expressionism’,”¹⁹ were on standby to reach a new synthesis of revolutionary expressiveness and measured form.

This generation, born between 1892 and 1912, to which Fritz Ascher belonged but from which he had been excluded as a consequence of the racial policies of the Nazi regime, increasingly withdrew into a cocoon of *inner emigration*. These artists found a voice between 1933 and 1935 in the journal *Kunst der Nation* (Art of the Nation), where Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, Edgar Ende, Karl Hofer, Emil Nolde, and others were still reviewed until 1934. The aforementioned Werner Haftmann, twenty-two years old at the time, wrote in 1934 that an antithesis between “clear form and expressive form” had always been characteristic of German art.²⁰

In this so-called inner emigration, many painters, like Karl Hofer, had “lost all feeling of cohesion with this world.”²¹ Their last refuge in those years was faith in an introspective detachment from the world as a shelter from the impositions of evil. *Inwardness* and *inner emigration* became a position of retreat for German artists and intellectuals, marked by self-deception, partial blindness, and seclusion from the reality of rising Nazi terror.

A psychogram of this widespread mentality of inner emigration is sketched in Christoph Meckel’s book *Image for Investigation: About My Father*: “While the SA marched, the Reichstag burned, and he himself witnessed deportations (a commando also came to him for interrogation and searched his books), he continued to write stories and poems in which time did not make itself felt. He was not alone in his attitude. . . . One encased oneself in nature poems, withdrew into seasons, into everything eternal, everlasting, timeless, into the beauty of nature and art, into the notion of solace and the belief in the irrelevance of circumstantial miseries.”²²

In his segregation, Fritz Ascher, a Protestant-baptized Jew from an upper middle class, educated, and wealthy Berlin family, presumably also drew on his education and the values of literature, theater, music, and nature:

The Image
(Before my own creation)
So I crouch
in heavy silence;
enchanted = bewildered =
before my very self. . . .
and listen to
“a distant I.”²³

Abruptly deprived of books, conversations and of his artistic practice, he was entirely thrown back on himself and his horizon of knowledge:

I look around me—
I contemplate my Being.
It is stamped with the ordering of life—
out of an eternal arising decree
into a binding = human weave.²⁴

In his poems he reflects on the “creative impulse” of his unpainted pictures:

Just as I am a soul—
as it perceives the tone
experienced, it blooms—
an image forms.²⁵

Ascher’s forced seclusion from the outside world in his hideaway was not an isolated instance in the 1930s. Particularly the emphasis on nature in his poems, presumably written between 1942 and 1945, is typical of those years.²⁶ In a letter of 1940 to the wholesaler Friedrich Wilhelm Oelze in Bremen, Gottfried Benn writes: “Doesn’t this current time have its own beauty, a Franciscan beauty that will lead you quite by itself to the butterflies and the meadows? Our eyes can no longer rest on the remainder of the world. . . . But the rose gardens that you have outside your window nurse the dream.”²⁷

“In Nature” Ascher versifies, the

Skies turn blue—
Vibrant, expanded. . . .
Alluring expanse
Crickets chirp,
Butterflies and bees
zip within.²⁸

Dancing gnats and
Beetles that buzz,
Butterflies flit
Mystery and light.²⁹

“In Nature” the world is still intact, time stands still.

Silent woods on the horizon.
Specters dancing round above.
Dream, by the heavens chosen.³⁰

“In Nature” there’s a “song of joy, brightly sounding,” but there is also a sea of darkness.

The silence that afflicts you.
A forsakenness of profound power,
internalized, scratching at the soul . . .³¹

The “Nights that darken” are perceived by the soul

as the abyss
of the utmost black then.³²

Max Beckmann gives shape to this sense of time in 1934 with his bronze figure *Mann im Dunkeln* (*Man in the Dark*). The piece shows the fifty-year-old artist in the dark, his head

averted from an imaginary danger that he is endeavoring to ward off with oversized hands. Once the Nazi takeover of 1933 had stripped the artist of any safe ground of existence, and an inward gaze, intuition, and the senses of touch and hearing supplant his conscious perception of the outside world. In a 1938 speech in London, delivered by Beckmann in German, the artist avowed to “never having been politically active . . . in any way. . . . Thus I have passed blindly many things that belong to real and political life.” For Beckmann, and presumably for Fritz Ascher, “the spiritual world and that of political reality” had “strictly separate functions in the manifestations of life, which probably sometimes converge, but are in principle fundamentally unrelated.”³³

One year after Beckmann’s poignant artistic self-exploration along the road to an uncertain future, Wolfgang Koeppen describes in his novel *Die Mauer schwankt* (*The Tottering Wall*) this same feeling of helplessness and disorientation at the incursion of an incomprehensible and stifling violence: “Did we know anything? We knew nothing. Every step was a step into darkness. We could come down at any moment.”³⁴ And Hans Paeschke admits: “We didn’t know what would happen. We were living in darkness.”³⁵

Alongside the darkness of night stands the
Winter motif
Closed is the soul’s land,
In the iron of its rigid shell,
Glazed there lies the will to live,
Down, far away and unrecognized.³⁶

Here Fritz Ascher formulates yet another striking image for the feeling of torpor, of waiting for the reawakening of social life.

