



LEOPOLD **STROBL**

S M A L L S C A P E S

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IN ASSOCIATION WITH GALERIE GUGGING

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The captivating and mysterious world presented in *Smallscapes* comes by way of a series of intimately scaled drawings that persuade us—like magnetic little portals—into landscapes of haunting beauty. Every drawing presents a deliberately partial view, but collected they are strangely Zen-like in their unity. We catch glimpses of reposed forms that resemble hills and crests or prehistoric rocks, nery trees and melancholy shrubs, segments of quiet roads, castles, fortresses, clock towers, precisely schematic houses and constructions—their windows peeking back at us like multiple all-black eyes. This world comes steeped in shades of ochre yellow, raw umber, sage, pine, olive, and moss greens, touches of bone white, graphite and gunpowder greys. We are not turning seaward any time soon; skies are minty, dawns are not roseate, and yet the contours of this realm express an almost meditative state, an intense quietude or—depending on the viewer's disposition—an extreme suspense.

This is the work of Leopold Strobl, born in 1960 in Mistelbach, Lower Austria, and who from a scarce biographic record comes across as a Kafka-esque figure—yet one who found definitive solace and redemption in artistic practice; the focused contemplation that keeps mental demons at bay. Strobl has devoted himself exclusively to art for more than 35 years, and for the past 12 he has been a guest of the Open Studio program at the Gugging House of Artists in Vienna. He draws in the morning and single-mindedly finishes a new piece per session. This aspect of his routine relates directly to his chosen format (most works are approximately 4.2 x 3.9 in.). Strobl always renders his drawings—or the component parts of his paper collages—on carefully selected newsprint clips, which he then adheres onto clean drawing paper. He signs the back of every finished work with a personal symbol, notes the technical specifications, and—remarkably—records how long it took him to complete it.

This undergirding of published media (utilized as a kind of graphic informational base) furnishes Strobl's works with different pictorial facets and layers of meaning. Under his hand (and an intuitive grasp of light effects and the interaction between solid colors and transparencies) a few of the printed motifs emerge while others are obscured. In some compositions, the artist illuminates a given naturalistic element with flushes of color (a tree canopy, the outlines of a nocturnal cityscape, parts of a rocky ground) to create visual texture, three-dimensionality, or realistic depths of field that merge impeccably with the more abstract execution of the whole. In other drawings, the newsprint conjures an elusive palimpsest; a faint trace of words or letters barely visible, buried under the pigment. In all cases, this aspect of the work infuses it with hints of an ephemeral "real" world—selectively referenced—that underpin a psychological dimension conveying the opposite: stillness, timelessness, and spiritual contemplation. Notably, when asked what would make him happiest, Strobl answers that he will be happy when he is dead, and hence close to God.

Perhaps the signature formal feature of Strobl's work is his consistent, and brilliant, incorporation of bold dark masses that create overpowering negative spaces of sorts, thereby becoming the main subject of his compositions. These dark areas, which the artist outlines and colors before everything else, perform different functions. Sometimes they are an integral part of the landscape, taking the shape of mineral formations. Other times, they seem to be mercurial matter that could be handled like dough. In these cases, they can either almost completely swallow a scene, create an extreme vignetting, or become a deckled border that nestles the composition. In the human-less setting of Strobl's vision, these abstract volumes—which occasionally emulate basic humanoid forms and gestures—are arguably the nonfigurative, malleable main characters. Furthermore, they drive Strobl's virtuosic awareness of perspective and framing. We only see what we are allowed of these landscapes because the artist places us at specific points of view that we must come to terms with. This negation of omniscience, which expresses a very postmodern sense of relativity, constantly reminds us of the partial nature of every story. Yet, from our status as observers, the feeling is not quite voyeuristic but of discovery and wonderment; we could be characters stumbling upon this improbable kingdom. The scene is set and we must fill in the gaps.

Smallscapes presents a diverse selection of works produced by Strobl in the last two years. Curated in a filmic, interactive, mode—like a large-scale, walkthrough zoetrope—this exhibition illustrates the fact that every single drawing possesses the subdued potency of a haiku poem, but that it is also very much part of an unspoken master narrative set in Strobl's brain. The triumph of these tiny masterpieces is that, while we are entirely conscious of their tight physical boundaries (as when we look through a window or a keyhole), what we see is so enthralling that those limits dissolve and, for a split second, the world on the other end becomes all-encompassing. Then it happens again, and again.