

Press release
Zurich, 29 October 2015

Kunsthhaus Zürich presents 'Tomi Ungerer. INCOGNITO'

From 30 October 2015 to 7 February 2016, the Kunsthhaus Zürich is showing more than 170 mainly unpublished collages, drawings and three-dimensional works by the well-known illustrator, author and activist Tomi Ungerer (b. 1931 in Strasbourg).

Tomi Ungerer has become world famous for his drawings and gouaches. But a hitherto unknown treasure trove is only now seeing the light of day: an extensive collection of collages, as well as more recent three-dimensional works, created over several decades. Unlike his illustrations produced as commissions, these are free artworks motivated by his own interests. Ungerer first adopted the creative technique of the collage back in the 1950s, even before art-historical research noted the increased prevalence of collages and material montages using a wide variety of techniques in the late 1960s. Over the years, the crossovers between applied and fine art have become impossible to ignore.

FOLLOWING ON FROM DAUMIER, VALLOTTON, DÜRRENMATT, HUGO

There is a tradition at the Kunsthhaus Zürich of exhibitions devoted to the artistically independent work of artists who first became known as illustrators. They include Honoré Daumier (presented in 2008), Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1951), Saul Steinberg (2008), Félix Vallotton (1928, 1938, 2007) and Andy Warhol (1978). Tomi Ungerer, not just a fine artist but also a gifted author and storyteller, falls also within a second tradition of exhibitions focusing on writers such as Friedrich Dürrenmatt (1992), Alfred Jarry (1985), the Marquis de Sade (2002) and Victor Hugo (1987).

POP ART IN NEW YORK: NARCISSISM, THE EROTIC AND POLITICS

All these individuals work in a number of disciplines. It is also noteworthy that they turn towards acerbic socio-political commentary on their contemporaries, or the erotic and the longings that fuel it. Often, they do both at the same time. This is especially true of Andy Warhol, who was working in New York at the same time as Tomi Ungerer. Both asked themselves questions about narcissism, longing, the erotic and politics. Their artistic responses take the form of nihilistic confrontations rich in contrasts. Like Warhol's visual worlds, Ungerer's collages are kaleidoscopes or picture puzzles. Depending on where they are standing, viewers are struck more by the socio-political or the erotic aspects. A disabled veteran strides through a landscape of ruins in which gigantic, shapely female legs rise up towards the sky; a tattooed pig makes itself comfortable above the

horizon of the azure-blue sea; a tightly clenched fist replaces the head of a masturbating businessman.

THE COLLAGE AS METAPHOR FOR FREEDOM

In the process of artistic production, the collage conveys a strong sense of self-empowerment. Ungerer deconstructs the existing, recombining individual components with little technical effort but acutely intellectual associative skill and therefore sometimes obtains an entirely different meaning. His creations are not bearers of a single message that rejects all other interpretations; rather, they actively encourage multiple meanings: polysemy rather than monosemy; tension rather than harmony.

SURREALITY FROM THE WORLD OF THE SITUATIONISTS

Certain stylistic references support the thesis that Ungerer's approach has much in common with that of the Situationists in Paris. The city had become a place of adventure and source of inspiration to be explored by means of aimless wandering. For Ungerer – born in Alsace, torn between the French and German languages and cultures and spending his life travelling restlessly between the US, Canada, Ireland, France and Switzerland – the appropriation of set pieces became the elixir of life. The stubbornness and productive desperation with which Ungerer pursues his artistic quest is exemplified in his 'Waiting for Godot' series (2009), a homage to the writer Samuel Beckett of whom he was a great admirer. Visitors to the Kunsthaus Zürich will be able to judge for themselves whether his visual creations tip over from dream into trauma.

LARGELY UNKNOWN OEUVRE PRESENTED THEMATICALLY

It took a long time for institutions to address the art of this self-proclaimed 'chameleonist'. Today his permanent presence is assured by the Musée de la Ville de Strasbourg and the Sammlung Würth, two of the principal lenders to this exhibition, next to the artist himself. Over half of the 178 collages, drawings, assemblages and three-dimensional works on show in Zurich come from the artist's own collection. Curator Cathérine Hug has collated this largely unpublished material in close cooperation with Tomi Ungerer. Polemical depictions of man and woman are succeeded by cityscapes and landscapes. A separate section is devoted to the ornamental and serial as formal metaphor for social criticism and disparity. Sculptures and objects provide surprising tonal emphasis. Probably the most extensive group deals with the body, fragmented and vulnerable, as fetish and object of desire. This theme runs through all phases of Ungerer's work, from the 1950s to today. There is a certain irony in the works of such a multi-faceted artist being presented in a conventional hanging. The curator plays with the dialectic in Ungerer's work and his critical distance from dominant institutions, and the way he takes aim at and challenges them.

CATALOGUE IN STANDARD AND SPECIAL EDITIONS

The 400-page catalogue is published in German, English and French by Diogenes Verlag. It contains the works displayed in the exhibition as well as new essays by Tobia Bezzola, Tobias Burg, Cathérine Hug, Philipp Keel and Thérèse Willer and is available from the museum shop and bookstores, price CHF 59 / € 49. The luxury, numbered and signed special edition, which includes an exclusive screen print, costs approximately CHF 500 / € 500.

With the kind support of the Würth Group and the Dr. Georg and Josi Guggenheim Foundation.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Kunsthau Zurich, Heimplatz 1, CH-8001 Zurich, www.kunsthau.ch. Opening hours: Fri-Sun/Tues 10 a.m. – 6 p.m., Wed, Thurs 10 a.m. – 8 p.m. Closed on Mondays.

Admission to Tomi Ungerer incl. collection: CHF 15 / CHF 10 (concessions and groups). Children and young people up to the age of 16 free of charge. Admission free on Wednesdays.

Public guided tours: 14 November and 19 December at 11 a.m., 26 November and 14 January at 6.30 p.m.

Advance sales: Zurich Tourism: hotel room reservations and ticket sales. Tourist Service in Zurich main railway station, tel. +41 44 215 40 00, information@zuerich.com, www.zuerich.com.

SBB RailAway combination ticket, with discount on travel and admission: at stations and by phoning Rail Service 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19/min. by land line), www.sbb.ch/kunsthau-zuerich.

Magasins Fnac: sales points in Switzerland: Rive, Balexert, Lausanne, Fribourg, Pathé Kino Basel, www.fnac.ch; France: Carrefour, Géant, Magasins U, 0 892 68 36 22 (EUR 0.34/min), www.fnac.com; Belgium: www.fnac.be.

NOTE AND CONTACT FOR THE MEDIA

Visual material is available at www.kunsthau.ch under Information > Press.

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