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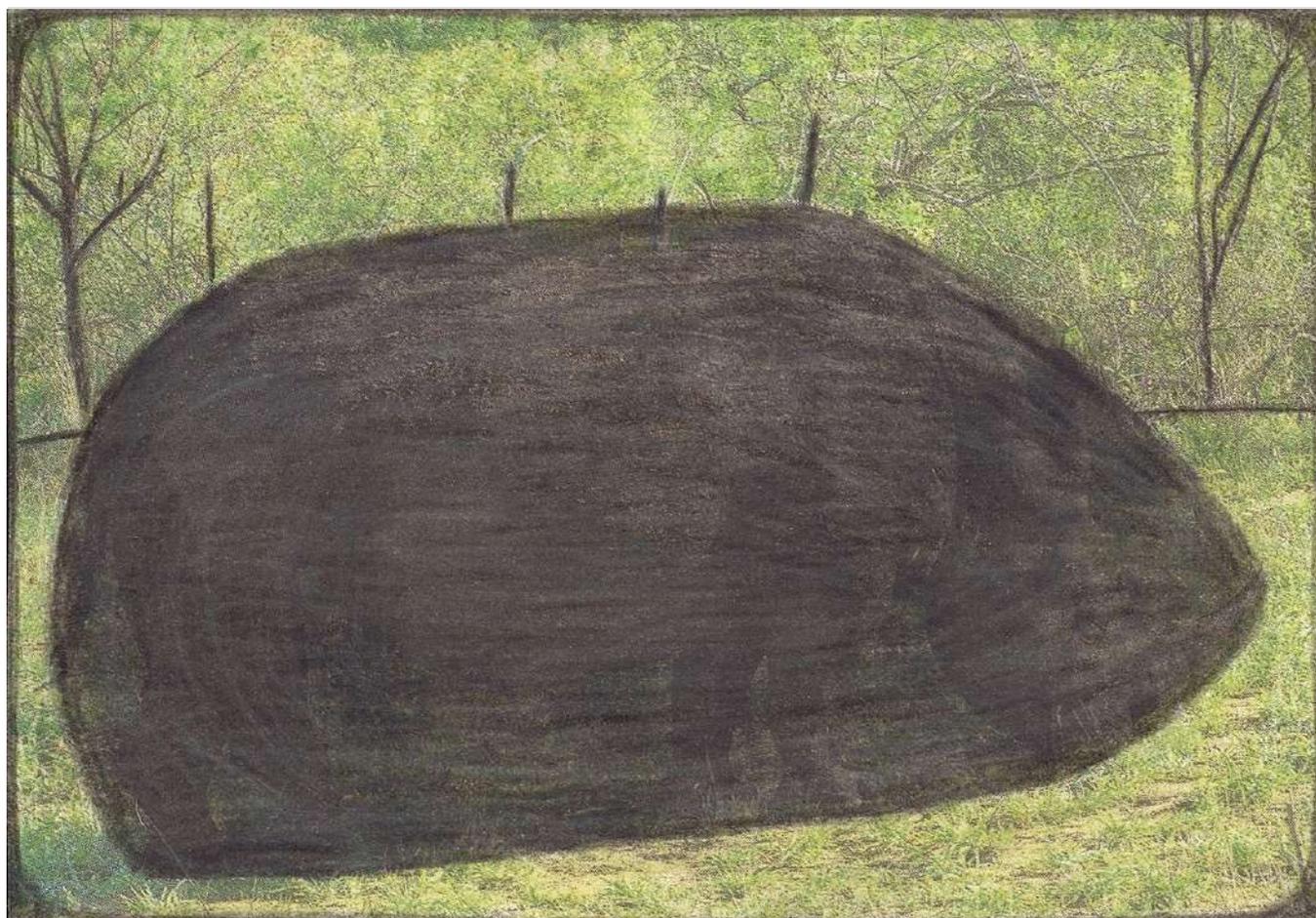
Monumental Art No Bigger Than a Postcard

Toying with blob-like shapes and the illusion of depth, the Austrian self-taught artist Leopold Strobl packs mystery and expressive power into small-scale drawing-collages.



by Edward M. Gómez

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Leopold Strobl, "Untitled (2020-005)" (2020), graphite and colored pencils on newsprint, cut and mounted on paper, 3.3 x 4.7 inches (all images courtesy of Ricco/Maresca Gallery, New York, unless otherwise noted)

When it comes to the fields of *art brut* and outsider art, there is nothing that many dealers and collectors like more than the dramatic stories of lives led on the margins of mainstream culture and society that are often associated with the self-taught creators of the works in these related categories. In recent years, though, some dealers in the outsider field have begun placing more emphasis on the technical aspects and formal qualities of

this sometimes hard-to-classify art. The Austrian Leopold Strobl (born 1960), whose star has risen steadily since his distinctive, small-scale drawing-collages were first seen at the Outsider Art Fair in New York a few years ago, is one self-taught artist whose success appears to owe little to the details of his biography, which his dealers tend not to overemphasize. Now, a big batch of his latest works may be seen in [Leopold Strobl: One](#), an exhibition on view at Ricco/Maresca's recently renovated and considerably expanded space in Chelsea, where it will remain on view through January 9, 2021. The increasing appeal of Strobl's works to collectors — some of the more avid have been known to buy several pieces at a time — seems to owe much to their powerful, semi-abstract imagery, their irresistibly mysterious air, and the monumental impact of their central forms — even though most of the artist's compositions are no larger than postcards.



