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Landscape in Your Mind

Austrian Cultural Forum

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Herbert Brandl, Heinz Greissing, Alois Mosbacher, Otto Muehl, Eva Schlegel and Otto Zitko

On July 18, 2006, the Austrian Cultural Forum will open Landscape in Your Mind, a new group exhibition exploring contemporary landscape painting and photography that will be on view through October 28. In the recent past, landscape has regained prominence as a subject matter in visual art. Challenged by the rise of art photography, painting has developed intriguing ways of breaking free from the grand romantic landscape tradition. The heightened sensibility for what's behind the landscape has resulted in a bolder range of artistic expression, moving into figurative and abstract directions at once. Embracing landscape as a favorite theme, art photography, for its part, has added immediacy and novel perspectives to the depiction of landscape, paving the way for the rediscovery of landscape as a mirror of human civilization.

What promises to be an exquisitely "beautiful" show gradually reveals an undercurrent of discontent or uneasiness with the treatment of nature by man. Even a photograph rendering a serene landscape isn't necessarily comforting anymore, but acts as a reminder of the brutal speed and thrust of progress. The definition of beauty is subject to change as well. Nowadays, landscape risks being substituted and relegated to the margins by sophisticated software programs and video games allowing everybody to relish in their spectacular pet landscapes and recreational environments aimed at surpassing the beauty of nature. Against this background, landscape is the perfect theme to position art as an antidote to the streamlined entertainment of our time, inspiring artists to develop strong individual approaches that may in turn inspire us.

Juxtaposing photos by Lombardi (plus a related video) and Eva Schlegel with paintings by Herbert Brandl, Heinz Greissing, Alois Mosbacher, and Otto Muehl and a large-scale on-site mural painting by Otto Zitko, Landscape in Your Mind covers a wide range of artistic sensibilities. The landscapes by these artists are at least as much creations in their mind as they mirror, and correspond to, existing nature. The show is constructed like a dream, with abrupt sequences and scenery changes, thickening density, and rites of pattern recognition addressing the manifold lineages between humanity and nature. What can be interpreted as a tribute to Sigmund Freud in the year of the anniversary of his 150th birthday underlines the emotionally charged relationships between apparently generic exterior landscapes and our individual interior "mindscape."

The entrance screen video Landscape in Mind, tells of Inés Lombardi's journey on a freighter from Rotterdam to the Black Sea on the Rhine, Main, and Danube rivers, spanning a spectrum from untouched nature to industrial rape. Of the several thousand pictures taken, Lombardi retained just a fraction of images for a series entitled Given. The three photo tableaus selected for the exhibit appear only at first sight contemplative. At closer inspection they reveal irritating aspects, such as the elementary force of water hidden beneath its tricky shallowness; the illusionary fog cutting short the seemingly endless horizon while creating distance to the land in sight; or the uncanny, otherworldly

tranquility of the night.

Creating an on-site mural painting, Otto Zitko knows how to penetrate the room with his presence and immerse the viewer in the texture of his large-scale work. Zitko's long way of the line (as he titled a 1987 drawing) has evolved and become more relaxed and flexible over the years, to the point of constructing a new painterly vocabulary of evocative abstraction that borders on figuration - an abstract dimension of figurative painting. From here, it is only a small step to imagine infinite thriving landscapes with endlessly winding paths and elaborate patterns of radiating beauty and disorienting irregularity.

For Herbert Brandl, who is primarily interested in the texture and color of painting, oscillating between abstraction and figuration is tantamount to moving between fields of tension. The show contrasts a large canvas of the densest and most intense green imaginable (a meadow or fictionalized jungle, almost oppressive in its sexual directness and sensuality) with three more relaxed landscapes that evoke water in different manifestations. What appears peaceful at first sight quickly reveals undercurrents that lead us into unearthly dream worlds barely hidden beneath the painted surface.

To generate some discomfort or disorientation is a desire shared by Eva Schlegel, whose landscape photos, with their monochrome, soft colors, hold their ground as painterly statements. Schlegel strips mountains of their monumentality, as if to deprive them of their three-dimensionality, and her seascapes are dominated by highly suggestive formations of clouds, a consistent theme in her oeuvre. What appears detached and enigmatic at first sight becomes gradually more accessible without entirely revealing its soul. In fact, her landscapes betray a degree of eroticism and sexuality from a female vantage point, as if she were playing with their seductive powers, and she often uses lead to add sensual weight.

Otto Muehl's landscapes are irritating in their serenity, and not only in view of his actionist background. Here is a decidedly male mindset at work, as opposed to Schlegel's female sensibility. Muehl has repeatedly returned to landscape painting, evoking the ardent colors of van Gogh and other illustrious 19th-century masters. With Muehl, you are sucked into the dire marriage of man and nature, whether you want to be or not. As Muehl is the oldest artist represented in the show, it was tempting to include one of his so-called electric paintings, which depicts a human figure raising his or her hands in desperation against the backdrop of the sea, the face partly covered by an allegorical burning tree. The landscape paintings by Otto Muehl encompass the full range - electrification of nature contrasted by the depiction of nature at its most innocent.

The tensions between humanity and nature also inhabit the work of Alois Mosbacher. Fascinated with characters emerging from live role-play games on the Internet, he is busy exploring the narrative possibilities of painting, and his works are way more than simple landscapes: a car half-hidden in the woods with nobody to be seen, an uncolored tree spilling green blood, and a bridge leading walkers into the deep forest... Mosbacher is a storyteller, and he expects you to play an active role. As the characters of perpetrator and victim are in a permanent state of flux, the viewers can constantly redefine themselves.

Heinz Greissing's so-called stripe paintings expand the one-point perspective in intriguingly fresh ways. When driving a car, you see what is in front of you through the windshield, but you also notice what is behind you through your rearview mirror. Applying this parallel awareness to painting, Greissing uses one series of stripes to depict the view ahead and another series of stripes, interspersed between the frontal view stripes, to reflect the rear view, thereby achieving a dreamlike sequence of points and counterpoints. What lies behind you influences what you see ahead of you. In Greissing's paintings, this happens literally, but it can also be regarded as a metaphor for life. Other

methods are to change position while painting (by moving around the object, etc.), or to reflect different times of the day or different light in the course of the year in one painting.

When returning to the Lobby, the viewer won't fail to notice the affinities between Greissing's approach and Lombardi's, in spite of different aesthetics. Compressing distinct views into a single work, both artists convey the message of the exhibition with structural clarity: To truly appreciate landscape, it takes several perspectives at once. When you wake up, your dream has ended, but it has not necessarily come to a conclusion.

Landscape in Your Mind is curated by Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, director of the Austrian Cultural Forum New York. It continues ACF's focus on the relationships between individualism and society, society and economy, economy and media as well as media and lifestyle in the digital age.

An exhibition catalogue including artist statements and an essay by Christoph Thun-Hohenstein is available in conjunction with the exhibition.

Austrian Cultural Forum New York
11 East 52nd Street - New York
Gallery hours: Monday - Saturday | 10 am - 6 pm. Free admission

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