In 1939, Hannah Höch, also ostracized as an artist and the grande dame of Berlin Dada, retreated with her entire archive to an airfield keeper’s cottage in Heiligensee, on the outskirts of Berlin, to safely hibernate from her fellow compatriots until the totalitarian ice age came to an end. She gradually let the little house disappear behind a garden “of tropical abundance” that shielded her from the hostile outside world and in addition supplied her with food. In her own words, an ideal “place to be forgotten.”³⁷

We have no idea of how Fritz Ascher reacted to his liberation from the oppressive and humiliating confinement of his hideaway after May 8, 1945. He never said anything about it. We can only guess or refer to reports by other artists and writers who, in retrospect, have commented on the moment of their own liberation—for example, Carl Laszlo: “Imagine that you, as you may say, survive! You come into a world where you are a stranger; into the world of the survivors who rule the earth. Do you then want to live with them? . . . You will silently walk among them . . . but your mouth will hurt, and one day you will begin to speak, and no one will understand what you are trying to get at. Everything you will say, they will misunderstand . . . and this uncomfortable stuff that doesn’t fit into their picture will get on their nerves. They will think you are dangerous or sick. . . . All and everything will abandon you, only your memories will stay . . . and you will get more and more entangled in what you say . . . You will try to embrace them, and they will think you want to hit them. And they will fight back.”³⁸

Fritz Ascher, suspecting the ignorance and total misunderstanding of his contemporaries, retreated into silence and avoided contacts with the outside world. But he



immediately began to paint and draw again, and his pictures are an indication of what moved him then and in the post-war period until his death in 1970.

At first, he built upon his painting from before the forced interruption of his practice by reworking or adding to existing pictures. It is significantly his alter ego, the *Bajazzo (Clown)* of 1924 [Fig. 11], that, early on, he overpaints, or rather, completes.

Fig. 11 Fritz Ascher, *Bajazzo*, 1924/1945. Oil on canvas, 47.6 x 39 in. (121 x 99 cm). Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection. © Bianca Stock

In this title character from Ruggero Leoncavallo's *veristic* opera, who stands here dramatically lit on an imaginary stage and surrounded by flickering lights reminiscent of the *Forest* painting from the 1920s,³⁹ we can assume the self-image of a sad clown stoically dissimulating his social shyness behind a mask.

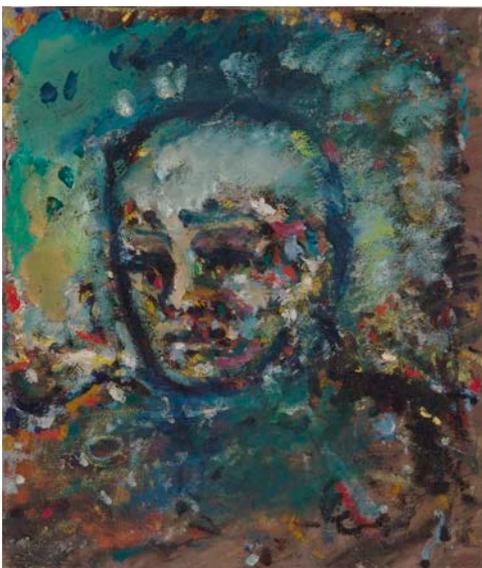


Fig. 12 Fritz Ascher, *Male Portrait*, 1920s/1945. Oil on canvas, 23.4 x 20.1 in. (59.5 x 51 cm). Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection. © Bianca Stock



Fig. 13 Fritz Ascher, *Bajazzo*, 1963. Black ink on paper, 24 x 17 in. (61 x 43 cm). Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection © Bianca Stock

Male Portrait, also originally from the 1920s and reworked in 1945 [Fig. 12], once more shows the sad clown with shadowed eyes and shrouded in Bengal light. A further *Bajazzo* drawing in black ink is dated 1963 [Fig. 13].

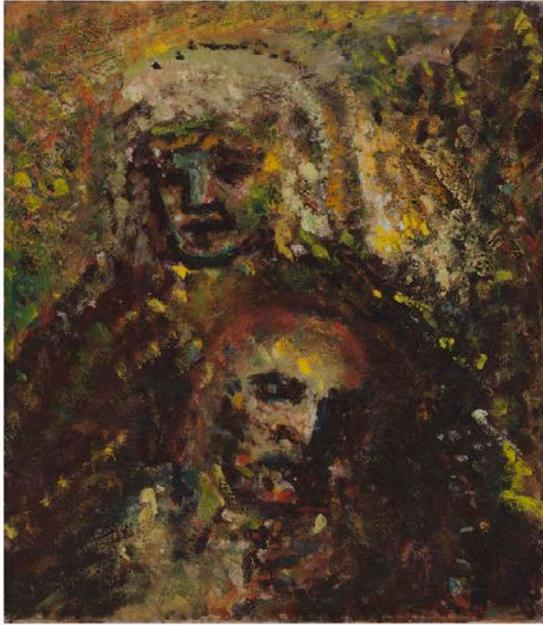


Fig. 14 Fritz Ascher, *Pietà (Mother and son/Wife and Husband)*, ca. 1916/1945. Oil on canvas, 31.5 x 27.2 in. (80 x 69 cm).
Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection © Bianca Stock



Fig. 15 Fritz Ascher, *Couple*, ca. 1945. Oil on canvas, 27.6 x 25.6 in. (70 x 65 cm).
Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection © Bianca Stock

Other heads among many unnamed portraits include a *Pietà*, ca. 1916/1945 [Fig. 14], *Couple*, ca. 1945, [Fig. 15], *John the Baptist*, 1945 [Fig. 16], and *Pained (Leidender)* [Fig. 17]. All are depicted with closed eyes as dreamers or melancholy characters, lost in themselves. Furthermore, a series of head studies in ink on paper has only recently been discovered.

