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Neo Rauch: *Aus dem Boden (From The Floor)*

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By Tom McGlynn.



Neo Rauch, *Der Stammbaum*, 2017. Oil on paper, 66 1/4 x 81 3/8 inches. Courtesy Neo Rauch Studio, Leipzig.

New York

The Drawing Center

April 12 – July 28, 2019

On or about November 11, 1989, two days after coincidentally witnessing the fall of the Berlin Wall, I found myself walking with a German friend of mine late one evening along the Reeperbahn, in Hamburg's St. Pauli district. At the time the area was still noire-gritty with junkies and drunks, sex-workers and peep shows: an era hypostasized in the *Café Deutschland* paintings (1977-82) of Jörg Immendorff. In the midst of this nightly street procession we encountered the curious vision of a nuclear family of newly- touristic, formerly East Germans: mom, dad, sis, bro, all clad in their Sunday best, the cut and fashion of which was straight out of the past (ca 1961). They looked as if they were members of a period movie cast. The contrast of their enraptured promenade (transfixed temporarily by a nearby Mercedes showroom) couldn't be more jarring within the grungy contemporary backdrop of the Reeperbahn. This literal embodiment of "the return of the repressed" was incredibly uncanny in that present moment. This was no mere Freudian slip, but a real phenomenon where past political ideologies of the state (with all of its labyrinthine contradictions) directly memorialized and "clothed" an experience in the present. It is this phenomenon, and these uncanny "derivatives of the unconscious" that populate the paintings and drawings of Neo Rauch.



Neo Rauch, *Kringel*, 2011. Crayon, pencil on paper, 11 5/8 x 16 1/2 inches. Courtesy Neo Rauch Studio, Leipzig.

