



Realism
and
Expressionism in Berlin Art

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Essay and Selection
by
Eberhard Roters

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Extractions:

Introduction

Expressionism and Realism in Berlin. This exhibition is part of the Festival dedicated by the City of Berlin to the City of Los Angeles to mark its 200th anniversary. Seven living Berlin artists are being shown, all belonging to different generations. Alexander Camaro, born in 1901, is the eldest. Fred Thieler is fifteen years younger, and also the teacher of Wolfgang Petrick and Klaus Vogelgesang. Wolfgang Petrick and Klaus Vogelgesang, together with Walter Stöhrer, belong to the middle generation of artists living and working in Berlin today. They have already made a name for themselves in public. The younger generation is represented by Barbara Heinisch and Max Neumann, who are just beginning to launch their work. The paintings and drawings of present-day Berlin artists – most of them large-scale works – are presented side by side with historical examples of Berlin art, drawings and watercolors which were produced in the early part of this century up to and including the twenties. Our intentions in showing this collection need brief explanation.

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Realism and expressiveness – these are two components of the cultural image which should not, on the other hand, be overrated because they are neither calculated nor programmatically intended. They are that part of the cultural character which is easy to perceive yet hard to define – that which constitutes the "air" or "special touch" of a personality, no more and no less.

I should like to express my warmest thanks to all those who have helped in organizing the exhibition. There are two people who deserve special mention: Professor Jack Carter, the Director of the Wight Gallery in Los Angeles, with whom I was able to work out the plans and idea of the exhibition, which is being shown in his rooms. This of course involved many practical considerations and he was at all times extremely generous and helped in offering his suggestions. I also wish to extend my gratitude to Dr. Ursula Prinz, the curator of Berlinische Galerie, who so kindly took on the task of arranging the exhibition and preparing the catalogue in Berlin.

Eberhard Roters

Art from Berlin

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Barbara Heinisch takes the other approach. She paints her pictures directly on to the body of her model – or models; this takes place as a performance, up until now in the quiet of the studio, often in a kind of trance, aided by music. It is a public action, performed in the presence of a small audience. At the end the model frees himself from the muslin screen which clings to his body by making a slit in the material with a knife. (The artist arranges with her model beforehand where the cut should be made.) The model then steps out of the picture almost as though a birth had taken place. The action is usually recorded by means of a camera or video equipment. This action means as much to the painter as the panel painting which is left behind. And vice versa: the picture, as with the Tachists (cf. Thieler), is the relict of a physical activity – but it is more than a mere relict; it becomes a work of art in its own right once more. So we can see that Barbara Heinisch has managed to reunite two strongly opposed tendencies: the performance and the good, old panel painting – a missing link between the offshoots of anti-art in the tradition of Duchamp, Beuys and Vostell and traditional painting.

This interplay between the avant-garde and the traditional is surely typical of Berlin and its art. It was always more expressive and more realistic than art in the rest of Germany and Europe, more aggressive and untamed. But neither is it in its nature to kick against the traces. When it rushes into the avant-garde, this is never in a senseless way. There is always a quiet, restrained element to be found whenever something new has been discovered. One likes to anticipate things when referring back – like Petrick and Vogelgesang to Dix and Dada. One looks for firm ground in order to start asking questions – like Thieler and Stöhrer, Camaro and Neumann, too. Like Barbara Heinisch, one preserves the panel painting in order to go beyond panel painting. If there were a symbol for painting in Berlin, it could well be a pair of scales.

Or, as Eberhard Roters, who was responsible for choosing this selection, put it: "Art is philosophy by another means."

Heinz Ohff