

The Critics

► in the prison cells where three of them died (presumably by their own hand). Six years ago, he fashioned a hazy, nearly abstract painting based on an image showing the second plane crashing into the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. Bereft of any editorial or moralising stance, these deftly painted works challenge and stay with us, in large part because of their unsettling ambiguity.

Wilhelm Sasnal, whose paintings from the past decade are the focus of an exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, also bases much of his work on photographic imagery, but fashions his stylistically varied pictures with loose brushstrokes and a minimum of detail. Born in 1972, Sasnal, who attended art school in Kraków (just 30 miles from Auschwitz), came of age as an artist during an era of drastic change in his native Poland and often draws on images that evoke a troubled past as well as the perplexities of the present.

Comprising a restless inventory of contemporary life, his pictures include portraits of African immigrants and guest workers, transformations of the Polish landscape brought on by capitalist enterprise, and emblems of the oil industry and global trade. Whatever its ostensible subject, his work – like Richter’s – always takes on board the ways in which media images frame our view and our moral judgements of the world around us.

A 30-year survey of the American artist George Condo at the Hayward Gallery, “Mental States”, highlights a very different iteration of “terrible beauty” (disclosure of bias: I am the curator of this show). Condo’s canvases teem with a surreal cast of invented characters, inspired in part by past art from Rembrandt and

Goya to Picasso and the cartoon animator Chuck Jones. His work defies any conventional definition of “political art”; yet, in a series of portraits from the past decade, he has conjured the manic excesses and forlorn lows of our boom-and-bust era with a disquieting power. Endowed with deformed anatomies, executives and stockbrokers, secretaries and janitors are depicted in alternating states of wild desperation and acute despair. Though Condo’s work never directly invokes media culture, it nevertheless seems to picture its psychological impact on us. Gazing back at the viewer, his subjects seem tacitly to acknowledge their dehumanisation. While these paintings walk a wobbly line between pathos, the grotesque and black comedy, it is hard to think of many contemporary artworks that so intimately engage the human fallout from our deregulated economies.

It is a truism that there are two types of artist: those who respond to the history of their art form and those who reflect on the times in which they live. As these three exhibitions make clear, our most interesting artists do both. While our mass media and politicians aim to make millions of people feel and think the same thing at the same moment, good art traffics in the uncertain. It asks us to hold in our mind contradictory ideas and histories and provokes us to a range of possible responses. To unravel its terrible beauty takes time. But that is the common denominator of good art: rather than delivering a message, it presents us with opportunities to make meaning of the world. ●

The Frieze Art Fair runs until 16 October.

For more details, visit: friezeartfair.com

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