

ART & DESIGN

Celebrating Self-Taught Artists at a Center in Austria

By EDWARD M. GOMEZ JUNE 29, 2016

MARIA GUGGING, Austria — By choice or by chance, the visionary autodidacts whose works fall into the related categories of Art Brut and outsider art find themselves on the margins of conventional culture and society, even if their creations sometimes draw on ideas from the popular mainstream.

Unlike their academically trained counterparts, these artists, often employing found or castoff materials, tend to work primarily for themselves, unconcerned with the canon or the latest critical positions. The term “Art Brut” was first coined by the French artist Jean Dubuffet in the 1940s, and since then an alternative world of specialized publications, galleries, museums and fairs has developed to support the genre.

In recent years, the establishment has begun to embrace outsider art, with its unusual aesthetic and spirit of authenticity. The British artist Grayson Perry has found inspiration in collages by the American outsider Henry Darger; the gallerist David Zwirner has shown the works of self-taught artists; and at the 2013 Venice Biennale such works were displayed alongside those of contemporary luminaries.

At the same time, the field of self-taught art has developed significant outposts of its own. One of them is Art Brut Center Gugging, a cultural complex in this village north of Vienna that focuses on the intersection of art and psychiatric treatment. The center’s Museum Gugging is commemorating its 10th anniversary with the recently opened exhibition “johann hauser... i’m the artist!” (on view through Jan. 8), which showcases the work of the Austrian Art Brut master Johann Hauser (1926-1996), a longtime resident of the facility.

A celebration of explosive color and draftsmanship, this survey of more than 200 of Hauser's drawings and etchings offers an illuminating introduction to the kinds of deeply personal themes and the inventive handling of materials that characterize his oeuvre and, in general, the work of the most original self-taught artists.

The show and its substantive and encyclopedic catalog include many of Hauser's emblematic works, which he usually made with little more than graphite or colored pencil and wax crayons on paper. His subjects include nude or fabric-draped women, rockets and flying machines, and semiabstract moons and lunar eclipses.

Hauser's female subjects make for some of his most powerful images. Voluptuous clouds of hair, elongated breasts and other highlighted body parts give the gestural *Sturm und Drang* of Willem de Kooning's oil-painted women a run for their expressionistic vigor. Hauser's art delivers a punch time and time again from a modest palette of mainly primary and secondary colors. He once remarked that "just black is nothing."

Born in Bratislava in what was then Czechoslovakia, Hauser was sent to a psychiatric institution when he was still a teenager, and he never learned to read or write. In 1949 he was transferred to a psychiatric hospital on the outskirts of Vienna and later became a resident of the hospital from which Art Brut Center Gugging emerged.

Johann Feilacher, a psychiatrist and working artist himself, is Museum Gugging's director. (In a building near Maria Gugging, he uses chain saws to make large-scale wooden sculptures.)

"As much as we appreciate the self-taught status of the artists who have been associated with this place and whose works we have shown, we try to present their art in a broader context," he said at the Hauser exhibition's opening. "Their work is special, but they should not be isolated."

In recent decades, Dr. Feilacher has played a large role in guiding the evolution of the Gugging art complex. The institution grew out of an earlier psychiatric hospital, where, starting in the mid-1950s, for diagnostic purposes, the psychiatrist Leo Navratil (1921-2006) asked his patients to make drawings. The character and quality of their handiwork and imagery caught his attention,

and he began focusing more specifically on what would now be called art psychotherapy.

Later, Dr. Navratil corresponded with Dubuffet, who in the 1940s had begun researching and promoting the hard-to-classify works of self-taught artists. Dubuffet described their output as art brut, French for raw art, referring to the sense of unfettered creative energy they conveyed.

Dr. Navratil introduced Dubuffet to Hauser's drawings, which the artist considered definitive examples of Art Brut. In 1965, the psychiatrist published the book "Schizophrenia and Art" in which he examined the relationship between schizophrenia and artistic expression, noting that making art could play a role in the healing process.

He went on to establish a center for art and psychotherapy at the hospital, where 18 male patients resided and made art. Among them were Hauser, Franz Kernbeis (born in 1935) and Oswald Tschirtner (1920-2007). Later, August Walla (1936-2001), who became known for text-and-image paintings and murals that expressed a polytheistic outlook, also moved in.

In time, Dr. Feilacher became Dr. Navratil's assistant and then his successor, transforming the still clinically oriented Center for Art and Psychotherapy into an artists' community, renaming it the House of Artists and placing a new emphasis on the artistic creativity of its residents rather than on their mental illnesses.

Taking a socio-therapeutic approach, the reborn facility stopped using the word "patients" in the mid-1980s to describe its program's participants. In 1994, Gallery Gugging was established as a venue for the presentation and sale of the Gugging artists' works.

The gallery's director, Nina Katschnig, said it has "working relationships" with other galleries, including Ricco/Maresca Gallery in New York, which has exhibited works by such Gugging artists as Leopold Strobl and Günther Schützenhöfer. At a sold-out show there this spring, Mr. Strobl's pencil drawings on paper sold for \$4,000 or more.

Along with the museum, the gallery, the artists' house and a gift shop, Art Brut Center Gugging is home to Atelier Gugging, a studio in which some of its associated artists work. The studio is also open for use by visitors.

“You don’t necessarily have to come make paintings or drawings, as long as you come to explore your creative potential and make something artistic,” Dr. Feilacher said. “That’s what this atelier — and this entire art center — is all about.”

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