



Art

★★★★★ *Time Out Critic*

Art Review



John Bock, "Im Schatten der Made (In the Shadow of the Maggot)"

John Bock invites us on a WTF return to Weimar Germany. By Howard Halle

There are more than a few WTF moments peppering John Bock's latest exhibition, in which he conjures the ghosts of Weimar Germany. For instance, if you were in a studio exec's office pitching the story of the titular video (a black-and-white silent movie complete with title cards, tinkling piano soundtrack and Expressionistic sets), you might describe it as Frankenstein meets *The Princess and the Frog*.

Any invocation of the short-lived republic bearing the name of Goethe's adopted hometown necessarily recalls the catastrophe that followed, and this is especially true when referencing celluloid masterpieces—*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Metropolis* and *Nosferatu*—that have come to be seen as eerily prophetic of Nazi evil. Bock, who is German, understands this. But his age (he was born in 1964) means his relationship to that history and how it rebounds in his work is far less direct than in, say, the paintings of Anselm Kiefer. It is certainly less portentous: Black humor is as much a part of the formula here as horror.

While there is also a gallery filled with collages that appear to channel Hannah Höch, the movie is clearly the main event. Cordoned off by curtains, *Im Schatten der Made (In the Shadow of the Maggot)* flickers on a screen flanked by lighted vitrines containing the props and costumes used to make it. It's also more than an hour long, so bring popcorn.

The proceedings open on a mad scientist attempting to animate an android (actually a straw-stuffed figure amid coils of plastic tubing) in his lab. But his exertions come to naught, and he departs in despair. Enter a willowy female in flowing robes (the scientist's daughter?), who stirs the creature to life with a kiss. Now resembling a cross between Ziggy Stardust and the young Nijinsky, he stalks off into a smoke-machine-shrouded forest of cutout Cubistic trees with the girl hot on his trail.

What follows from this girl-meets-monster beginning is, of course, girl losing monster before finding him again. Unaware that his brainchild is alive, the scientist has headed to a church housing a powerful relic—a fingernail from Christ—with the intention of stealing it in the hopes of finishing a job that is already done. While there, he's confronted by a fanatical priest, played by Bock himself; told of the golem, this man of the cloth storms out in a fury to find the brute and erase his abominable presence in God's eyes.

Over the next couple of scenes, the priest locates and kills the creature—not once, but twice. He also runs across the girl, kidnapping her and raping her repeatedly with a cross equipped with a retractable dildo. Despite the violence, the girl's *l'amour fou* wins in the end; she brings the android back to life yet again, and they live happily ever after.

The seams in the film, as well in the objects on view, are as obvious as Boris Karloff's stitches, suggesting that the work, like any artistic creation, represents Bock's own Frankenstein. But while the scientist clearly serves as a surrogate for the artist, it is telling that Bock has chosen to play the priest, an agent of moral and cultural control.

Bock's interest, I think, is in that moment when the artistic process gets out of hand—as, for example, in the case of filmmaker Werner Herzog's legendarily tempestuous relationship with his leading man, Klaus Kinski, whose crazed visage pops up in a couple of the collages. When such conflicts play out on a larger historical stage—when religious or political conviction runs off the rails—the resulting rot inferred by the video's title leads to chaos and destruction. The consequences of Hitler's artistic delusions, after all, were not confined to stilted watercolors. Love and justice, Bock seems to say, may eventually put things to right, but only after a terrible cost.