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True Confessions?

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nate, is conceived as something of a tourist album. Its 50 color and black and white photographs of random ironies from around the world—a battered flophouse sign that reads “Sunshine Hotel,” a chain-link-caged Christmas tree—are tipped into a small hardbound book, with pages left open at the end for “notes.” Scattered among the found follies are some slightly more deliberate gestures, by the artist and his friend M.C. Escher, who is shown at a café in Italy with a pair of wineglasses raised to his eyes as goggles, and there is a color shot of Roiter’s own handiwork in the form of a wooden campstool set up on a patch of grass in San Francisco and engraved with the words, “God made artists; the Devil made tourists.” Clearly, Roiter enjoys playing the latter’s advocate.

Australian Allan Mann’s Charts & Ciphers (Ballarat, 1994, signed and numbered edition of 80, N70) is another kind of travel guide. It is a set of ten screenedprint images on unbound cards presented in a 7-1/4 x 8-3/8-in. wooden box. The five “charts” and five “ciphers,” each a compound of pictographic symbols, are, a prefatory note explains, “intended to be visual puzzles...which have a relationship to ancient maps of exploration, to secret ceremonial rites of progress and acceptance, to coded messages of discovery...”; each, in turn, may be thought of as having a bearing on the others. Mann, a printmaker with a longstanding interest in the evolution of languages, has also produced a larger folio-format book of related material called The Stoneposts Suite, in an edition of seven (SA900).

Blind Trust: Guides for the Uninfected, a collaboration between Robert Flynn and Chris Packard (self-published with support from the MFA Photography Department of the School of Visual Arts, designed by Flynn with Bethany Johns, New York, 1994, $10), documents and extends a November-January exhibition at the Temple Gallery of Temple University, Philadelphia. There, Flynn’s imagery was presented as 7-ft.-high ink-jet print panels adhered directly to the wall, along with cibachromes and other color photographs; as in the book, where they are reproduced in black and white, Packard’s texts were incorporated into the visual material. The photographs are of living men, mostly nude, always underwater, along with classical statuary, Greco-Roman wrestling diagrams, and anatomical charts and drawings. The object, ably achieved, was to reinvint the metaphor, for the subject is the cost of living, healthy, amid ceaseless death by AIDS. Packard’s writing is precise, poetic, urgent, and fresh, and in the book it is also reprinted by itself, for greater clarity. A helpful essay by David Deitcher concludes the publication; “More than a few viewers of Blind Trust will think that it does not concern them,” he calmly begins, with tact that could hardly be more chilling.

NANCY PRINCENTHAL

Nancy Princenthal is an art critic who writes this column regularly for PCN.

1994 Schiele exhibition catalogue observes that it is now possible “to plot a retrospective exhibition with a precision heretofore impossible.” Yet the catalogue, edited by Kallir, offers as its major critical essay only a personal reminiscence by Alessandra Comini, perhaps this country’s preeminent Schiele scholar, regarding her early contacts with the artist’s family. Comini reflects very little upon what was at stake in these early encounters. In addition, while the exhibition and its beautifully illustrated catalogue have provided American audiences with the opportunity to become more deeply acquainted with the artist’s work, there is little in the organization (by themes) and the individual entries by Kallir, which inevitably reprise in summary form the arguments of her earlier book, that would indicate what, precisely, are the benefits of the new “plot.” The foundational contributions to our understanding of Schiele’s work made by Nebeyah, Kallir, and Comini ought not to prevent our recognition that they have not been disinterested critics. Kallir and Nebeyah entered Schiele scholarship as art dealers trading in the artist’s works, while Comini’s intimacy with the artist’s family—which, at one level, is to be praised—also constitutes the basis for another kind of prejudice. A certain decorum and hero worship are to be discovered to varying degrees in each author. Even when acknowledging the artist’s failings, Schiele’s biographers have consistently chosen to justify, or at least to contain, the artist’s sexual politics, his narcissism, and his professional self-promotion under the guise of genius.

Kallir’s satisfaction that there exists no evidence for Schiele’s sexual “misconduct” is really an assertion that there is no written evidence to this effect among the surviving memoirs, artist’s statements, interviews, and police records. What she chooses to ignore is precisely the evidence that inspires such suspicions: Schiele’s works. How shall we regard the early paintings and drawings of Geri, nude, and what are we to make of the many images of the artist and his models masturbating or of the fact that many of these girls had just reached puberty? No doubt, Kallir hoped to correct the insidious conception that the connections between biography and art are in Schiele’s case self-evident. Whitford, for instance, quoted Serge Sabarsky, one of Schiele’s most important collectors and another biographer, to the effect that “few artists need explanation less than Schiele...one can be overwhelmed by the starkness of the imagery or even shocked by it, but no explanation of a “message” is necessary, no analysis is required—the artist has said all he wants to say in his own clear language.” Given the choice between no and every connection, a biographer’s interest in a future Schiele scholarship must inevitably explore a middle ground, however methodologically elusive this task may be.

