

DANIEL RICHTER

SPAGOTZEN

SALZBURG VILLA KAST

24 Saturday - 28 Saturday



Parallel to Daniel Richter's solo exhibition in the Salzburg Rupertinum Museum of Modern Art, presenting works created in connection with Daniel Richter's stage-set for Vera Nemirova's production of Alban Berg's *Lulu*, the Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, in its first collaboration with Richter, is showing his latest series of works.

Under the title *Spagotzen*, a neologism coined by the artist, the exhibition comprises fifteen works showing mysterious figures bathed in an artificial light typical of Richter, against a sometimes seismographically linear background. They seem like actors on a stage, engaged in strange kinds of interaction. Richter's new block of works is distinguished on the one hand by an innovative, graphic, almost secessionist style, the paint applied like varnish, and on the other by a novel orientation towards the world of symbolism at the turn of last century, the mysticism of Odilon Redon and Félix Valotton's compositions dominated by flat areas of black and white contrasts.

"Ultimately, there is no difference between abstract and figurative painting – apart from particular forms of their decipherability. But the problems of organising paint on surface always remain essentially the same. In both cases, it is the same method that makes its way through various forms." Thus Daniel Richter commented in 2004 on his change from abstract to representational painting – a personal turn-round which he carried out at the turn of the century. Born in 1962, the artist has shaped painting in Germany since the 1990s as few others have done. In his large-scale oil paintings, Richter dovetails set pieces of art history, mass media and pop culture into idiosyncratic, narrative pictorial worlds.

Daniel Richter studied 1992-1996 with Werner Büttner – one of the protagonists, along with Martin Kippenberger, of the revival of expressive trends in painting during the 1980s – at the Hamburg Academy of Fine Arts, and worked as assistant to Albert Oehlen. Initially, he did abstract paintings, with a cosmos of forms intensely colourful to the point of being psychedelic – somewhere between graffiti and intricate ornamentation. His orientation was divided equally between Surrealism, Underground and the intricate, elongated bodily forms of Italian Mannerism.

Since 2002 he has painted large-scale scenes filled with figures, often inspired by reproductions from newspapers or history books. These show conflict and menace in excessive aggression and vitality. Richter's change to figurative painting was often acclaimed as a "Renaissance of the historical painting". However, while the classic historical painting relied on clear narrative with the aim of legitimising something contemporary by referring to some past event, Richter deals with the failure of social utopias. "I was interested in ways of referring to the world and to a world view that I wish to perceive or describe", he said in 2007.

If we look at his previous style, we see an artistic practice "which aims to ease the picture towards a maximum superabundance of colours and painting" (Roberto Ohrt, 1997) – although in his latest series this is toned down in favour of enhanced nuance. The symbolist painter James Ensor and the pioneer of expressionism, Edvard Munch, might be seen here as Richter's artistic forebears. At the same time, Richter is committed to the painting of Oehlen and Kippenberger, demystifying the aura of the painted picture. Many of Richter's works are puzzles, playing with historical formulae of pathos, the viewer providing content from his own knowledge and his ideas on politics and pop culture.

A further important aspect of Daniel Richter's painting is that of light – white accents distributed over the entire picture to create highlights. "Richter's pictures are light-painting, though not in the sense of atmosphere created by chiaroscuro or of *plein-airisme*, but as experiments with contemporary forms of light" (Christoph Heinrich, 2007). The representation of artificial light, flashlight, thermal image or X-ray picture evokes an atmosphere of artificiality and nervousity. The theme of total surveillance seems to be an important motif in Richter's oeuvre – the association with infra-red and thermal imaging cameras is unavoidable, revealing a paranoid view.

In Richter's paintings, space – in so far as it is indicated – always has the effect of a stage, and usually of an abstract geometrical place. For Bartók's *Cantata Profana* at the 2008 Salzburg Festival, Richter created a monumental, flamboyant panel-painting with niches and indentations set at right angles, and tiny port-holes through which the members of the chorus looked out and sang, thus forming a conglomeration of figures typical of Richter's work. Superabundance in his painting is followed by reduction: for Bartók's one-act opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, Richter built a stage-set with three huge dark veils, arranged to form a box and appliquéd with lengths of grey and black fabric intertwining like branches or veins. The two aesthetic poles of reduction/darkness/mysticism and painterly excess/colour/light – characteristic in general of Richter's work – were clearly manifest on this occasion, in the form of two stage-sets. Daniel Richter returns to the Salzburg Festival in 2010 to design the set for Vera Nemirova's production of Alban Berg's second opera, *Lulu*.

Richter's subjects suggest allusion to current politics, but on closer inspection, we see that this is not so. "Events, whether conveyed through the media or through his own experience, appear to serve Richter rather as a projection screen for his inner images, the origins of which remain

concealed from the viewer" (Fritz W. Kramer, 2002). Daniel Richter enjoys playing around with an iconography of radical political gestures.

There are clear correspondences in Richter's work to his socialisation in the politicised atmosphere of the Hamburg squatter scene, while his great institutional success (for instance, the North Rhine- Westphalian art collection in Düsseldorf and the Hamburg Kunsthalle held major solo exhibitions in 2004 and 2007) and his career in the international art market counteract this aspect of his past. His ambivalence between middle-class lifestyle and the art world establishment, on the one hand, and leftist tradition on the other provided the press with a welcome and frequently.