Visual arts Jackie Wullschlager

Elmgreen & Dragset: Tomorrow
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Funky, subversive, disturbing, the Danish/Norwegian duo smuggle narrative into conceptual art in unexpected ways. Their new, elaborate installation transforms the V&A’s former textile galleries into an apartment belonging to a fictional, elderly and disillusioned architect. It uses some works from the museum’s collection and is accompanied by a script written by the artists.

www.vam.ac.uk 020 7942 2000
from Tuesday to January 2

Willie Doherty: Unseen
City Factory Gallery, Derry

A highlight of Derry-Londonderry City of Culture: an overview of the complex photographic oeuvre of the Derry artist who for 30 years has explored ways of representing a centenarian landscape, through videos, photojournalism, documentary landscapes and the appropriation of images and texts. Important film works include the new piece “Remains”, shot in a number of locations used to carry out knuckeckapping, “Re-Iam” (2006), for which Doherty was a Turner Prize nominee, and “At the End of the Day” (1994), in which he first used circular repetition, focused on images of border roads, as a formal and metaphorical device.

www.cityfactoryculture2013.com to January 4

George Grosz’s Berlin
Richard Nagy, London

Satirist or realist? More than any other artist, Grosz defined the glamour and doom of an inflation-ridden Weimar Republic where everything and everyone was for sale. A brilliant draughtsman, he provided 1920s Berlin to sketch incessantly “observations dictated by my utter contempt for mankind”. In paintings, such as the prismatic cubo-futuristic “Beat of the Street”, and in savage watercolours and drawings, he depicted the city’s exhilarating chaos as a montage of signs, symbols, events, people: façades of houses towering over gangsters, pimps and prostitutes; a suicide hanging from a rope; a naked tightrope walker; gorging industrialists and bankers.

Popular imagery, cartoons and the covers of westerns inspired him; he was bored by classical models and disliked the grace of Paris, “a city of idlers”. Ultimately his taste for the grotesque looks back to gothic exaggerations characterising German art since Grünewald, refreshed by Grosz’s shrill modernist colour, razor-sharp line and subtle, varied approach, as demonstrated by this excellent show of mostly works on paper.

In “Diamond Profiteers in the Cafe Kaiserhof”, he uses collage to give an unsettling perspective to his shady characters. The watercolour “Suicide” is suffused with a singular luminosity, as if the dead man bleeds out on to the paper. In “The Gloaming”, watercolour is applied wet on wet, with pen drawings above and beneath, creating spatial depth and brilliant sparkle.

In “Germany, A Winter’s Tale”, a recently rediscovered sketch of a major oil lost in the 1930s, a pyramid of misery and corruption – brothels, tenements and bloated figures representing church, army, education, each turning a blind eye – is built up around a fat complacent nationalist, sitting upright with knife and fork about to carve. “We knew these types, they were all around us,” recalled Hannah Arendt, on seeing Grosz’s drawings. They still are, in any 21st-century metropolis – in acknowledgement of which this show benefits the charity Global Witness.

www.richardnagy.com 020 7252 6400
until November 2

Australia
Royal Academy, London

Unravelling the complex story of how a nation defined itself by its art, this show has strong displays of Aboriginal “dreaming” landscapes, begun in the 1970s but using imagery going back 60,000 years. It also explores coherently two centuries of engagement with the western tradition. A narrow, provincial approach to contemporary art is a disappointing conclusion.

www.royalacademy.org.uk 020 7300 6000, to December 8

Raw Truth: Auerbach Rembrandt
Ordoyn, London

Ordoyn has made its name by a series of very small, tightly focused exhibitions of museum-quality works juxtaposing old and recent art – Carracci and Lucian Freud, Rodin and Francis Bacon. This, the most ambitious, is a joint venture with Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum, which is lending paintings and etchings by Rembrandt, Auerbach, whose engagement with Rembrandt goes back decades, will be the first contemporary artist to show alongside works from the museum’s collection when the show transfers there in December.

www.ordoyn.comart 020 7297 5013
from Friday to December 1

Adrián Villar Rojas
Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London

Villar Rojas, who makes monumental figurative clay sculptures, was among my top five highlights of the 2011 Venice Biennale. Theatrical yet deeply serious, an artist whose wild imagination and technical virtuosity stand up to the flamboyant of contemporary architecture, he is a marvellous choice to launch Zaha Hadid’s new Serpentine Sackler Gallery. His show of post-apocalyptic ruins and future fossils, playing with ideas of time, modernity and narrative, is called “Today We Reboot the Planet”.

www.serpentinegallery.org 020 7442 5075
until November 10