

Enigma and perhaps evasion (or “hide and seek”): the realism of German painter Neo Rauch

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Neo Rauch at the Met: para—an exhibition of paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, May 22-October 14, 2007, and at the Max Ernst Museum, Brühl, October 28, 2007-March 30, 2008

Catalogue of the exhibit by Gary Tinterow and Werner Spies, Cologne: Dumont.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York holds an extensive collection of all periods of world art like the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, the National Gallery in London or the Louvre in Paris. It exhibits a very limited number of living artists in solo shows; the institution was in fact prohibited from doing so by museum policy until 1968.

The contemporary artists the Met does exhibit are considered likely to prove significant figures in the long run. Tony Oursler, known for his video projections of anxious faces onto dolls and other unlikely objects, and Kara Walker, whose black paper silhouettes examine the legacy of slavery in the US, were given shows in 2005 and 2006, respectively.

This year the Met has chosen the German artist Neo Rauch. Born in 1960 in Leipzig where he still lives, Rauch was relatively unknown until recently. He studied and now teaches at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst—the Academy of Visual Arts in Leipzig. Founded in 1764, the Academy has continued to teach traditional painting.

Under Stalinism in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), the Academy was obliged to advocate the anti-artistic perversion of “Socialist Realism.” For better or worse, the Leipzig academy has been out of sync with the major art movements of the late 20th century. Since the GDR’s collapse in 1990, a re-assimilation has taken place into an increasingly international art world, under circumstances where the prevailing trends, in figurative painting especially, are heavily influenced by post-modernist sentiments and moods, or their artistic equivalents.

Technical virtuosity in creating illusionist images has come back into favor, but with a strong measure of skepticism as to whether these sometimes startlingly realistic images actually represent or even *can* represent or refer to an objective reality. Rauch’s work reflects this emphasis on subjectivity and ambiguity. This is not a matter of personal ill will or a deliberate desire to obscure reality, but expresses more general problems in the art world: a failure to grapple with the processes that have led artists, and others, to the present difficult conjuncture, a disheartening sense that the future offers little more than the present and a subsequent loss of bearings.

Rauch follows the generation of East German painters that includes Gerhard Richter, George Baselitz and A. R. Penck, as well as the West German Jorg Immendorff, whose *Café Deutschland* (1978) became an artistic emblem of the divided Germany. In it, a swastika-decorated disco on the Western side is walled off from the somewhat thuggish-looking proletarian workers of the East, who are presided over by the image of dramatist Bertolt Brecht. The figure of the artist A.R. Penck reaches his

hand through a hole in the wall to his Western counterpart, Immendorff, whose face appears mirrored on the end of the wall.

The style is crude and simplistic, in keeping with the Neo-Expressionists’ “return to figuration” of the late 1970s-early 1980s and the Maoist politics of the artist at the time. Rauch says he admires Immendorff’s work, although he has taken a more nuanced approach both in style and content.

Rauch’s work has also been compared to that of painters Balthus (1908-2001), Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) and Max Ernst (1891-1976), with a touch of Francisco de Goya (1746-1828) thrown in, in an effort to describe the enigmatic and quasi-surrealistic quality of his images.

His paintings from the late 1990s, with their flat colors and schematic figures, mimic the look of “Socialist Realist” storybooks or how-to manuals from the early 1960s in a witty critique of the Stalinist propaganda of his youth. Somewhat lumpy figures in plain suits and dresses are studiously engaged in enigmatic forms of work—holding charts, pointing at blank chalkboards, working in factories. Everyone is busy in a calm, anodyne way, but on closer examination he or she isn’t actually doing anything that makes sense.

For example, in *Neid* (1999, Cat. p.56) a man contemplates a fireplace that appears to be filled with steaks, or beef tongues, or pies, some of which also hover in the air. Rauch uses abrupt shifts in perspective, scale and idiom to turn the purported normalcy of this out-of-date world on its head.

Despite the disregard for the laws of time, space and physics in Rauch’s pictures, he resists calling his work surrealist, perhaps because of the term’s overuse as a means of describing any peculiar or paradoxical artistic creation. Rauch prefers “surrealist verism” to suggest that his work corresponds to reality, even if one that exists parallel to our familiar one. He describes the world of his painting as the world we see out of the corner of our eye, i.e., one never quite fully perceived, but no less real.

