Full speed into the vortex
A fascinating, underexplored corner of Modernism at the Nasher

BY CHRIS VITIELLO

Innovators in the sciences usually show us where we are going, but our artistic innovators tend to illuminate where we are, so that we can then move in whichever direction we see fit. And although most scientific innovations become mundane the moment we assimilate them, cutting-edge artworks can remain radical for decades, even as times and tastes change.

"Make it new!" was Ezra Pound's call to artists to embrace and express change, and it became a central tenet of Modernism. The Vorticists: Rebel Artists in London and New York, 1914–18, a new show at Duke University's Nasher Museum of Art through Jan. 2, gives an unprecedented look at one facet of early 20th-century art, albeit a dim and dusty one. A collaborative curatorial effort between the Nasher, the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice and London's Tate Britain, this show is the first U.S. retrospective of the British alternative to French Cubism and Italian Futurism since the original show at a New York gallery in 1917.

Keep in mind that the differences between the many Great War-era "isms" were very high stakes. Aesthetics and politics were forged together in the foundry of a Europe about to explode. Today, if you put a Wyndham Lewis painting next to a Picasso, few viewers would find it provocative even if they could tell the difference between the two. But in 1917, you'd likely get a glass of Pernod—if not a fist—in the face if you lumped them together.

Still, don't dismiss The Vorticists as an academic obligation next to the hipper, contemporary The Record, the current featured exhibition at the Nasher. Many of these works would look perfectly at home on a contemporary gallery wall, testifying to the intellectual and aesthetic rigor of the group.

Upon entering the gallery, you're immediately challenged by two alien sculptures. Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's gigantic stone "Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound" stares you down with an aggressive ambivalence, appearing to have just arrived from either Easter Island (the front) or a catalog of Stone Age martial aids (the back). And Jacob Epstein's black bronze torso from his "Rock Drill" could have been an extra in the Terminator movies after finishing its graveyard shift in a torpedo factory. You're in for some aesthetically divisive works.

The gallery is organized chronologically, showing how the movement first cohered around Lewis's blend of Cubist line and angle with Futurist dynamism and Pound's prolific explications in the literary and art reviews of the day. Areas are devoted to the two-issue run of Lewis's radical magazine BLAST, which defined the Vorticist scope through image, text and manifesto, as well as the only two exhibitions of the group, at London's Dore Gallery in 1915 and New York's Penguin Club in 1917, the latter after the exhibitors had permanently scattered.

Although the show is devoted to the chronicle of a movement cut short, there are plenty of individual stories here, none larger than the tragic loss of Gaudier-Brzeska before his 24th birthday. His many fully formed works, all carved directly from various stones and metals, show the promise of a Modernist giant had he survived the war. Women artists are well represented, Jessica Dismorr's powerful graphic architectures and Helen Saunders' graphite and gouache abstractions (her "Balance" is a revelation) particularly shine. And, in an exhibition within the exhibition, the provocative concept of abstract photography is raised in Alvin Langdon Coburn's "vortographs."

Ultimately, the Great War broke up Vorticism, although it's hard to say how coherent the movement really was. Gaudier-Brzeska died in a trench in France in 1915. Lewis, after serving in the artillery and as a "war artist" for both British and Canadian forces, spent the next two decades writing rather than painting. And Pound, disillusioned by the madness of the war, turned his didacticism against nationalism and capitalism, beginning his epic Cantos before the ink on the armistice could dry.

So why do Cubist and Futurist artists have their works on coffee mugs and calendars, while the equally interesting and relevant Vorticists remain unknown outside art history seminars? It certainly hasn't helped history turn a favorable eye on the movement that its two leaders, predisposed to the exclamation point rather than the ellipsis, fell under fascism's spell during the interwar years.

In a 1931 book, Lewis championed Hitler's rise to power, reversing his endorsement only as the Nazis invaded Poland. Pound more famously aligned with Mussolini, reading often incoherent, anti-Semitic diatribes over the radio throughout the first half of World War II, which led to his arrest for treason and incarceration in St. Elizabeths mental hospital in Washington, D.C. until 1958. His radio broadcasts remain a bizarre, underanalyzed Modernist epic when considered together with the transcripts of the United States military's investigations into him.

Regardless of these inauspicious or anonymous ends, The Vorticists offers startling work for both the eyes and the mind, as well as a lens through which to scrutinize a hugely influential era in art history. In addition to the art on the walls, the Nasher has programmed music, drama and film events throughout the fall to accompany the show, underscoring its importance and making it new.