

Press release

Arnulf Rainer

Landschaften—Goya 1983—1992

25 January—5 April 2025
Opening Saturday 25 January 2025, 11am—1pm

Thaddaeus Ropac
Salzburg Villa Kast
Mirabellplatz 2, 5020 Salzburg



Arnulf Rainer, *Ohne Titel*, ca. 1989.
Mixed media on chromolithography on cardboard on wood. 76.5 x 105.5 cm (30.12 x 41.54 in).

This exhibition brings together two of Arnulf Rainer's celebrated series on the occasion of the artist's 95th birthday: the *Goya* paintings and *Landscapes*, both series created between 1983 and 1992. In his uncompromising search for new means of expression, Rainer developed radical approaches

to art, establishing him as one of the most influential artists of the post-war period. The exhibition at Thaddaeus Ropac Salzburg coincides with a major institutional exhibition at the Arnulf Rainer Museum in Baden near Vienna, on view until 5 October 2025.



Arnulf Rainer, *Serie Goya*, 1983/84.
Mixed media on photo on wood. 62.5 x 53 cm (24.61 x 20.87 in).

Through overpainting Rainer effectively enters into a dialogue with the works of other artists and into a conversation with himself. [...] A comparison to works by other artists, against the backdrop of various art movements or cultural contexts, reveals their idiosyncrasies, the special position they occupy in twentieth-century art history.

— Nikolaus Kratzer, curator of the current exhibition *Arnulf Rainer: Nothingness Against Everything* at the Arnulf Rainer Museum

In the *Goya* series, Arnulf Rainer pays tribute to Francisco de Goya (1746–1828), whose art – deeply attuned to the complexities of his time – explored dark, surreal themes that foreshadowed modern existentialism and abstract art. Rainer probes the paintings of the Spanish master by reinterpreting them through expressive overpainting, and the finished works oscillate between homage and radical transformation. ‘Paint, [...] helps Rainer to transform his composition into a different physical state,’ writes art historian and curator Helmut Friedel on the subject of Rainer’s ‘attacks’ upon the underlying motifs. Some pieces in this series feature discernible faces, while others show semi-abstract oval structures, only faintly reminiscent

of heads – or tunnels and archways. An azure-blue and reddish-pink tonality runs through the series, lending the depictions a surreal quality, overlaid with deep-black gestural brushstrokes. Based on photographic enlargements of Goya’s portraits, Rainer’s intense, expressive depictions adopt the stark contrast and raw quality of expressionist woodcuts. By enlarging Goya’s imagery to such a degree that the photo fragments into benday dots, Rainer draws a connection to postmodern movements such as Pop art.

Heads and faces have been recurring motifs in Rainer’s work throughout his career. At first, the artist documented his own grimaces and other exaggerated facial expressions, drawing on dormant or manic reserves of energy to express the tensions of inner states. He has noted that facial expressions and body postures predate the spoken word as forms of human communication, and he considers them more complex and meaningful than language. In the late 1960s, he frequently took photo-strip portraits during nightly sessions in the automated photo booth at the Westbahnhof train station in Vienna. During an experiment with mescaline, a psychedelic, he perceived spots of colour appearing on these



Arnulf Rainer, *Serie Goya*, 1983.
Mixed media on photo on wood. 62.5 x 52.5 cm (24.61 x 20.67 in).



Arnulf Rainer, *Ohne Titel*, ca. 1988.
Mixed media on chromolithography on cardboard on wood. 76.5 x 105.5 cm (30.12 x 41.54 in).

portraits and, acting upon this impulse, began overdrawing the photographs, initiating his famous *Face Farces* series (1970–73). In the subsequent decades, Rainer turned to portraits by other artists, including works by Vincent van Gogh and Rembrandt. Through the process of overdrawing, he emphasises the expressive moments captured in the artworks of his predecessors, and these graphic or colourful adaptations either correspond to the mood of the underlying image or contradict it.

Rainer's *Landscapes* combine depictions of nature with his characteristic gestural overpainting. The works express his exploration of nature as a means to convey internal conditions, while fluctuating between abstraction and figuration. Landscapes characterised Rainer's very beginnings as an artist. While still at school, he painted cartographic landscapes inspired by aerial photographs, including bomb craters, fires, tanks and aeroplanes in drawing lessons, avoiding figures and faces. In 1945, he

fled from Russian occupation in Lower Austria to relatives in Carinthia, where he painted a series of uninhabited landscapes over the next few years, a period that marked his decision to become an artist.

In contrast to his earlier overpainting, nature takes centre stage as an autonomous motif in this semi-abstract, intensely colourful *Landscapes* series. Landscape paintings from the 18th and 19th century serve as the substrata of this series, shining through a multilayered application of paint – sometimes diluted, dripping and fluid, sometimes in dense individual strokes, often heavily applied to the extent of damaging the support. 'The transparent layers of paint allow the deeper layers of paint to shine through. This creates an enchanting world of secrets and radiant lightness,' writes Helmut Friedel. Elements, such as hills, trees or streams, remain recognisable but are fragmented and placed in new contexts through the overpainting and gestural interventions.



About the artist

The Austrian artist Arnulf Rainer is regarded as a pioneer of Art Informel, a movement that brought an intuitive form of lyrical expression into the field of abstraction. One of his early influences was Surrealism, and an ongoing interest in dreams and the subconscious imparts a mystical element to his work. He created his first *Overpaintings* in 1952, layering brushstrokes over existing artworks or photographs, and has continued to investigate the possibilities of this process throughout his career. During the 1960s and 1970s, experiments such as 'blind drawing' brought Rainer into contact with Viennese Actionism, as he explored the extremes of facial expression and body language. From the 1980s onwards, he increasingly used religious motifs, such as the cross and crucifixion, for their connotations of suffering and death but also transcendence.

Following his inclusion in the 1978 Venice Biennale, Rainer's international reputation flourished during the 1980s, with important solo exhibitions at the

Nationalgalerie, Berlin (1981); Centre Pompidou, Paris (1984); Abbazia di San Gregorio, Venice (1986); a *Self Portraits* show that travelled across the United States (1986); and a major retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, New York (1989). His work was also included in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* and *Avant-Garde in the Eighties* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1986–1987), as well as entering the permanent collections of The Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum. More recently, his work has been the subject of retrospectives at international institutions, including the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2000); Kunstmuseum Den Haag, Netherlands (2005); Alte Pinakothek, Munich (2010); Albertina, Vienna (2014 and 2018); Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz, Austria (2017); Arnulf Rainer Museum, Baden, Austria (2020); and the MARE – Muzeul de Artă Recentă, Bucharest, Romania (2022). In 2002, the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich dedicated a room to the artist, where his work is on permanent display.

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