Fittingly, Rauch chose “para”—a prefix meaning “beside, near, along with, or resembling”—as the title for his show at the Met and the prefix appears in many of the pictures themselves. The 14 paintings are predominantly horizontal compositions, painted with the low-ceilinged exhibition space at the Met in mind. The robust figures seem to barely fit the picture frames, which emphasizes the tense, claustrophobic atmosphere of a dream.

In fact, Rauch has compared his painting process to dreaming rather than the planned execution of a preconceived image. He might begin in one corner, and work his way outward, creating a space that he then peoples with a variety of figures, some realistically modeled while others are cartoon-like. Many of his figures seem like clones. This unplanned process accounts for sudden shifts in the picture’s visual coherence. The

disjunctions are sometimes awkward but, when successful, intriguing.

That said, Rauch's method is subject to pitfalls. His conception of himself as a passive filtration system in which all kinds of images get stuck and then come out in his paintings can mean that the official version of things—whether Stalinist propaganda or capitalist free-market ideology—gets passed along somewhat uncritically. The artist might dismiss the need to make a conscious evaluation of the social upheaval and trauma that he and his generation witnessed in the GDR, but this weakens the work. Instead images that initially promise to be rich and complex end up, with a second view, a bit hollow or limited.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians/Warten auf die Barbaren* the right side of the long canvas is crowded with figures out of a circus or a Disney cartoon. A blank-faced sharpshooter is being handed a rifle, while in the background others are putting a bull's head on a bare-chested man. They appear to be in a town protected by a high grassy wall, on which two girls are lying, one looking expectantly out over an open courtyard while the other lounges in an awkwardly seductive pose. An odd dwarf-like creature with a red beak seems to have stabbed the lounging girl's breast with a stick. Her expression is blank; perhaps she is dead, though the wound doesn't seem fatal. She holds a red ball in her outstretched hand. A pyre stands in the center of the otherwise empty courtyard enclosed by a barracks wall on which another bare-chested figure with a bull's head awaits burning.

The picture is arresting not just because of the suggestive human activity of the right hand side, but for the brilliant expanse of flat blue sky on the left (which does not reproduce as vividly as it actually is). Together with the bright sunlight and strong shadows on the barracks wall, it balances the elaborate automaton-like preparations for an execution with the stark clarity of pure, but no less brutal, color.

The painting poses provocative questions, but resists answering or probing them. Who are the barbarians these figures are waiting for? Why the executions? Are they really executions at all, or just some sort of a circus show?

Taken at another, more prosaic, level, is the imagery meant to be a semi-ironic comment on the old East German official attitude toward the West? Or under present conditions, a semi-ironic comment on Westerners vs. Easterners in Germany? Are the barbarians the Americans, or perhaps Islamic "fundamentalists" who have immigrated to Germany? Or are the barbarians 'within us,' or are there really no barbarians after all?

The painting *Gold Mine/Goldgrube* is equally enigmatic. In this image, three men are at work in a rural area just as night falls. The sky is still streaked red and orange, but the trees and buildings are dark. Two of the men are loading a wheelbarrow, while the third is going to load a truck in the distance. They seem routinely occupied, until the viewer realizes that they are loading steer skulls with antlers. At the center of the image is the gaping maw of the goldmine radiating light as though from a Wagnerian underworld.

The painting epitomizes all that Rauch does best—his creation of an ordinary scene that on closer inspection turns out to be strange, ominous and inexplicable; and his satisfying handling of paint. Parts of the scene like the house in the trees on the right are skillfully rendered in detail, while the sky and flat landscape on the left are painted loosely to the point of abstraction. And then there's that succulent yellow gash in the center that dissolves into pure pigment.

But appealing, even beguiling as these paintings are, their reliance on a semi-dream state for their inspiration becomes problematic. To what extent is any even relatively objective interpretation of them possible? In a Freudian approach, the various symbols in a dream rely on the dreamer's associations to give them meaning. While acknowledging that his pictures are extremely personal "mosaics," Rauch is more of a Jungian, saying "the characteristics of quality that I consider important are originality, suggestiveness, and timelessness ... *Zeitgeist* painting scrapes at spots that

are already sore, while timeless art elevates us from the commonplace and at most indicates a delicate phantom pain that indicates the presence of archetypal wounds." [1]

As is true for many artists, for Rauch intuition and the unconscious are strongly valued at the expense of conscious intention. This creates a spontaneity and free flow of imagery that can be evocative, but it also allows a considerable amount of confusion and unnecessary detail in his pictures to go unchallenged—after all, if he dreamed it that way, he dreamed it that way. But his desire to create timeless art does not mean that he has escaped his historical moment.

