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Portraits of the people

EXHIBITION

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Faces in the Crowd Whitechapel Gallery E1 AMBITIOUS and brilliantly conceived, Faces in the Crowd is one of the most intellectually vital exhibitions I have seen. It brings together a vast and impressive array of artists, from early modernist masters such as Manet, Munch, Picasso and Legér, to contemporary superstars including Andreas Gursky, Gerhard Richter and Bruce Nauman, as well as pretty much everyone in between, to make a timely, visual argument. For too long, the show argues, the story of modern art has been told as a triumphant escape from the boring traditions of figurative art into the excitingly realms of abstraction and experimentation. As the display proves, just as powerful and authentic a strand of modern art has responded to modern life without ever losing sight of the human figure and the environment it inhabits. Early modernist works, such as Manet's polite painting of a masked ball and David Bomberg's wonderfully bold depiction of an audience at a Jewish theatre near Whitechapel, introduced a relatively new subject to art: "the people", a group formed by the scale and structure of the city and its intoxicating array of experiences. The power of democratic politics and the economics of the mass market kept the people centre stage. They were captured by pioneering photographers like Eugene Atget, August Sander and Walker Evans and are still there in Gursky's haunting, and utterly modern, image of a seething, dancing, club crowd. Other pieces depict the often isolated, modern individual, from Bacon's tortured paintings to Philip Lorca di Corcia's oddly attractive photographic portraits of ordinary people. All, however, are works bravely engaged with the reality of the world, in all its nuanced complexity, and are none the less contemporary for that. . From tomorrow until 6 March. Information: 020 7522 7888.