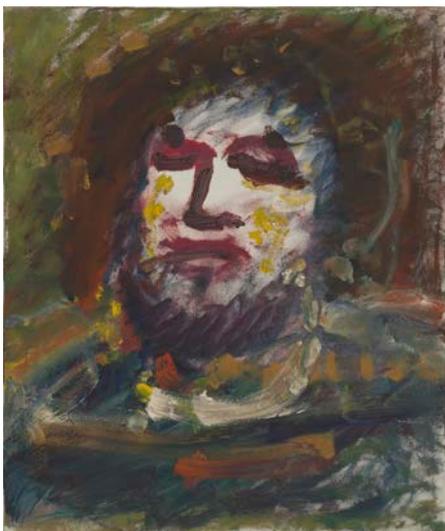


Fig. 16 Fritz Ascher, *John the Baptist*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 23.8 x 19.9 in. (60.5 x 50.5 cm).
Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection © Bianca Stock



Fig. 17 *Pained (Leidender)*, 1958. White gouache over black ink and watercolor on paper, 13.8 x 12 in. (35 x 30.5 cm).
Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection. © Bianca Stock

Ascher gives up all of his pre-1933 motifs from the pictorial world of the German Empire and the Weimar Republic with typically socio-critical imagery and mythological and allegorical characters of Christian or Jewish derivation. He also completely ignores the art that is produced in the circles around him: West Berlin's fantasist art, the abstract and informal scene, and the realists near and dear to East Berlin.

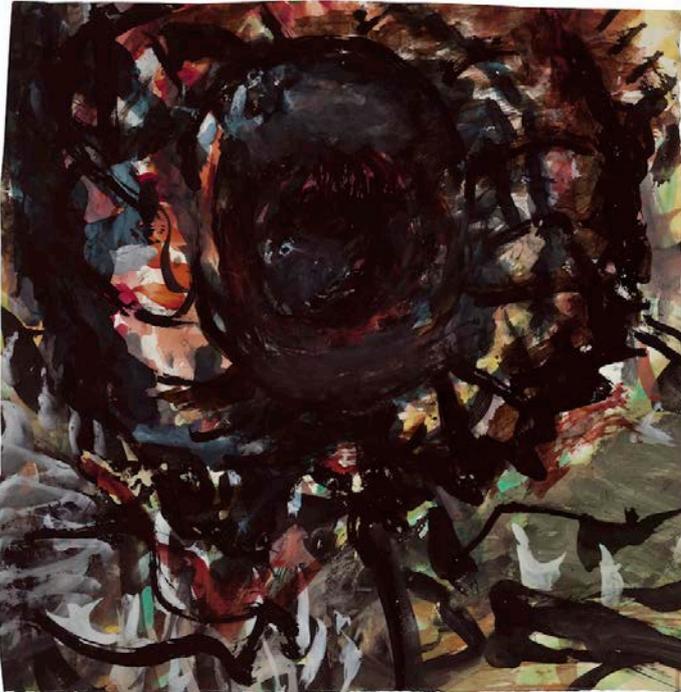
Instead, he addresses an absolutely outmoded genre, emulating the hymns and songs of his nature-praising poems from the period of inner emigration in dozens and dozens of intense and color-intoxicated paintings and gouaches. He turns to nature painting in the broadest sense: landscapes, forest scenes, portraits of trees, groups of trees, all inspired by hours of walking in the nearby Grunewald forest.

The *Blossoming Trees* from the 1950s [Fig. 18] lead on to the second important group of nature paintings, the flower still lifes, floral arrangements, portraits of single flowers such as the front view of a sunflower set in the landscape like a glowing solar fireball surrounded by its corona.



Fig. 18 Fritz Ascher, *Blossoming Trees*, 1950s. Oil on canvas, 39.4 x 37.4 in. (100 x 95 cm).
Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection © Bianca Stock

Ascher now mainly paints opulent bouquets in bulbous vases and glowing sunsets that are reminiscent of the paintings and watercolors of Vincent van Gogh, Emil Nolde, and Georges Rouault, all painters who were at the height of their creativity prior to the outbreak of war. Ascher's nature paintings, in contrast, look new and are full of power and energy. Particularly striking among his floral pieces are the numerous depictions of sunflowers, which can be seen as an expression of fertility and optimism toward life.



Among these paintings, however, we also see a format-filling *Sunflower*, ca. 1958 [Fig. 19], which looks dark and gloomy like an extinguished star. Some of the forest paintings also show the forbidding side of nature that withholds its secrets from humankind.

Fig. 19 Fritz Ascher, *Sunflower*, ca. 1958.
White gouache and black ink over watercolor on paper, 13.6 x 13.6 in. (34.5 x 34.5 cm)
Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection
© Bianca Stock

A painting from the late 1950s titled *Trees* [Fig. 20] shows a grid structure of black tree trunks and branches with hopeful streaks of yellow light shining through them. In another eponymous painting dated 1949, the massive tree trunks stand so close that only a glimmer of yellow light shines auspiciously from within the grove.

