

HYPERALLERGIC

The Importance of Making “Degenerate” Art

Here, the term is reclaimed not as an insult but as an ethical position: art that refuses neutrality, civility, or institutional comfort.

By Tara Anne Dalbow | February 12, 2026



A Home for the Brave, 2020 by Hugo Crosthwaite. Courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles.

TORRANCE, Calif. — Art can amaze, soothe, offer escape, expand the imagination, grant access to someone else's interior life, trouble deeply held beliefs, critique entrenched social norms. At FOG Design+Art a few weeks ago, for instance, I was surrounded by inspired, challenging, strange work that was, in large part, affirmative — a testament to human ingenuity and the capacity to create beauty. That Saturday afternoon, a man was shot and killed by two border patrol agents while trying to help a woman who'd been pushed to the ground. Not only was it difficult to focus on anything else after that, but it felt irresponsible to do so. It was in this state of mind that I visited DEFENDING ETHICAL INTEGRITY (D.E.I.): The New Degenerate Art at the Torrance Art Museum, and encountered work that invited me to stay where I was — to refuse looking away.

Hugo Crosthwaite's stop-motion animation "A Home for the Brave" (2020) is the show's most potent confrontation with state violence. The film makes visible what policy and propaganda obscure. In it, migrants, mostly women and children, are shot by uniformed men, their bodies turned into bullseye targets and skeletons. In one scene, a family appears under what seems to be the fluorescent lights of a federal building, before the image is violently torn apart; in the next frame, a woman is trapped behind a metal fence.

DEFENDING ETHICAL INTEGRITY: the new Degenerate Art continues at the Torrance Art Museum (3320 Civic Center Drive, Torrance, California) through February 21. The exhibition was curated by Jenny Hager, Ty Pownall and Steven Wolkoff.