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O U T S I D E R A R T B R U T



RV102

SUMMER 2019

\$16.00 £8.00 €15.00



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ODD ATMOSPHERES

The Austrian *art brut* creator Leopold Strobl's distinctive drawing-collages are bold in form and rich in ambiance

EDWARD M GÓMEZ



Untitled, 2019, 4 x 6 in. / 10 x 14.5 cm, pencil and coloured pencil on newsprint, mounted on paper,
All images courtesy: Galerie Gugging, Maria Gugging, Austria

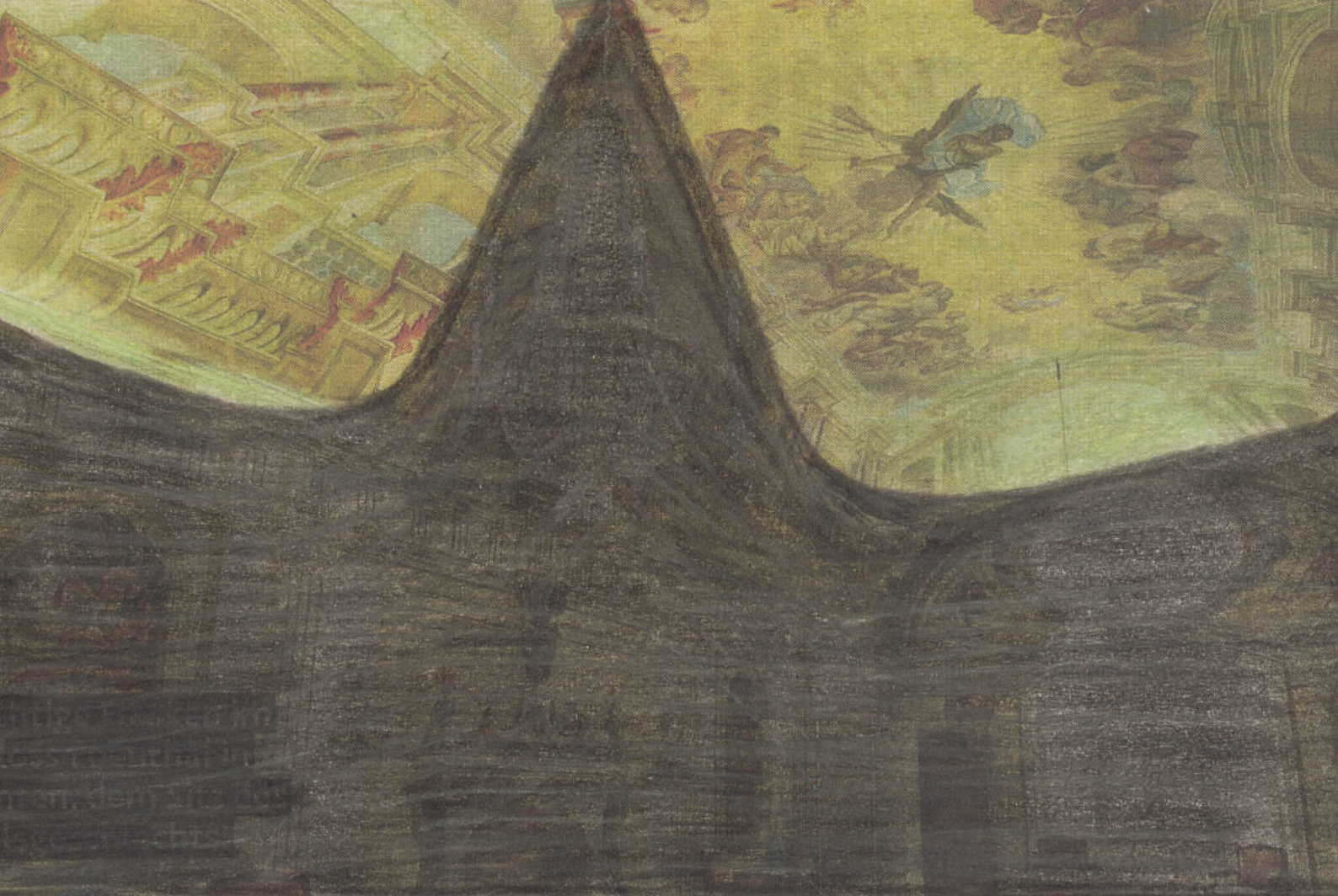


Untitled, 2019, 5 x 3.5 in. / 12.5 x 9 cm, pencil and coloured pencil on newsprint, mounted on paper

In the overlapping categories of *art brut* and outsider art, numerous creators have produced drawings, mixed-media assemblages, and other works that are partly or wholly abstract. (Consider, for example, among others, the works of such artists as Jeanne Tripiier, Eric Derkenne, Anna Zermánková, Dan Miller, and Judith Scott.) Now, with the emergence in recent years of the intriguing drawings of the Austrian Leopold Strobl, the role of abstraction in the bold compositions of one of the most original artists anywhere on the contemporary scene

have come into sharp focus – and again have shown just how expressive this art-making element can be in the work of an innovative autodidact.

“As a child, I made all kinds of art and I liked to experiment with materials,” Strobl recalled during an interview earlier this year at Galerie Gugging, part of the Art Brut Centre Gugging, an arts complex northwest of Vienna that includes a gallery, museum, artists’ residence and art studio. This multifaceted institution has long played a leading role in promoting the work



Untitled, 2019, 5.5 x 3.5 in. / 14 x 9 cm, pencil and coloured pencil on newsprint, mounted on paper

of notable *art brut* creators in Austria.