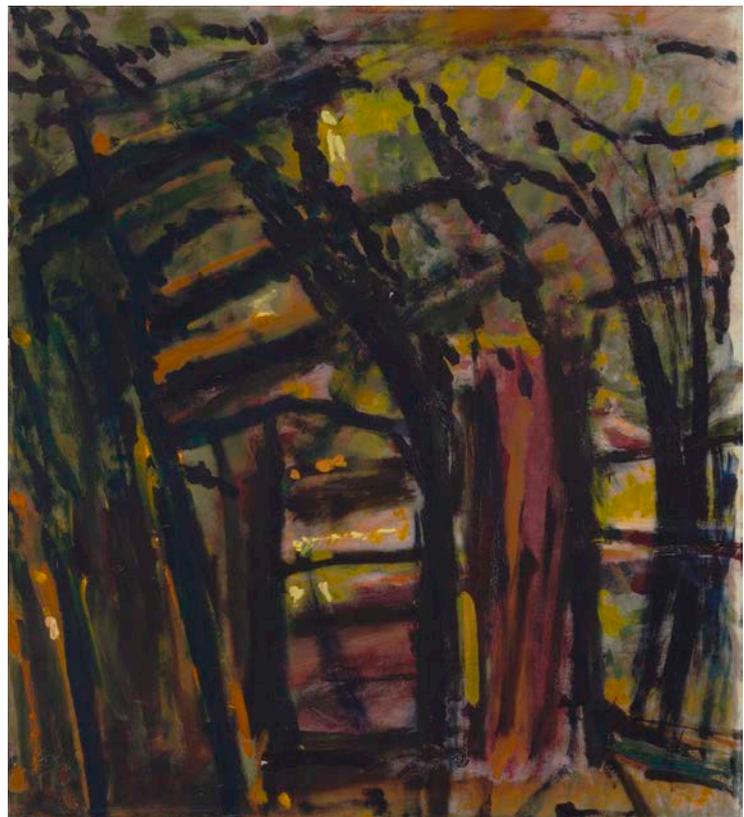


Fig. 20 Fritz Ascher, *Trees*, late 1950s.
Oil on canvas, 31.5 x 27.6 in. (80 x 70 cm).
Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection
© Bianca Stock

Also, in the last of his dated paintings of 1968, *Trees in Hilly Landscape* [Fig. 21], the trunks form a barrier, the center of which opens up toward a hill beneath a blue-and-white sky.⁴⁰

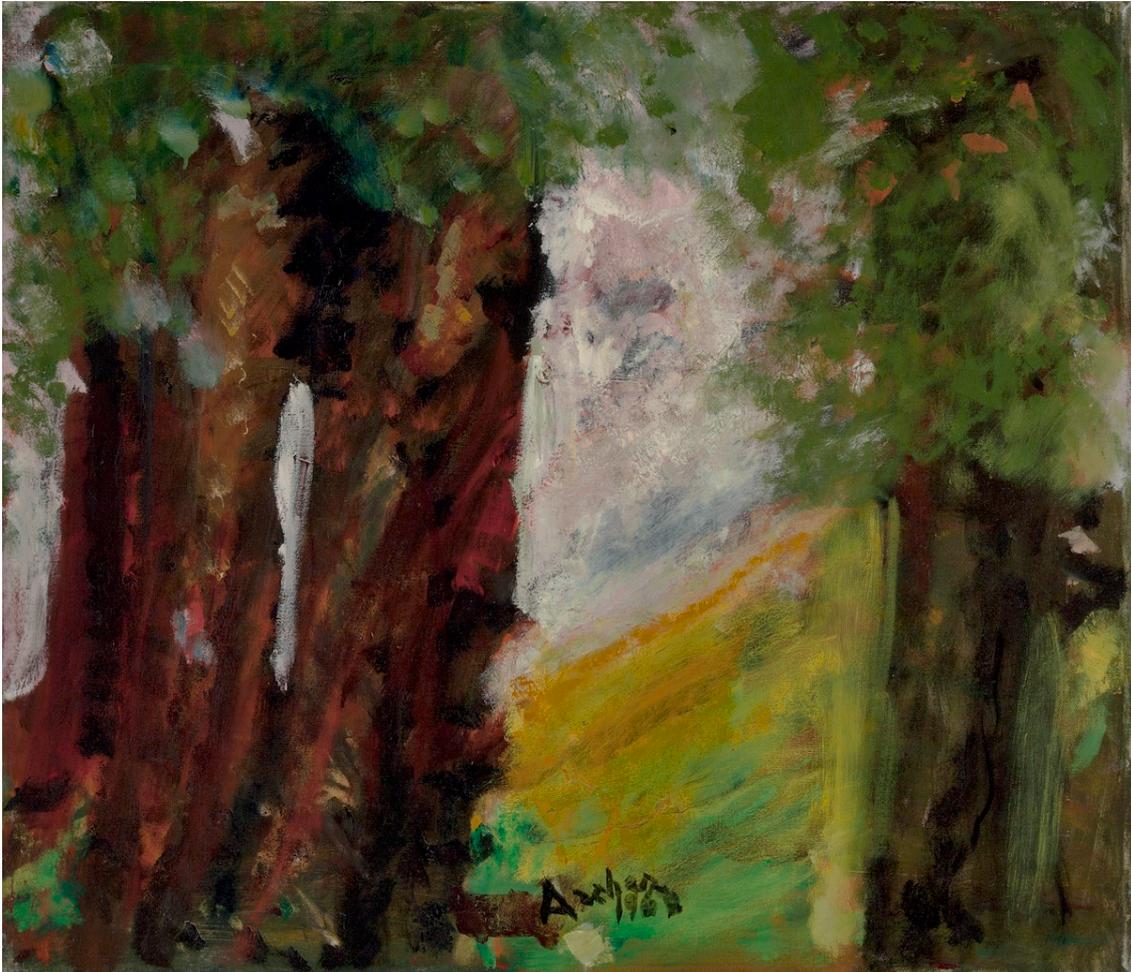


Fig. 21 Fritz Ascher, *Trees in Hilly Landscape*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 27.6 x 31.5 in. (70 x 80 cm).
Photo Malcolm Varon. Private collection © Bianca Stock

With these paintings, Ascher obviously resumes the intensive contact with nature already observed in his poems. Otherwise, he declines any kind of contact with former artist colleagues or with the new municipal art organizations and galleries. Indeed, he fundamentally shuns any exchange with the Berlin art scene, which is slowly but surely striding toward its division.

