

ARTFORUM

"Max Beckmann in Dialogue: Cecily Brown, Ella Kruglyanskaya, Dana Schutz"
CONTEMPORARY FINE ARTS GALERIE (CFA)
Grolmanstrasse 32/33
June 8–July 13, 2019

"We are all tightrope walkers," navigating the lines between art, grief, and passion—or so wrote Max Beckmann in "Letters to a Woman Painter," composed for a 1948 lecture at Stephens College, the US's second-oldest women's college, in Columbia, Missouri. That same year, he arrived in the United States following his long exile from Nazi Germany and painted *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie), a portrait of opera singer Minna Tube, his first wife and muse. Beckmann's depiction of her as the spear-wielding principal from Wagner's eponymous opera is a keystone work in this exhibition, which places the German Expressionist in conversation with painters Cecily Brown, Ella Kruglyanskaya, and Dana Schutz. Black predominates and jostles with fiery pigments in Brown's three small-scale canvases (*Untitled*, 2019), while her series of eight gouache-and-watercolor works on paper, "*Untitled (After Beckmann)*," 2012, recall Beckmann's iconic triptych compositions like *Departure*, 1932, with figures packed in close and blindfolded, their limbs articulated in jerky, ninety-degree angles.

Just as Beckmann pushed Tube to give up painting, he asked his second wife, Mathilde (Quappi) Beckmann, to sacrifice her music career. Both inspired his painting *Siesta*, 1924–34, which, in an inversion of Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*, 1485, portrays a man studying a voluptuous woman, post-coitus, reclining next to a violin and sheet music. As if in response, Kruglyanskaya's *Art Wench, Brunette*, 2019, depicts a female painter holding a pot of brushes and sporting a suggestive, paint-splattered dirndl, while Schutz's *The Traveler*, 2019, in its tight composition and eschewal of aerial perspective, channels more Beckmann-esque anxiety: a man reduced to an unrelenting churn of thoughts, accumulating in impasto. When art tries to traverse love and passion, the gaze inevitably turns inward, a space in which most people—even tightrope walkers—often free-fall.