

Preface

The death of painting may have been announced in the 1980s but things often happen just when they are least expected. Pessimism about the future of painting was partly due to the huge popularity of structuralism at that time. The structuralist approach to culture was rooted in linguistics—and wherever language dominates the visual element is soon downplayed. Theoretical approaches were the norm in the art of the 1980s in any case. But the subsequent rise of the Internet, with its constant stream of images, has changed the world forever, turning our culture into a visual rather than language-based one.

Undoubtedly, therefore, the arrival of the Internet has helped to trigger the resurgence of painting apparent since the 1990s. In recent years, a multitude of exhibitions have been devoted to painting, from the *Neue Leipziger Schule* to *The Triumph of Painting*. The most striking feature of this revival is the way the medium seems to have shaken off dogma in the twenty-first century. Today's artists no longer think in terms of styles; the world is their oyster. Everything seems possible. If painting today has one distinguishing feature, it is the way artists feel free to pick and mix styles. This hybridization—once described as the marriage of high and low art—is producing a virtuoso range of techniques and subjects. Thanks to our contemporary visual culture, the approach is predominantly figurative but this does not necessarily mean that depictions are straightforward. Artists make eager use of images from television, the Internet, or the print media, appropriating images and changing their context to endow them with new meanings.

This first ever museum exhibition of Léopold Rabus's work transports the viewer to a bizarre world full of hints of cruelty and perversity. The artist conjures up a baroque visual pot-pourri that leaves us amazed and fascinated rather than repelled. Garishly colored limbs, swamp-like landscapes, and grotesque architecture tumble across his canvases. The busy compositions are experienced as an assault on all our senses, although in fact we hear, smell, taste, and feel nothing. We simply see, but the sight is so overwhelming that we feel as though our ears are ringing and our brains intoxicated by scents.

Like many of today's artists, Rabus uses photographs; the big difference is that he often creates his photographic material

himself. In that sense, it is far more personal than that of many of his contemporaries. But if you come to his paintings expecting them to be autobiographical, you will be sorely disappointed. Rabus's bizarre pictorial universe is conjured up from his immediate experience of the contemporary world. It seems too strange to be true and, ultimately, the meaning assigned to the paintings depends on the viewer's own imagination.

In recent years, the three museums jointly organizing this exhibition of work by Léopold Rabus have repeatedly demonstrated that, contrary to earlier reports, the art of painting is alive and well. The GEM Museum of Contemporary Art in The Hague has held exhibitions of work by artists like Daniel Richter, Martin Eder, Tjebbe Beekman, and Michael Raedecker. Museum zu Allerheiligen Schaffhausen has exhibited work by Tim Eitel, Ingmar Alge, Matthias Weischer, and Klodin Erb. As for Kunsthalle Wilhelmshaven, since 2007 it has been engaging with a broad range of issues in contemporary painting and has held exhibitions of work by artists like Morten Buch, Cécile Hummel, and Michael Schmeichel, as well as showing work by Blaise Drummond, Robert Sherratt, and Matthew Davis in the context of the group show *Painting without Painting. Current Positions in Post-Action Painting*.

Our thanks go to the curators who made this exhibition possible: Doede Hardeman (GEM Museum of Contemporary Art), Markus Stegmann (Museum zu Allerheiligen), and Viola Weigel (Kunsthalle Wilhelmshaven). Galerie Adler, which has long shown such confidence in the artist, also did much to bring about the exhibition and accompanying catalogue. We are accordingly grateful to Ulrike Adler.

Publisher Hatje Cantz and designer Maarten Evenhuis worked with us to create a catalogue that does justice to the weird atmosphere of Rabus's art and in which authors Markus Stegmann and Joël Vacheron bring his outlandish pictorial world vividly to life.

And, of course, the exhibition would never have been possible without the kind cooperation of museums and private collectors. First and foremost, however, our thanks go to Léopold Rabus, who braved the Babylonian confusion of tongues involved with an enthusiasm that made this collaborative project the success it has become.

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