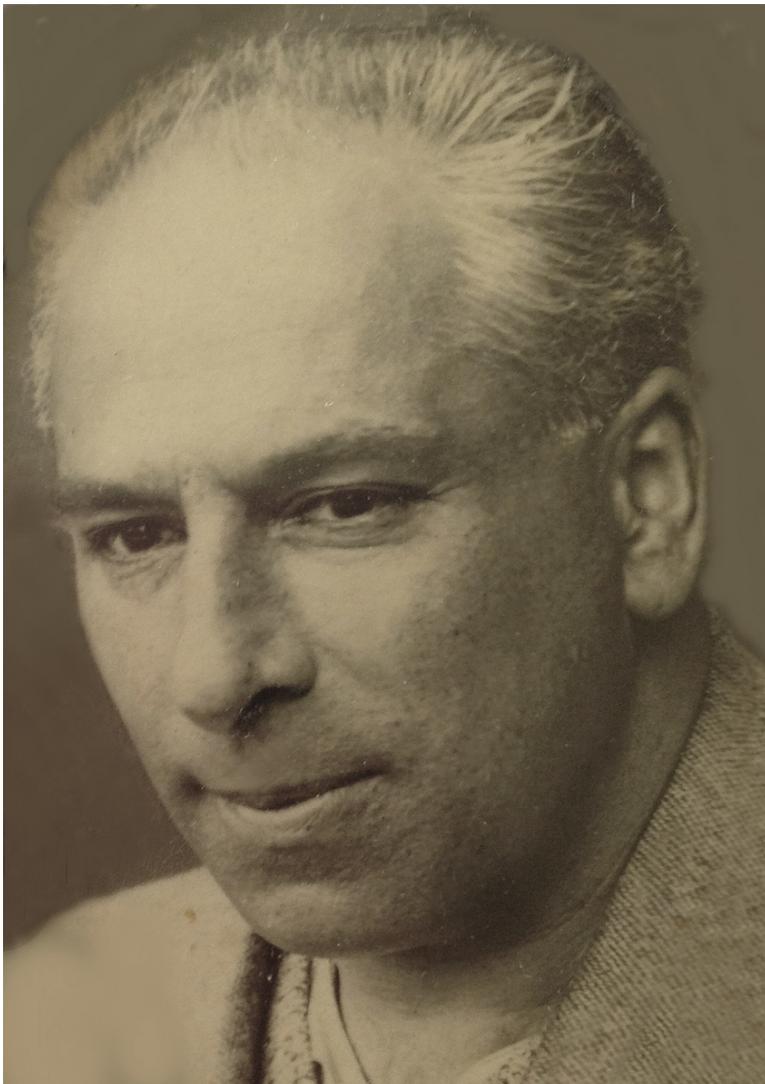
Did Ascher anticipate how hostile and uncomprehending—especially young people in Berlin and in post-war Germany, but also the population as a whole—would be in reacting to the re-exhibition of modernist artists and to the few returning emigrants after twelve years of Nazi rule?

In her journal, Hannah Höch records her dismay at a discussion that took place on February 11, 1946, within the context of the newly opened *Fantastenausstellung* (*Fantasia Exhibition*) at the Rosen Gallery on Kurfürstendamm: “Strong opposition from the youth to contemporary art, i.e., to everything that had not been recognized as art by the Nazis. To

transform these narrow-minded, intractable, and brutish young people incapable of free thought, into *human beings*—is probably the most difficult task of all in this German wasteland.”⁴¹

Berlin also feels alien to the communist writer Anna Seghers on her arrival from Mexican exile to Tegel on April 22, 1947, with a French military train. As with Hannah Höch, she is shaken by the magnitude of the mental devastation in the minds of Germans, “who are as shattered on the inside as their cities are on the outside.”⁴² After twelve years of exile and now back in her homeland and in the midst of fellow countrymen, she feels terribly lonely for the first time and, as she writes in a letter, has “no desire to meet anyone.”⁴³ To her friend Georg Lukács in Budapest, she confesses that she has “the feeling to have entered the Ice Age, everything seems so cold.”⁴⁴

Karl Hofer, director of the newly opened Hochschule für Bildende Künste (Academy of Fine Arts) in Berlin-



Charlottenburg from July 1, 1945, also forebodingly sums up the situation in the four-sector city in a letter of February 23, 1946, to the sculptor Gerhard Marcks: “Things here are getting worse and increasingly inflexible. Art should and must be, needs to be once more for the people, close to the people, the whole Nazi trash again, just flavored differently.”⁴⁵

This was the situation of art in politics in which Fritz Ascher began to paint and draw again after an involuntary break of twelve years. All the accounts from his entourage confirm that he avoided people. He even turned down a teaching position at the Art Academy offered to him by Karl Hofer. The only surviving photograph of him from the early 1950s shows him as a reserved and acutely sensitive person [Fig. 22].

Fig. 22 Fritz Ascher, Photograph 1950. Bianca Stock collection ©Bianca Stock

After the aforementioned first major solo exhibition of May 1946 at the Buchholz Gallery, which in 1943 had moved to temporary rooms at Reinerzstrasse 40/41 in the Grunewald villa colony, not far from Ascher's new living quarters at 26 Bismarckallee, he refused to have any solo show or to participate in any group exhibition for the next twenty-five years.