In *Aus dem Boden (From the Floor)* at The Drawing Center, one is presented with the opportunity to delve deeply into the artist's mode of conjuring up his symbolical derivatives with a series of drawings (not quite studies) for his larger paintings which are helpfully organized by the show's curator, Brett Littman, into six groupings under the loose headings of absurdist drawings, architectural and landscape drawings, character studies, scenarios and figure drawings. This type of logical, taxonomic structure, seat-of-the-pants as it is (Littman seems to have extemporaneously scoured the artist's studio—both from its floors and its drawers—for the works), may actually be anathema to Rauch, as according to him, the drawings arise intuitively from his unconscious. Yet this ordering of the installation, which the artist ultimately did permit, does assist one to begin to understand the multiple moving parts that make up any of the artist's grander narratives in his large-scaled paintings. While the drawings are not studies per se, the entire scope of the exhibition does add up to an incisive study of Rauch's image making via a wide array of materials including felt-tip markers, ink, pencil, crayon, watercolor, ball-point pen, graphite, chalk and oil paint. Most of the drawings are within a smaller size range (8×5, 10×6") which relate to a diaristic notation of a sketchbook. In addition to these groupings are six monumental (in the range of 8×5') oil paintings on paper. The combination of the smaller drawings with the larger finished works allows the viewer to make form and content correlations between, and to tease out patterns of recognition in pursuit of a freewheeling analysis of the artist's unconscious visions. One such line of inquiry can settle upon Rauch's character studies. These are composed of a motley cast seemingly gleaned from both historical novels and DIY technical manuals—drawn from both deep history and pulp fictions. The artist's autobiography might have something to do with this complex bricolage of both found and felt memory. He was orphaned at only four weeks old when his parents, both at the time art students in Leipzig, were killed in a train accident. Taken in and raised by his grandparents in the smaller East German town of Aschersleben, the artist's primary sources of memory (parents as archetype) were denied him. It therefore makes complete sense that he would fashion for himself a prosthetic memory to "flesh out" that which remained for him only a conceptual of origin: a qualified past. Rauch's work has been described as surrealist in its jarring juxtapositions of historical tropes yet his compositions are really more complex neurotic reconstructions than simply transcriptions of dreams. And this is why his work slots so easily into a narrative of the post-modern with its contingent histories and fallen edifices of Modernist idealism, which is integrally linked to the larger influence of German Romanticism and Idealism on Modernist theory and practice. Experiencing a Neo Rauch painting is therefore more analogous to an interview with an asylum inmate stuttering on lost time than an artfully-guided sentimental journey. What seems most important to the artist is the primitive, symbolic enactment of memories he never actually had, so that his ensemble cast (as seen isolated in his character study drawings here) of jokers, religious savants and penitent pilgrims, nefariously plotting burghers, custodial women, frustrated and brooding poets and painters, soldiers and workmen all collude in an overarching drama of radical detachment from their assigned task of being. There is something uncannily familial about this cast that could also be seen, with a wider lens, a projection of der Volk of the father (and mother) land. They are perfectly imagined marionettes in the artist's itinerate puppet show of imperfect, *non-historical* painting. If one attempts to analyze a large painting in the show like *Der Stammbaum* (2017), for instance, for some narrative coherence one is met with a frustrating confluence of competing stories of individuals set in autonomous motion on their mysteriously appointed rounds, yet not necessarily in concert with their fellows. This pictorial "groupthink" can be read as both a blind allegiance and a detached resignation to such obeisance, a before and after trauma pattern. In the composition, three main characters in overall, generic red outfits, proceed from the lower right hand corner (apparently Rauch always starts from the lower right) towards the center of the painting in which a colloquy of 19th century waist-coated colleagues gather around what looks to be a tree stump entwined by an outsized model of molecular structure. There's a ceremonial aspect to the proceedings that evoke both Cold-War nightmares of nuclear annihilation and the communal compulsion of an antique village feast day. The character in the dead center of the painting looks back over his shoulder directly transgressing the histrionic "fourth wall" of the painting's illusory proscenium as if to implicate the viewer in the unfolding of its tragicomic theater. The easy analogy of the atomization of the colloquial social in the East Germany of the artist's youth (private conversations qualified as public by the Stasi surveillance state, for example) can be made here but such a direct association misses the oblique point of the artist's real intent. And that is that one's subjective unconscious can still overpower the determinist narrative of the state despite its being an unwilling subject of that state. Rauch just so happens to use the pictorial husks of the failure of German Idealism (Marxism, after all, was incubated in it) as interpreted by East German ideologues as a *mirror*

manqué to explain the holes in his own history and the ideological uncertainty and contradictions that such voids project. He effectively inoculates himself against the moral inconsistencies of the wreckage of German Idealism post-WWII by injecting a compromised subjectivity into his own project of imaginative reconstruction.





Neo Rauch, *Falle*, 1995. Felt-tip pen, crayon on paper, 8 3/8 x 5 5/8 inches. Courtesy Neo Rauch Studio, Leipzig.

What is seen throughout the exhibition is the artist's uncanny fluency in adopting various historical languages of drawing as his own. In a single drawing like *Kur* (2005) one can see the unmistakable gesture of a Rembrandt pen and ink figure in concert with a Goyaesque dry point line value accumulation in juxtaposition with the scratchy lines of George Grosz. In other drawings such as *die grüne Kappe* (2008), ghost marks of painters- past come in the form of Manet's summarily descriptive strokes, Tintoretto's nervy figure compositions and Brueghel's succinctly observed lines in service of pathetic caricature. This remarkably chameleon-like character of the artist's graphic identity goes right along with the idea that his imagery, and how it is made and conceived, is drawn from *a history without*. This fact makes the phantasmagoric aspect of his work, and its radical coherence to that aspect, feel weirdly inevitable, as if he's drawing with history itself. Ultimately though, if there is any "message" to Rauch's work it is that painting is essentially a history of the present in which we all can be implicated in attempting to recast its dream. The irrepressible drawings in this show, the waking elements of his grand-mannerist paintings, give the viewer a clue as to how that might be achieved. Perhaps one true story of "The West" is that we are all nostalgically clad tourists in a yet-to-be determined present.

Contributor

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