Particularly before his arrest, Schiele’s art may be understood to belong to a genre heretofore little explored in the visual arts, that is, the confessional image. One must use this term carefully, because in a wider sense, all artists who

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Austrian Expressionism: The Formative Years. By Patrick Werkner. Published by the Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, Palo Alto, 1993. 328 pp. 166 illustrations. $49.50

Egon Schiele: Art, Sexuality, and Viennese Modernism. Edited by Patrick Werkner. Published by the Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, Palo Alto, 1994. 166 pp. 45 illustrations. $37.50

In his preface to Egon Schiele (1985), still one of the most interesting readings of the artist’s work, Frank Whitford complained that “there seems to be something about the artist that inspires in his admirers and collectors proprietary feelings, an exaggerated sense of self-importance and the conviction that although others have every right to be interested in Schiele they should not have the temerity to discuss him in print. Not only do many collectors deny access to what they own, they also do their best to prevent it from being reproduced.” Fortunately, even before Whitford’s book reached press, Christian Nebeyah published extensive and documentary material as Egon Schiele. 1890–1918. Leben. Briefe. Gedichte (1979). Recently, Jane Kallir’s Egon Schiele: The Complete Works (1990) not only provides a nearly definitive, fully illustrated catalogue raisonnée, her discussion of the works employs documentary materials heretofore unavailable. Yet even today Whitford’s complaint is not without some validity.

The control over the interpretation of Schiele’s oeuvre is best observed indirectly. A characteristic example is Kallir’s repeated use in her monograph of the unpublished memoir by the son of Anton Peschka, Egon’s sister Geri’s husband, testimony that functions largely as hearsay evidence, but is used to establish critical points in the psychological, sexual, and professional relationships between the artist, his sisters, mistresses, wife, and models. Since the memoir exonerates Schiele from his most scandalous reputed behavior (proposed by Whitford, among others), that is, an incestuous relationship with Geri, it helps Kallir deny the existence of Schiele’s “supposedly abnormal sex life.” She argues that “there is no evidence whatsoever” for such a conclusion.2 This denial is significant because it defends an artist whose sex life.” She argues that “there is no evidence whatsoever” for such a conclusion.2 This denial is significant because it defends an artist whose
standing both from the vantage of the sexual attitudes of fin-de-siècle Vienna and from the psychological state of the artist, it is due at least in part to the fact that most Schiele criticism has been cast in the monographic mode. The format fosters the propensity to treat the artist exclusively under the rubric of "genius," and thus the artist's stories get told largely within a self-referential envelope; the artist is sole producer of his unique vision, which in turn may be made to excuse much. "Influences" become the material for creative gestation, and individual works are offered as illustrations to an overall developmental history of personal style and sensibility in which commercial, political, and even cultural circumstances appear only as background material. The insular character of this pattern perhaps explains why Schiele studies have been so little touched by work that overtly critiques the cult of genius and destabilizes the authorial subject. Most notably, his art has not been subject to a sustained feminist analysis.