Only the legendary Berlin gallery owner Rudolf Springer succeeded in gaining Ascher's consent for a large solo exhibition in the newly opened venue at 13 Fasanenstrasse in 1969, one year before the artist's death. Springer had started up his gallery on December 8, 1948, in his parents' villa, Schillerstraße 10, in Zehlendorf, with an exhibition of works by the sculptor Hans Uhlmann. His was not just any gallery, but significantly West Berlin's most important art venue after 1945 and into the 1980s. According to Wieland Schmied in 1989, the gallery "objectively reflects like no other in Berlin a piece of Berlin, German, and European postwar art history, from Uhlmann to Baselitz, Masson to Calder, Baumeister to Lüpertz, Altenbourg to Penck, Wols to Rainer, Dorazio to Tapies."⁴⁶

Springer had courted the reclusive painter for many years, in attempts to persuade him to exhibit. As with so many other artists (Gerhard Altenbourg, for example), he was quick to recognize Ascher's importance. Springer, himself a keen walker, frequently spotted Ascher "walking alone through the Grunewald" and noticed that he would be talking to himself.⁴⁷

Manifestly, following his long solitude and complete isolation, Ascher was not only shy of people, but did not want to exhibit because he had no desire to sell his paintings or even separate from them. When, in 1945, he finally began to paint and draw again, his works became indispensable companions and conversation partners—shields protecting him from an alien world.

Fritz Ascher's conspicuous retreat to the theme of nature, to the trees and flowers of his walks in the Grunewald, to the expressionist style no longer considered topical after 1945, in combination with his demonstrative aversion toward the city, society, people, their plots and political intrigues, is a fundamental outcry of someone stripped of his trust in humanity and struggling with trust in himself. His late work and his attitude confront us viewers and interpreters with many questions. His painting becomes a guarantee of his own existence, the finished pictures are partners, allies, figures of protection against a threatening, alien environment, a substitute even for the mental and physical destruction of his hometown of Berlin.

The strictly imposed self-restraints in Ascher's approach to painting and its subject matter are clues to an interesting psycho-aesthetic mechanism. Derived from "centralization," a term used in emergency medicine that refers to the reduction of blood flow induced by the autonomic nervous system to organs that are essential for survival (brain, heart, and lungs),⁴⁸ "psychic centralization"⁴⁹ in psychology is a concept in which certain emotional hardenings occur to protect the individual from being recurrently overwhelmed by past painful experiences. Neurologists speak of "post-traumatic stress disorders" which flood the affected person with sudden surges of memories and deprives him or her of sleep.⁵⁰

In the likely unconscious knowledge of his traumatization, Ascher developed a kind of "aesthetic centralization" in his painting, where a radical reduction of his means and themes

protected him from the strain of dealing with everyday life and the art public in an environment in which he felt alienated.

Fritz Ascher, who, in a hideaway in the Grunewald, was one of about 1,400 survivors out of more than 55,000 Berlin Jews who were deported and most of whom were murdered, bears the additional burden of a sense of guilt for having by chance survived when so many did not. Theodor W. Adorno has described this traumatic life event in his *Negative Dialektik*, as “The guilt of life . . . according to a statistic, which complements an overwhelming number of murdered with a minimal number of rescued, as if this were foreshadowed in the calculation of probability and is no longer to be reconciled with life. That guilt reproduces itself unceasingly, because it cannot be completely present to the consciousness at any moment. This, nothing else, compels one to philosophy.”⁵¹ Or to art, one would have to add.

1. For all biographical details I refer to Rachel Stern’s comprehensive archival research on Fritz Ascher in Berlin, Potsdam, and elsewhere. See also her essay “Fritz Ascher: A Life in Art and Poetry.” For this text, I further develop the argumentation pursued in my essay “Painting as Confirmation of One’s Own Existence: Fritz Ascher’s Post-Shoah Paintings Compared with Frank Auerbach’s Autobiographic Images.” Both contributions are published in Rachel Stern, ed., *The Expressionist Fritz Ascher: To Live is to Blaze with Passion*, (Cologne: Wienand, 2016).

2. The *Mahnmal Gleis 17 [Track 17 Memorial]*, inaugurated on January 27, 1997, at Grunewald train station, is composed of 186 cast iron tiles embedded in the track ballast, inscribed with the deportation dates and destinations of about 10,000 Jews who left on transports from this station between fall 1941 and spring 1942. In all, 55,000 Berlin Jews were deported and murdered between September 1941 and June 1943. Between 1933 and 1945, 90,000 Berlin Jews were able to flee abroad, very few of whom ever made it back to Berlin.

3. EA 2060: E11, E12, and B23, Entschädigungsakte (Reparations payment file) at the State Office for Public Order Affairs, Dept. I, Reparations Authority Berlin Reg, no. 2060. As early as January 21, 1931, Lion Feuchtwanger wrote in the *Welt am Abend* (Evening World): “What artists and intellectuals can expect when the Third Reich becomes plainly visible is clear: Extermination. And that is what most are to expect. Anyone of an intellectual mind who has the chance to do so should get ready to emigrate. Circulating among Berlin’s intellectuals, one gets the impression that Berlin is a city of nothing but future emigrants.”

