

Press release

Zurich, 11 December 2008

Kunsthaus Zürich presents 'Friedrich Kuhn (1926-72) – The Painter as Outlaw'

From 12 December 2008 until 1 March 2009, the Kunsthaus Zürich is hosting a comprehensive exhibition of the work of local painter Friedrich Kuhn (1926-1972), with over 150 pieces on show. Kuhn, who died young, was an enigmatic figure, and his art is inextricable from his life. His eccentric painting style, at once finely tuned and anarchic, displays a sensitivity to pop culture and a bold will to scandalize, and is as astonishingly fresh and relevant today as when it was created.

Friedrich Kuhn is the leading figure of the Zurich school of the 1960s which served as a counter-balance to the era's dominant style, abstract/concrete art. Although he never left Zurich for the modish art centres of the day – or perhaps for precisely this reason – Kuhn was well-read and worldly enough to exude a force that reshaped painting from within, creating grotesquely ornamental compositions interpenetrated with collage work, as well as sculptural objects and other hybrid forms.

Ambiguous and genuinely committed to shocking bourgeois sensibilities, Kuhn also addressed the role of the artist in society. His work, at once finely tuned and anarchic, mingles figuration with abstraction and is laced with idiosyncratic references to modern mass culture and allusions to the then-burgeoning pop style.

OUTSIDER ART?

A bogeyman to some, for others Kuhn was the very picture of the intellectual free spirit with a heart of gold, throwing off the chains of social convention to indulge his joie de vivre with a wry smile. Paul Nizon, the Swiss writer in Paris who referred to the late Kuhn as an 'outlaw', saw in his art a kind of secular blasphemy, an infringement of the stylistic unities that was at the same time the object of a 'remarkable cult of beauty'. Kuhn's work demonstrates his devotion to a painting beyond schools and styles, whose candour, for all that it can present itself as childlike, is in fact not naive. Kuhn is entirely a creature of his age, in which outsider art – Art Brut, Adolf Wölfli, Louis Soutter – was being discovered, and Ensor, Dubuffet and Cobra were the order of the day. Yet at the same time – and this is Kuhn's strength, and what makes him still so topical today – we are in no doubt that his psyche and spirit are firmly rooted in modern reality.

ROMANTICISM AND ADVERTISING

Kuhn's art from the mid-1960s is evidence of his fine eye for standardized dream motifs, such as the palms that recur in his paintings and sculptures, or the images of female beauty and exotic fruit he included collage-style in his painting work. Such details broaden the referential scope of his art to span the distance from the Romantic tradition all the way to mass tourism. In his multifaceted work, Kuhn takes aim at various manifestations of categorical ambivalence, as for instance in the artfully curled little bonnet of whipped cream he clips out of an advert to imitate and parody its 'painterly' context while at the same time sending up the world of sentiment, as a mummified bride and groom blend into the stiff, portentous white that surrounds them. Kuhn's is a complex painting process, 'sampling' as it does elements of both high and pop culture.

SUBURBAN SPRAWL IN SWITZERLAND

It sometimes seems as if Kuhn drew with his brush and painted with his pencil – watercolours and oils, on paper, cardboard, canvas and wood; and he was still using his mixed technique to apply collage to the sculptures he produced towards the end of the 1960s. These pieces continue the furniture motif and the emboxed character of his paintings of the late 1950s, which mock Cubism while seeming at the same time to disintegrate the symbols of solid middle-class virtue. This was the dawning of Switzerland's age of housing developments, the much-decried suburban sprawl Kuhn depicts in his large-format 'Rêve helvétique I+II' (Swiss dream I+II), two pictures he painted for the 1964 Expo in Lausanne.

AN OUTLAW – AND A PRODUCT OF ZÜRICH'S BOHÈME

Born in 1926 in Gretzenbach in the canton of Solothurn, Kuhn moved with his family to Zurich while still young. His first steps in the art world are only sketchily documented, and the apprenticeship as a graphic artist noted in one account of his life may be just as much a legend as the 'voyage to the Eskimos' he is also said to have taken. From 1952 to 1954 he lived in Bern and Ticino before settling down again in Zurich, where he cultivated his position as an outsider before dying of alcoholism in 1972 at the age of 46. Throughout his life he was able to depend on a small horde of admirers, accomplices and collectors, despite the heavy demands he made on them (as well as on himself). From our perspective Kuhn's work is best seen in the special context of bohemian Zurich and Lucerne in those days, in which an artist could retreat within himself even as he remained in touch with the cosmopolitan ideas and the buzz of the day. For all that it was routinely lamented as confining, Switzerland in the period following the war was a stimulating place for artists, a country in which key intermediaries, museums and art galleries had been able to keep the modernist tradition alive uninterrupted during the conflict.

150 WORKS: KUHN'S LEGACY IN CONTEMPORARY ART

The exhibition, curated by Bice Curiger, offers a cross-section of Friedrich Kuhn's work in the form of over 150 paintings, drawings, watercolours and sculptures. The works on loan from museums and private collections testify to the artistic quality of an oeuvre at once abundant and un-academic. Its features have influenced Swiss art down to our day, as well as tracing out its dynamic relationship to the international scene. Kuhn may be considered the 'last' of those Swiss artists whose range remained regional, since they never ventured beyond their borders to an international art centre; and Peter Fischli and David Weiss, accordingly, would be the first of a new generation of artists who were never obliged to make the trip outside of Switzerland to enjoy international acclaim from the very outset.

The exhibition is supported by the Stanley Thomas Johnson Foundation, by Theo Hotz and by the Erna and Curt Burgauer Foundation. It is accompanied by a 168-page catalogue sponsored by Edouard A. Stöckli and Horisberger Regensdorf AG printers. In addition to inviting the reader to rediscover the opulent oeuvre of Friedrich Kuhn and offering insight into his work, the book also contains analysis and local colour, collects the testimony of eyewitnesses, and uses abundant photographic evidence to document the life of a sensitive dandy and rakish baron of the underground. Available at the Kunsthaus shop for CHF 54.-.

VISITORS' INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz 1, CH-8001 Zurich, www.kunsthaus.ch

Open Sat, Sun, Tues 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Wed, Thurs, Fri 10 a.m.–8 p.m.

Admission: CHF 12.-/8.- (concessions). As of 1.1.09: CHF 14.-/10.- (concessions)

Christmas: 24 and 26 December 10 a.m.–6 p.m. Closed 25 December

New Year's: 1 and 2 January 2009 10 a.m.–6 p.m.

Advance sales: RailAway/SBB Kombi-Ticket, with reduction on rail travel and entrance to the museum. Available at local stations and by phoning Rail Service: 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19 per min.), group rates possible.

Magasins Fnac, tel. +33 1 4157 3212, www.fnac.ch

Public guided tours: Friday, 19 December and 30 January, both days at 6.30 p.m.

For private guided tours apply on +41 (0)44 253 84 06 (Mon–Fri 9 a.m.–12 noon)

NOTE TO MEDIA

For additional press information please contact Kristin Steiner, Kunsthaus Zürich, Press and Communication, kristin.steiner@kunsthaus.ch, +41 (0)44 253 84 13