Strobl, who was born in 1960 in the state of Lower Austria, north of Vienna, noted that, as he was growing up, despite the interest he expressed in making art, his teachers told him that becoming an artist was not a likely prospect for him, and that an artist's life would be very hard.

"That did not deter me," he said matter-of-factly. Strobl, who, with his long, grey-white beard, gentle gaze, and soft-spoken manner, brings to mind a large elf, explained that he went on to make landscape pictures and, eventually, just a few years ago, began clipping photos of landscapes from newspapers. He was especially interested in photos showing large expanses of sky. "Making art has an almost religious character for me", he noted, adding, "I've always been interested in the sky; I used to go up on the roof and look at the sky."

The small-scale, intimate-feeling works for which he has become best known are at once drawings and collages. To create them, he starts with photographic images clipped from printed publications, which he pastes onto fresh sheets of paper. Using plain and coloured pencils, he then outlines in black certain basic shapes within the compositions of these found images, accentuating them and effectively creating new compositions on top of the old. That is because he also colours over in black certain visible subjects within his found photos, purposefully obliterating, for example, the

appearance of any human figures or other distracting elements within them.

Colouring his skies in such images in various shades of green and sometimes blue, Strobl produces reworked pictures that glow and hum with the restrained, concentrated energy of some of his trained, modernist counterparts' more self-conscious varieties of minimalist art. Curiously, his abstract or semi-abstract pictures' aesthetic charge and the mysterious atmospheres they seem to conjure up within pictorial space that is often no larger than that of ordinary playing cards bring to mind the resonant character of Zen calligraphy, whose gestures are both the expressions and the records of keenly focused creative impulses.

Strobl observed, "It's the lines, the colours, and the forms in the photographs that I find and then rework that interest me." Normally, he produces a drawing a day. Looking for the photographs in newspapers that serve as his source material is an enjoyable task, he said, but he noted that it can be time-consuming. "When I find a photograph that appeals to me, right away I have a sense of what I can do with it," he explained. "I think about which parts I'll draw over. I look for photos without too many churches or buildings." One of Strobl's favourite sources for photographs is the *Kronen Zeitung*, a leading national newspaper in Austria. The artist said, "I'm lucky if I can find one good photo per issue of any newspaper."



Untitled, 2019, 2.7 x 3 in. / 7 x 7.5 cm, pencil and coloured pencil on newsprint, mounted on paper

Leafing through an album in which some of his recently completed, still unframed drawings had been gathered together, Strobl pointed to one in which, somewhat unusually for an artist who prefers images of nature and landscapes, the interior of an old castle appeared, its foreground figures obscured by one of his signature black blobs. In another picture, Strobl's overdrawing covered but also evoked the form of an exploded atomic bomb's swelling mushroom cloud.

Admirers of modernist, geometric abstraction may find in the bulbous, curvilinear forms that appear like giant lumps or boulders in Strobl's compositions, covering cars, human figures, or other subjects, echoes of the sensuous, even voluptuous lines and shapes that characterize the paintings, drawings, or sculptures of such definitive modern artists as Jean Arp, Henry Moore, or Myron Stout. Of course, Strobl, who is mostly unaware of canonical modern-art history, does not intentionally set out to evoke such remarkable affinities in his work.

For all its simplicity, the formal language Strobl has developed in just the last few years is surprisingly expressive. Together, his abstract forms and muted palette conjure up strange atmospheres, without referring explicitly to any specific subjects. In one of his untitled pictures, a tall protuberance shoots out of the earth like a geyser, its thick stalk and bobbing head solidified and looming, monumentally, against the blue glow of a nocturnal sky. In another, an almost rectangular black object lies on the ground, seen, it appears, in close-up, like some kind of unknown artifact waiting to be examined. With his pencils, Strobl almost always draws small, rounded corners around his images, framing them with a specificity



Leopold Strobl at Galerie Gugging, February 2019, photo: Edward M. Gómez

of compositional point of view that helps accentuate the planar contrast – or spatial tension – between his foregrounded, dark abstract shapes and the coloured backgrounds around and behind them. "These drawn-in corners are very important to me," he said.

Referring to the character of the abstract shapes that become the subjects of Strobl's pictures, Nina Katschnig, Galerie Gugging's director, recalled a comment about them made by Brett Littman, the director of the Noguchi Museum in New York. That institution showcases the accomplishments of the Japanese-American, modernist sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), an artist whose *oeuvre* bridges the aesthetic sensibilities of the East and the West, and whose works often exude a sense of the transcendent. "Littman noted that Strobl's abstract shapes sometimes resemble those of Noguchi's sculptures," Katschnig said.

Looking through his album of recent drawings, Strobl pointed to one in which he had coloured over a photo showing people in a city street, another in which he had obscured part of a Chinese landscape, and still another in which he had obliterated some animals. In many of his pictures, he noted, the resulting forms he creates by overdrawing unwanted elements in his found photos resemble high-peaked mounds or mountains.

Strobl sipped a cup of tea and nibbled a jelly-filled doughnut as he examined his artworks. He paused, and in the straightforward, unhurried way in which he speaks, explained, "These hills are extending upward, reaching to the heavens to be with God."

Interview and translation from German by *Raw Vision's* senior editor, Edward M. Gómez.