4. In June 1939 the tax office explained: “Under the present circumstances, it is unlikely that it will be possible to completely settle the tax affairs of the aforementioned within the [?] deadline set here by the Secret State Police for the preparation of his emigration. . . . It is therefore in the fiscal interest that the taxpayer remains for the time being in Babelsberg or in Berlin.” EA 2060, D16 and 21.

5. EA 2060, B7.

6. EA 2060, D40.

7. Cf. Hans Dieter Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewusstsein. Vom Dritten Reich bis zu den langen Fünfziger Jahren* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009), 105.

8. Cf. Bruno Blau, *Das Ausnahmerecht für die Juden in Deutschland 1933–1945*, 377 (Düsseldorf: Verlag Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland, 1954), 104–113; cited after Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewusstsein*, 106.

9. Cf. Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewusstsein*, 108–109. In summer, younger Jews in particular slept with groups of people who had been bombed out of their homes in Grunewald and Tegeler Forst.

10. Cf. Monika Richarz, “Galerie Buchholz. Eine Oase moderner Kunst,” in *Gute Geschäfte. Kunsthandel in Berlin 1933–1945* (Berlin: Aktives Museum Faschismus und Widerstand and Centrum Judaicum, 2011), 29–34. In the 1930s, the gallery exhibited works by Werner Heldt, Alfred Kubin, Georg Kolbe, Gerhard Marcks, and Renée Sintenis. In 1951, Buchholz emigrated with his family to Bogotá, where he died in 1992. Werner Haftmann later remembered the gallery as follows: “It was a wonderful oasis in the hideous cultural climate of Berlin in those days, to which one escaped in order to feel comfortably part of the obstinate power of creative freedom.”

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- Werner Haftmann, "Ein deutscher Kunsthändler in Amerika," *Jahresring 1958/59. Beiträge zur deutschen Literatur und Kunst der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: 1958), 179.
11. Cf. Eberhard Roters, *Galerie Ferdinand Möller. Die Geschichte einer Galerie für moderne Kunst in Deutschland 1917–56* (Berlin: Mann, 1984).
 12. Karl Scheffler, *Der Geist der Gotik* (Leipzig: 1917), 15–21, 38, 89.
 13. Christian Sährendt, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Boheme-Identität und nationale Sendung. Rekonstruktion seiner weltanschaulichen Prägung anhand seiner Schriften*, Dissertation, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, 2002.
 14. Rudolf Ibel, "Von der Würde und Fragwürdigkeit der Ausdruckskunst in der Dichtung," in *Die Literatur*, 38 (1935/36), 405; cited after Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewusstsein*, 345. (See n.7, n.10.)
 15. Werner Haftmann, *Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*, cited after the 1965 German edition (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1965), 364; Helen Adkins, trans. English edition, *Painting in the Twentieth Century* (London: Lund Humphries, 1960).
 16. "'Entartete Kunst' und documenta I: Verfemung und Entschärfung der Moderne," in *Die unbewältigte Moderne. Kunst und Öffentlichkeit* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1989), 96.
 17. Frank Matzke, *Jugend bekennt: so sind wir!* (Leipzig: Phillip Reclam Jun, 1930), 229. Cited after Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewusstsein*, 379. (See n.7.)
 18. Otto Heuschele, postscript to *Almanach der jungen Generation auf das Jahr 1933: Jugend in Front vor dem Leben im Auftrag der Notgemeinschaft junger Autoren (NGJA)* (1933 Almanac of the Young Generation: Youth at the Forefront of Life on Behalf of the Emergency Association of Young Authors [NGJA]), 238 f. Anthology member Waldemar Glaser notes in his short biography, "Zwischendurch nach dem Wandervogel SA-Mann und SA-Führer in Breslau" ("Meanwhile, after the Wandering Bird movement, SA Soldier and SA Leader in Breslau"), Klaus Mann, who emigrated in 1933 and was attacked for this by Gottfried Benn, also appears in the anthology.
 19. Bernhard Diebold, foreword to Frank Matzke, *Jugend bekennt*, 3. Cited after Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewusstsein*, 22. (See n.7.)
 20. Werner Haftmann, "Zur Vielfältigkeit deutscher Kunst," in *Kunst der Nation* 24, December 2, 1934, 1–2.
 21. Karl Hofer, letter to Leopold Ziegler, January 1, 1944, cited after Andreas Hüneke, ed., *Karl Hofer, Malerei hat eine Zukunft. Briefe, Aufsätze, Reden*, (Leipzig and Weimar: 1991), 241.
 22. Christoph Meckel, *Suchbild. Über meinen Vater* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuchausgabe, 1987), 21 f. and 32 f; Helen Adkins, trans., English edition, *Image for Investigation: About My Father* (Tayport: Hutton, 1987).
 23. Poems Vol. 1 (undated, c. 1942–1945), 40 (translation Ori Z Soltes).
 24. Poems Vol. 3, 106, no. 265, typescript (1945), 1 (translation Ori Z Soltes).
 25. Poems Vol. 3, 106, no. 266, typescript (1945), 2 f. (translation Ori Z Soltes).
 26. Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewusstsein*, 333 ff. (See n.7.)
 27. Gottfried Benn to F. W. Oelze, July 17, 1940, in Gottfried Benn, *Briefe an F. W. Oelze 1932–1945*, (Wiesbaden and Munich: 1977), 236. Cited after Hans Dieter Schäfer, ed, Introduction, *Am Rande der Nacht. Moderne Klassik im Dritten Reich. Ein Lesebuch* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Vienna: 1984), 11.
 28. Poems Vol. 5, 28, no. 44, typescript (1942), 3 (translation Cindy Opitz).
 29. Poems Vol. 5, 48, no. 79, typescript (1942), 3 (translation Cindy Opitz).
 30. Poems Vol. 5, 47, no. 76, typescript (1942), 4 (translation Cindy Opitz).
 31. Poems Vol. 5, 24, no. 37, typescript (1942), 9 (translation Cindy Opitz).
 32. Poems Vol. 2, 102, no. 201, typescript (undated, ca. 1942–1945), 10. (translation Cindy Opitz).
 33. Max Beckmann, *Über meine Malerei* (On My Painting), lecture held on July 21, 1938, at London's New Burlington Galleries during the *Exhibition of Twentieth Century German Art* that had opened there on July 7. Cited in Max Beckmann, *Die Realität der Träume in den Bildern. Aufsätze und Vorträge. Aus Tagebüchern, Briefen, Gesprächen 1903–1950*, (Leipzig: Philipp Reclam jun, 1984), 134 f.
 34. Wolfgang Koeppen, *Die Mauer schwankt* (Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1935), 247. Cited after Hans Dieter Schäfer, "Die nichtnationalsozialistische Literatur der jungen Generation im Dritten Reich," in *Das gespaltene Bewusstsein. Deutsche Kultur und Lebenswirklichkeit 1933–1945* (Munich: 1981), 29.
 35. Conversation of December 27, 1976. Cited after Schäfer, "Literatur der jungen Generation," 384.
 36. Poems Vol. 5, 26, no. 41, typescript (1942), 14. (Translation Cindy Opitz).