The recent anthology devoted to Schiele's work, edited by Patrick Werkner, derived primarily from papers presented at a 1990 symposium held at Stanford University, while rarely even hinting at a feminist analysis, does offer an important, if belated, exegesis of the artist. The book also palpably demonstrates the sharp differences in interpretation still available. For example, in his contribution to the volume Werkner takes the position that Schiele made "his most original and also most disquieting contribution" in his early work. Conversely, in an essay comparing Schiele to Arnold Schönberg, Leon Botstein, a historian of fin-de-siècle Austrian society, concludes that Schiele's mature and important works date from the final years of his life (a preference he shares with Kallir). He further regards the early work as exemplifying "a coy attitude toward candor, rather than interior distress and angst (as in Kokoschka and Gersd)." Similarly, whereas Botstein has Schiele capitalizing on the Viennese obsession with sexuality, the architecturally coherent form of transcribing the subject onto the women and female hysteria, Werkner wishes to be firmly "historical," he believes that the artist's ambition to tell the story of Rodin's erotic drawings on Schiele's work. Olsen offers new insight into Schiele's drawing practices, proposing not only Rodin as a direct source of inspiration for Schiele's choice of subjects and compositions but, and this is the most original aspect of his argument, also for his specific way of drawing. Olsen takes believe that Rodin taught Schiele fundamental lessons in draftsmanship, encouraging a new spontaneity, a far less mediated form of transcribing the subject onto paper. On the whole a convincing argument, what Olsen leaves out must still be considered. His claim for Rodin's importance comes at the expense of other experiences that may have equally shaped Schiele's style. I am thinking in particular of Schiele's (controversial) debt to Kokoschka's drawings dating between 1908 and 1910, and to a less often recognized connection between Schiele's compositional manners and the European poster movement (with its debt in turn to Japanese prints). Sherwin Simmons' recent essay on Kokoschka's posters (PCN, XXXI, 161) demonstrates just how important it is that high modernist art be reconsidered in light of contemporary advertising culture. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Olsen takes little interest in the sexual politics and the institutional lessons offered by Rodin's drawings. He chooses not to mention, for example, that the exhibition of such drawings by Rodin cost the director of the Weimar state museums, Harry Kessler, his position in 1906. Given such a cause célère, it is not important to consider how the "obscenity" of Rodin's work would come to bear on Schiele's interest in the sculptor? Werkner, in this essay and in his chapter on Schiele in his book Physik und Psyche (1986), recently translated under the title Austrian Expressionism: The Formative Years, offers a wider context for Schiele's style and handling of subjects. Werkner aspires to present a balanced, contextual, and carefully documented look at Viennese art and culture around 1910. Thus, in both instances, he attempts to place Schiele's work within a broad understanding of sexual politics in fin-de-siècle Vienna. In the essay on the child woman and the child hysterical, Werkner benefits in particular from Sander Gilman's work on fin-de-siècle sexual stereotyping, that is, on the class, race, and gender prejudices that inform Schiele's selection of pubescent models. Werkner also relates Schiele's work to contemporary, especially Freudian, models of hysteria and its representations. But because Werkner wishes to be firmly "historical," he does not allow himself to consider Michel Foucault's fundamental insights in The History of Sexuality regarding exactly the matrix of subjects that most concern Schiele—the female hysterical, the masturbatory child, the pedophilically inclined adult, all played against the notion of "conventional" sexuality. Hoping to preserve Schiele's avant-gardist credentials, Werkner believes that the artist's ambition to tell the truth about sex, to offer, as he phrases it, more than "the sultry, languorous atmosphere that characterizes works of both art and literature at this time" truly separates Schiele from his
kunstschauen of 1908 and 1909). The second chapter treats Secessionist aesthetics, with its cult of beauty, and then analyzes its overthrow in the "expressionist" period under the sign of "hostile powers," that is, the assertion of Expressionist truth-telling against the sexual repressions of contemporary Vienna. The book is bracketed on the other side by a comparably general discussion of the aesthetic, philosophical, and social issues entertained by Austrian Expressionism, beginning with a chapter titled "Body and Soul," in which Werkner provides a wider intellectual and artistic context for how the body came to be conceived as a vehicle for artistic truth-telling and for personal identity. The next chapter, "Affinities and Differences," attempts to summarize what is exceptional about Austrian Expressionism vis-à-vis its European variants, while the last chapter, "Art History as the History of Ideas," is somewhat deceptively titled, since it is exclusively concerned with the philosophical resonance of Viennese Expressionism, juxtaposed against such doctrines as monism, the collapsing of mind and matter into a single principle. Werkner's brief survey of these matters serves primarily to establish the artists' independence from any one doctrine (Expressionism). This, ultimately, Werkner takes as evidence of the fundamentally contradictory character of their art.

Of the chapters in between, perhaps most interesting are those devoted to Gerstl and Kubin. Gerstl's work, tragically terminated by his suicide in 1908 and compromised by the destruction of many paintings and personal artifacts, is here perhaps for the first time fully integrated into a discussion of the artistic culture and landscape that attempted to mirror the spiritual experience of the individual. Likewise, the essay on Kubin firmly underlines the importance of an artist, who, owning to his practice as a graphic artist, has all too often been assigned to the periphery of studies of high and English literatures, is a remarkable garden created in the ruins of a castle at the foot of a steep hillside. In fact, the garden was originally the moving staircase at its core.

Clearly, the more we seek to analyze "objectively" the work of an artist like Schiele, the more we are in danger of refusing to see its polemical character. What gets elided in such discussions is not only how Schiele's work connects to a wider visual culture but also how the gender and sexual issues are assumed, but hardly discussed. The difficulty of working out the complex interactions of often quite contrary ideological positions is likewise reflected in Werkner's Austrische Expressionism. He organizes the book around a series of portrait sketches devoted to Richard Gerstl, Oskar Kokoschka, Alfred Kubin, Arnold Schönberg, and Schiele, as well as a chapter on fellow travelers. These essays are preceded by two chapters: the first on the Vienna of Schiele's student and reception of French modernism in the glory years of the Secession, that is, between 1897 and 1905 (with a subsequent discussion of the Klimt-organized Kunstschauen of 1908 and 1909). The second chapter treats Secessionist aesthetics, with its cult of beauty, and then analyzes its overthrow in the "expressionist" period under the sign of "hostile powers," that is, the assertion of Expressionist truth-telling against the sexual repressions of contemporary Vienna. The book is bracketed on the other side by a comparably general discussion of the aesthetic, philosophical, and social issues entertained by Austrian Expressionism, beginning with a chapter titled "Body and Soul," in which Werkner provides a wider intellectual and artistic context for how the body came to be conceived as a vehicle for artistic truth-telling and for personal identity. The next chapter, "Affinities and Differences," attempts to summarize what is exceptional about Austrian Expressionism vis-à-vis its European variants, while the last chapter, "Art History as the History of Ideas," is somewhat deceptively titled, since it is exclusively concerned with the philosophical resonance of Viennese Expressionism, juxtaposed against such doctrines as monism, the collapsing of mind and matter into a single principle. Werkner's brief survey of these matters serves primarily to establish the artists' independence from any one doctrine (Expressionism). This, ultimately, Werkner takes as evidence of the fundamentally contradictory character of their art.

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