Taken as 'Zeitgeist painting,' Rauch's work 'scrapes' quite insistently at the sores of his generation in East Germany. Although Rauch does not make the connection per se, the idea of parallel worlds is apposite to the experience of "two Germanys" shared by citizens of the former GDR and West Germany (FRG). The Berlin Wall epitomized the brutal artificiality of this division, and some of Rauch's early pictures seem to be seen through a hole ripped in a wall.

The East German Stalinist and West German capitalist states co-existed for more than 40 years as part of the postwar settlement worked out between the Western powers and the Soviet bureaucracy. The GDR did not come about through the taking of power by the working class, nor was it ever a socialist or 'communist' state. The peculiarity of the repressive East German state, claimed to be 'real, existing socialism' by both its defenders and its opponents, inevitably had a deeply confusing and disorientating impact on the population, in both East and West.

The sudden dissolution of the Stalinist regime took wide layers of the population by surprise. The divided German working class was politically disarmed and unable to prevent or even oppose the bureaucracy, in alliance with the West German ruling elite, from restoring capitalism as a way out of its crisis. One could suggest that the opening of East Germany to capitalist exploitation has proven a "gold mine"—though it is not clear that Rauch means to.

Rauch has described how his generation, "those born around 1960, represents a strange mixture of the experience of stultifying boredom, thickly sown with a permanent, more than just subconscious, fear of atomic overkill that could happen any moment. From one second to the next a flash of light could annihilate everything. We grew up under this pressure, then just for a short moment, around 1989, 1990, all seemed to dissolve." [2]

The sense of taut expectation that pervades Rauch's images accurately reflects this experience; it never seems fulfilled, but instead dissolves into disbelief or bewilderment.

In another work, *Suburb/Vorvort*, an unexploded bomb has landed in a square. Onlookers are carrying flags that have caught fire, though not from the bomb. A man in the foreground has also caught fire and rolls on the ground, but there is no sense of urgency or agitation in the faces of those standing by him. A streak of yellow light across the sky might be the tail smoke from another missile, but turns out to be a sunset behind a cloudbank.

Having effectively evoked the peculiar stagnant autarky of the Stalinist GDR and its doomed efforts to build "socialism in one (half) country," Rauch seems unable to push beyond the surface observation of this dull, frozen society to sense the underlying social and political cross-currents which were to so thoroughly smash it up before Rauch's eyes, as it were.

Although Rauch claims to have a very limited interest in history, in a significant shift from his earlier work, his figures are no longer wearing the drab outfits of the GDR's citizens. Many wear the jackets and cravats of the Romantics, the generation of the failed 1848 revolution.

Rauch may claim this was an unconscious impulse not meant as a historical reference. It even seems more like an effort to jumble history together, as Rauch gives his German Romantic the yellow balloon hands of a cartoon in *Father/Vater*. Intentional or not, the aftershock of failed

revolution underlies the sense of futility and confusion that characterizes many of the images. But after a certain point, bewilderment is not enough of a response, at least not for resonant art.

Even if Rauch were not to grasp the dissolution of the GDR and its effects intellectually, one wonders why his pictures betray so little sense of today's Germany, or of living humanity in general. The dull sameness of people's faces in most of the paintings is particularly ironic in *Father/Vater*. The image of the son cradling the father like an infant becomes far more affecting when one knows that Rauch lost both his parents—who were young art students in Leipzig—in a train accident when *he* was an infant. But pain is not much present in the image; instead, there is a sense of trauma both personal and social that has yet to be grasped.

The fact that Rauch's work is far more interesting and visually rewarding than most of today's painting does not let it or him off the hook. By drawing on the full repertoire contained *within* painting in a post-conceptual art world that runs over all such boundaries, Rauch's work succeeds in reflecting a multifaceted world within a two-dimensional space. But his insistence on the unconscious process at the expense of developing work at a conscious level helps allow the "enigmatic" to become a cover for avoiding, perhaps evading, a far more complex social and historical reality.

Notes:

1. Neo Rauch's reply to Alison Gingeras, in "A Peristaltic Filtration System in the River of Time," *Flash Art No. 227*, November/December 2002. Catalogue, p. 65
2. Interview with Meinhard Michael, Catalogue p. 71

All images provided courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

To view more images from the exhibition, go to http://www.metmuseum.org/special/neo_rauch/para_images.asp



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