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37. Hannah Höch was a collagist “and thus her little home in Heiligensee came to house her autobiographic medium, collage. It was a complex cosmos, for which she created her own reference systems so that she could quickly find whatever she needed.” Quoted in Ralf Burmeister, “Hannah Höchs System der Erinnerung,” in *Hannah Höch eine Lebenscollage*, Vol. 3, 1946–1978 (Berlin: Argon, 2001) 1:31.
38. Carl Laszlo, *Ferien am Waldsee*, (Vienna: DVB 2020 [1956]), 68–70. Laszlo had suffered internment in several concentration camps.
39. The painting *Forest* (ca. 1920) portrays a dense, cavernous patch of forest adorned with expressive and colorful dots. *Moonlit Night*, allegedly created around 1918, is a bleak scene with dead trees. These intense landscape works are so unusual amidst the context of his figure paintings that the dating could be questioned. Since Fritz Ascher unfortunately rarely dated his paintings himself, it is legitimate to doubt the suggested 1910s and 1920s for these forest scenes.
40. The late work of the expressionist painter Karl Schmidt-Rottluff reveals parallels to Ascher’s focus on flowers. From the mid-1960s until his death in 1976, Schmidt-Rottluff made only pen and ink drawings and watercolors, e.g., *Die Tazetten (Paperwhites)*, 1964. These are white daffodils that bloom in the middle of winter. They “are not cheerful daytime companions, there’s nothing ornamental about them, and they harbor something nocturnally abysmal. Their beauty seems not only endangered, it also looks dangerous, in a quiet and contained way.” Gunnar Decker, “Tazetten blühen mitten im toten Winter,” in *FAZ* 4 (January 6, 2016): N3.
41. Cited in Eva Züchner: “Jeder Tag ein Kampf. Die Nachkriegsjahre 1946–1949”, in *Hannah Höch, eine Lebenscollage*, vol. 3, 1946–1978 (Berlin: Argon, 2001), 1:46 f.
42. Anna Seghers, cited in Monika Melchert, *Heimkehr in ein kaltes Land. Anna Seghers in Berlin 1947 bis 1952* (Berlin: Berlin-Brandenburg, 2011), 9.
43. Seghers, 21.
44. Seghers, 57.
45. Cited in Andreas Hüneke, ed., *Karl Hofer, Malerei hat eine Zukunft. Briefe, Aufsätze, Reden* (Leipzig and Weimar: 1991), 265.
46. Wieland Schmied, “Ein idealer Kunsthändler. Für Rudolf Springer zum 80. Geburtstag,” in *Berliner Kunstblatt*, 18, no. 63 (1989): 36.
47. Rachel Stern, conversation with Rudolf Springer, November 20, 1990.
48. Depending on how long this condition lasts, it can lead to permanent damage to the affected organs.
49. Psychic centralization responds to conditions of prolonged overextension of the normal protective barrier. “Imaginative and emotional functions are reduced to the vital minimum.” Those returning after the war were “very productive and often occupationally successful despite pronounced psychic deficit manifestations, but severely disturbed in private life and emotional relationships.” Wolfgang Schmidbauer, “Ich wusste nie, was mit Vater ist,” *Das Trauma des Krieges* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: 1998), 49 ff.
50. Cf. Gottfried Fischer, “Psychotraumatologie, Kunst und Geschichte. Trauma in der europäischen Geschichte und die Geschichte der Psychotraumatologie,” in Peggy J. Alderse Baas-Budwilowitz and Willem J.H. Alderse Baas, eds., *Unvollendete Vergangenheit. Verarbeitung des Zweiten Weltkrieges in der Bildenden Kunst in Deutschland und den Niederlanden (Unfinished Past—Coming to terms with the Second World War in the Visual Arts of Germany and the Netherlands)*, bilingual exhibition catalog (Amsterdam: Stiftung Kunst und Gesellschaft, 2000), 12–22.
51. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, 1975), 355 ff. Dennis Redmond, trans, 2001 (libcom.org, July 23, 2005); Helen Adkins, trans., first English edition, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973).