The Austrian artist Leopold Strobl with some of his works at Galerie Gugging in the Art Brut Center Gugging, on the outskirts of Vienna, February 2019 (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

During an interview I conducted with Strobl last year, he recalled, “As a child, I made all kinds of art and I liked to experiment with materials.” I met the artist at [Galerie Gugging](#) in the [Art Brut Center Gugging](#), an arts complex on the northwest outskirts of Vienna; it houses a gallery, a museum, an artists' residence, and an art studio. With these various, related components, this institution has for many decades played a leading role in the promotion, locally and internationally, of the work of notable *art brut* creators from Austria. Through Ricco/Maresca, Galerie Gugging has made Strobl's work available in the United States. Strobl was born in the state of Lower Austria, north of Vienna. He told me

that, as he was growing up, he expressed a keen interest in making art, but that his schoolteachers advised him that an artist's life would be challenging and discouraged him from pursuing art professionally. Nevertheless, Strobl, whose long, grey-white beard, gentle gaze, and soft-spoken manner bring to mind the aura of a rather large elf, said, "That did not deter me."



Leopold Strobl, "Untitled (2020-002)" (2020), graphite and colored pencils on newsprint, cut and mounted on paper, 3.1 x 4.4 inches

Over the years, he explained, without going into detail, he made numerous landscape pictures before beginning to clip photos of landscapes from newspapers, which for him seemed like a natural development. He was especially interested in photos showing large expanses of sky. He observed, "Making art has an almost religious character for me. I've always been interested in the sky; I used to go up on the roof and look at the sky."

Clipping photos from newspapers in turn led Strobl to the technique he uses today to produce his intimate-feeling drawing-collages. First he pastes a cut-out photo onto a fresh sheet of paper. Then, using both ordinary pencils and colored pencils, he outlines in black certain basic shapes on the photo, filling them in and obliterating the appearance of any human figures or other elements he might regard as distracting. In this way, he creates new compositions on top of those that are already present in his source images.



Leopold Strobl, "Untitled (2020-031)" (2020), graphite and colored pencils on newsprint, cut and mounted on paper, 2.9 x 3.8 inches

Strobl likes to use colored pencils in varying shades of green or sometimes blue to cover visible patches of sky in a photo; he also meticulously draws dark, rounded corners in most of his compositions, effectively framing them both visibly and conceptually. "These drawn-in corners are very important to me," he noted. The bulbous, curvilinear forms that appear like giant lumps or boulders in Strobl's images, strategically obscuring automobiles, human figures, streetcars, or other objects, recall the sensuous, voluptuous lines and shapes that characterize the works of such modern artists as Jean Arp, Henry Moore, or Myron Stout. The peculiarly monumental presence of his freestanding forms brings to mind that of some of the stone works of the Japanese-American modernist sculptor Isamu Noguchi or of the big, looming shapes in the contemporary American artist Suzan Frecon's richly pigmented paintings. Strobl, who, for the most part, is unaware of canonical modern-art history, does not intentionally aspire to evoke such affinities in his work. In the selection of Strobl's recent works now on view at Ricco/Maresca, sprightly forms prance across grassy glades, and large blobs hunker down and commandeer most of their pictorial space. In some compositions, the artist's all-obliterating black pencil seems to gobble up their underlying photos like a magic drawing board gone berserk, leaving voyeuristic peepholes that only heighten a sense of mystery about what, exactly, is being presented, and what is being concealed.



Leopold Strobl, "Untitled (2020-050)" (2019), graphite and colored pencils on newsprint, cut and mounted on paper, 2.6 x 3.5 inches

Strobl works at home but regularly visits the Art Brut Center Gugging to drop off his newest drawings and chat with Galerie Gugging director Nina Katschnig, who is fond of the artist and tends to ply him with tea and jelly-filled doughnuts. "Leopold is very conscientious and diligent," she told me, adding, "He knows what he likes, and his works reflect the purposeful aesthetic decisions of a true artist." Leafing through a binder containing a group of his works that, at the time, Katschnig had yet to closely examine or catalogue in the gallery's archive, Strobl told me, "When I find a photograph that appeals to me, right away I have a sense of what I can do with it. I look for photos without too many churches or buildings." Then he looked up and added, wistfully, his words escaping from the depths of his thick beard, "I'm lucky if I can find one good photo per issue of any newspaper." **Leopold Strobl: One** *continues at Ricco/Maresca (529 West 29th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through January 9, 2021.*

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