ARTS

"If people did not love each other, I really do not see what use there would be in having any springtime."
LES MISÉRABLES VICTOR HUGO

New British art exhibit explores what it means to be 'modern'

BY ANGELINA KOVALCHUK
STAFF REPORTER

The Yale Center for British Art explores what it means for art to be "modern" in its exhibition "Going Modern: British Art, 1900-1960," which opened on Feb. 12.

The free exhibit, which is located on the second floor of the museum, greets visitors with bright color palettes and a range of media and forms, from abstract sculpture to colorful portraiture.

"I think the main point that comes across from what you see in this exhibition is the sheer diversity of approaches," said Lucinda Lax, a curator of paintings and sculptures and the interim head of the curatorial division at the museum. She believes this "plurality" is what makes British modernism distinct.

In the period from 1900 to 1960, Britain was characterized by intense social and cultural upheaval, including two world wars, the expansion and decline of the British Empire, and the Industrial Revolution transforming everyday life, according to the exhibition's brochure.

"In this dynamic context, artists explored shifting ideas of British identity and how it was shaped by class, gender and sexuality," Rachel Stratton, the author of the gallery's interpretative materials, writes in the brochure.

One of the exhibition's key themes is the conflict between urban environments and natural forms. The growth of urbanism, coupled with the Industrial Revolution, led many artists to retreat into nature and take inspiration from organic forms.

"This turning away, for some artists, to the land and to the organic, is a kind of response or reaction to some of what is going on within the greater social realm," Lax said.

Lax highlighted Barbara Hepworth's sculpture, titled "Sea Form," which is featured at the entrance to the exhibition. The piece greets visitors with rippling, organic shapes, which invite movement around the sculpture itself. Visitors can circumnavigate the piece, viewing its dimensionality from all angles.

"She's interested in materiality and form, but form in space as well," Lax said of Hepworth. Lax cited the landscape of the southwest coast of England, particularly Cornwall, as the inspiration for Hepworth's piece, as well as others in the gallery. "Something like this is directly inspired by the rocks she encountered that had imprints of all these ancient fossilized creatures on it."

The naturalistic works are contrasted with city and urban paintings within the gallery, notably from artists such as Robert Polhill Bevan, who depicted the bustling markets of inner London.

The exhibition also explores themes of identity and class through its collection of portraits. Stratton writes that while portraiture was "long a focus of British art," it "evolved to express new approaches and concerns."

Portraits by artists such as Vanessa Bell and Keith Vaughan depict new attitudes towards femininity and same-sex attraction respectively, reflecting the progressive ideals that began to emerge during the turn of the century.

Despite the uncertainty and upheaval of the period, Lax believes that these featured works also highlight a growing sense of optimism about the future.

According to Lax, British modernism is also distinctive for its interaction with traditional forms of painting, namely, the representation of physical objects. The exhibition features "May 1955," a piece by Ben Nicholson, as indicative of the transition toward the abstract forms commonly associated with modernist movements.

"The art sort of hovers somewhere," Lax said, referring to the tension between traditionalism and abstraction. "Even though it's kind of moving towards the almost purely abstract, there are still these aspects of it which can be identified as representational objects."

Lax believes that this "amazing period of experimentation and innovation" is at the "heart of the show."

Kathleen Quaintance GRD '28, one of the doctoral candidates present at the exhibit's debut, discussed the significance of this exhibition, particularly on the viewer's perception, in an email to the News.

"Thinking and talking about British modern art means that we have to interrogate our perceptions and prejudices around what we believe is stereotypical," Quaintance said. "That approach is important to consider today as we debate the relative obsolescence of certain ways of thinking with the rise of new technologies."

The exhibition will close on Aug. 9, 2026.

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ANGELINA KOVALCHUK / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
An exhibition called "Going Modern: British Art, 1900–1960" showcases a range of art, including abstract sculptures and colorful portraits.



Senior's glam rock opera about Nietzsche's life to open Thursday

BY KIVA BANK
STAFF REPORTER

Friedrich Nietzsche and a rock concert are perhaps not a combination many people would think of, but this weekend, viewers won't have to use their imagination.

Written and composed by Zeph Siebler '26, "OVERMAN: A Rock Opera" will premiere its first act on Thursday. The production explores the life of the famous German philosopher through an original, rock and roll-inspired score.

Advertised on its poster as "The man who killed God, live," the story spans the first 30 years of Nietzsche's life, focusing on his relationship with his sister Elizabeth and the composer Richard Wagner, both of whom turn to nationalism and anti-Semitism in pre-war Germany. Three sold-out performances are scheduled to run at the Nick Chapel Theater from March 26 to March 28.

