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Pol Cassel, Friedhof (Cemetery), 1921

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Pol Cassel
German (1892-1945)
Friedhof (Cemetery), 1921
Oil on canvas
43 ¼ x 50 ¾ in.
Museum purchase, 2000.30



ranz Kafka once famously said, “A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.” That definition could be extended to all art, and when I’m looking for an axe for the frozen sea inside me, I often go the Haggerty Museum to look at Pol Cassel’s disturbing and comforting *Friedhof (Cemetery)*. Cassel’s painting presents us with the disjunctive union of the grotesqueries of life next to the teeming regularity and variety of death. The painting is dominated by a grimy cemetery wall and by the well-heeled couple (she is wearing a fox stole and muffler, he’s dressed formally, like a burgher) about to enter it. The man possesses three-quarters of a face, the left side lopped off as if part of his brain is missing. The woman with him—his wife?—has a bulbous forehead and nose and rumpled lips and a rumpled chin. He looks grim and bored; she looks determined and befuddled. Leering out from the cemetery’s entrance is a pig-faced man in a bowler hat puffing on a cigar similar to the one the burgher is holding. He seems to be greeting this couple, “Welcome, welcome,” and anyone who’s seen Joel Grey in *Cabaret* will recall that smarmy, knowing *wilkommen* isn’t to be trusted. What are they/we entering? Why, the vibrant and various world of the cemetery, of course, the graves being the most colorful aspect of the painting, looking like so many decorated layer cakes. Behind the cemetery’s walls at the top of the painting is a forest populated with stylized trees, their shapes reminiscent of the crosses. But what really gives this painting its vibrancy is its tipped planes. The skewed perspective of the painting tilts the background—what’s behind the cemetery wall, the graves and the trees beyond—up into our view, and tips the foreground—where we are—down into the cemetery. It’s as though both death, and life beyond its walls, have risen up to meet us, and we are tipping down to meet them. We’ll meet in the center. And what are we to make of that? The effect is hallucinatory, like looking at a blow-up of one corner of a Pieter Bruegel painting as updated for the twentieth century.

This painting is striking on so many levels that I return to it again and again, seeing something new every time. For example, the man in the blue building that forms the right edge of the painting—what’s he doing there, standing over the couple’s shoulder? And that fox stole around the woman’s neck—why is he grinning? It looks as though he has a secret, and yet he is pawing, fondly and longingly, at the woman’s fox muffler. Is that his mate, perhaps, as perversely preserved as he is, so close and yet so far?

And then there’s the way the crosses make the painting seem like an addition problem—but what’s being added up? At first I notice all the zeroes—all the wreaths in the painting, the round face of the leering man, the fox stole, his snout not quite circling around to bite his own tail—and I think “plus nothing, plus nothing, plus nothing.” Then I consider the sense of movement within and without the cemetery’s walls—the couple about to enter, the trees encircling the walls, the other cemetery patrons visiting their loved ones, painted so that they’re in motion, circling too, and another thought crosses my mind—that these are images of circularity, of time’s passing and the regularly of the seasons passing, and we’re simultaneously being told “plus everything, plus everything, plus everything.” Life in death, death in life—it gives me pause, it wakes me up, it—dare I say it—serves as an axe for the frozen sea inside me.

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