This is not Siebler's first original production; he previously wrote and composed a musical called "Magpie's Song." The Chinese mythology-inspired production premiered in Saybrook College's Underbrook Theater last year and was performed at the Lincoln Community Playhouse in Lincoln, Nebraska, last month.

Siebler also plays Nietzsche in "OVERMAN," which he wrote for his senior thesis as a music major. He has worked on the production for six years, he said, having been inspired in high school when he was studying German and a neighbor gifted him an anthology of Nietzsche's writing.

When he read the works, including "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," the prose felt "electric," he said.

"It really captured that sort of sense of the electricity and the scale and the height of the ideas that he was dancing with," Siebler said. "It immediately felt very musical."

He said in a phone interview that he was initially primarily familiar with Nietzsche through what Siebler called Nietzsche's "tagline" — "God is dead and we have killed him." The opera focuses on this philosophy, which appears in Nietzsche's work "Thus Spoke Zarathustra." Siebler became interested in Nietzsche as both a philosopher and artist after reading the story.

"The sort of iconoclastic way that came together made me feel he was really like a rock star," he said.

The production incorporates 19th-century elements alongside the glam rock aesthetics of the 1970s and 1980s. The score reflects this with the incorporation of an infamous tune from "2001: A Space Odyssey" and other influences, ranging from Strauss to Queen to Radiohead, Siebler said.

Ava Gaughan '26, who plays Franziska Oehler, Nietzsche's mother, said the show has numerous vocal tracks that dip into a variety of genres, including musical theater and jazz. It also features 70s folk rock, which becomes characteristic of her role, in particular.

"That's a really fun thing, both as a performer and as a listener, you really just get to jump between genres," Gaughan said, noting that the production's synthesis of diverse musical styles still "feels really cohesive."

The costumes also reflect a mashup of aesthetics. Wagner wears a beret and gaudy, maximalist attire similar to his real life persona, but he also appears in clothing that would not actually be worn in the period, like a red leather jacket.

Siebler said he performed a concert presentation of "OVERMAN" in his first year, but he has changed the majority of the musical and lyrical material since then.

The cast also performed a staged concert version of "OVERMAN" in December in Jonathan Edwards College's theater. Since then, two new numbers have been added to the production, according to director Tomás Fuchs-Lynch '26.

He said in a phone interview they added an opening number titled "Knowledge is power," which "gets the energy up for the beginning of the show." Originally, the show opened with Franziska's lullaby, sung to Nietzsche by his mother shortly after his father dies when he was a little boy.

Another new addition, "Building a New Germany," focuses on the historical context of the plot as Germany becomes a modern nation state and nationalism rises in the late nineteenth century. Audiences will watch as a rift grows between Nietzsche and his sister and Wagner due to the latter pair's nationalistic, antisemitic views.

In a phone interview, Siebler said these changes were necessary to ensure the story focuses on Nietzsche's "bildung," which is German for "self-cultivation."

"Learning about shaping that through line really tightly has been really valuable in creating a really dramatic piece and not just a sort of Wikipedia summary of his life, which has been an interesting challenge, but I think one that we've navigated in a way that I'm quite happy with," Siebler said.

Fuchs-Lynch described the show as "very rewatchable." Only the first act will be performed this weekend because Siebler said he is still developing the second.

Siebler said he knew he wanted to work in the "European mega musical style," which he explained are typically two act productions that combine classical and rock elements, such as "Les Misérables" or "Jesus Christ Superstar." He said he developed the first act to follow Nietzsche's character arc, culminating in his "magnum opus," which Siebler says is his triumph with the writing of "Thus Spoke Zarathustra."

Siebler said that the second act will explore Nietzsche's life from that point until his death in 1900, along with posthumous receptions to his work as his sister manipulates his writing in support of the National Socialist project.

"Who listens to you and who tells your story after you're gone?" is a question Siebler will explore in the second act, he said.

In a phone interview, Fuchs-Lynch said that this weekend's performance doesn't feel "incomplete."

"Even though there's still more to the story, I think it's a very satisfying culmination for the first act," Fuchs-Lynch said. "Hopefully people will see that and be excited for act two."

Dennis Jin '28, the show's stage manager and lighting designer, said that the story doesn't "glamorize" Nietzsche's life, despite the show's glam rock aesthetic.

"I think it's a pretty honest depiction," they said. "I think Zeph does a really good job of humanizing this person, while also making him worthy of a rock opera and this amazing story."

In 1900, Nietzsche died at the age of 55 in Germany.

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KIVA BANK / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Written by Zeph Siebler '26, who plays Friedrich Nietzsche, the first act of "OVERMAN: A Rock Opera" will premiere in the Nick Chapel Theater in Trumbull College. The production addresses themes of nationalism and antisemitism in Germany.