

Kienzle Art Foundation Shows Works of Josef Kramhöller, who Died Prematurely

What if Josef Kramhöller had lived longer? What if he had overcome his self-doubts and had not committed suicide at the age of 31? Maybe he would have become a star. The exhibition "What a serious horror writing a play – hello man from kebab house" at the Kienzle Art Foundation reveals the palette of his potentials, the promise of this exuberant art.

Amelie von Wulffen, Jochen Klein, Andy Hope, and Thomas Helbig studied with Kramhöller in Hans Baschang's class at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Munich. Combing the early works of these artists, curator Franziska Hufnagel discreetly highlights Kramhöller within the group.

Some of the exhibited works belong to Jochen Kienzle's collection, which has been transformed into a foundation. But as a young student, Kramhöller also sold work to friends for little money, who have now lent to the exhibition. The artist was already dead when his first solo show opened eleven years ago at the Galerie Kienzle & Gmeiner, still in existence at the time. Meanwhile, his sister is the executor of the estate.

At art school, they called Kramhöller "our genius." The three works on paper near the entrance – on loan from Franziska Hufnagel – confront the viewer with the artist's audacious style. Rendered in bright ochre-colored acrylic on paper, the artist outlines a landscape with a swift paintbrush. Town and country merge into one texture with hard contour lines and soft surfaces. Next to this hangs a red sickle. The farmer's son from Bavaria loved to invoke Marxism. The third sheet in the row reveals a space, a stage with a screen, possibly a movie house. The stage became Kramhöller's trademark, both in his pictures and in his actual appearances. When recalling his performances, many witnesses use the term "embarrassing." The activities combined pain and shamelessness, whereas in his art he developed a buoyant counter world.

Raised in Rott am Inn, Kramhöller was born in 1968. He reacted sensitively vis-à-vis social hierarchies. In a catalogue for his posthumous exhibition at Düsseldorf's Kunstverein in 2004 fellow students remember how Kramhöller did menial jobs to feed himself and his little son. Applying his entire body, he created his works in ecstatic orgies. The light-handed velocity of his brush and pencil strokes conveys a life-affirming enthusiasm. Yet, the foundation is rough and brittle, the canvas is patched, and the sheetrock crumbles.

His negligence in dealing with materials is a marked contrast to Josef Kramhüller's careful draftsmanship. He variously sketches the head of Clara Schumann, the female portrait that used to be printed on the old 100 Deutschmark bill. The sheet seems effortless – like a finger exercise – and at the same time it refers to the burden of the financial difficulties.

Rebelliously, the artist entitles his book "Genuss Luxus Stil" i.e. "Pleasure Luxury Style." Certain passages from the collected writings from 1989-1999 are reminiscent of Georg Büchner's "Woyzeck." The battered individual lets loose the hellhounds to attack his own uncertain ego, always oscillating between clairvoyance and delirium. Upon learning of his twin sister's death, he writes to Amelie von Wulffen: "I am too young to bemoan the death of yet another beloved person every new month." At the time, the artist lived in London. Only shortly before, Jochen Klein, a friend from his Munich days and Wolfgang Tillman's partner, had died.

In the exhibition, the old classmates resume their conversations. The arrangement, although apparently improvised, is exciting. We see still lives by Jochen Klein and a revolutionary sun by Thomas Helbig. The painting used to hang in the apartment Helbig and Kramhüller once shared. In his new works, Andy Hope addresses the insightfulness of his fellow students. Amelie von Wulffen makes the screws dance on a board.

However, Franziska Hufnagel also stages Kramhüller's pain, his feelings of exclusion. Behind Elmar Zimmermann's massive room divider hangs a series of photographs: the artist's thumbprints on the windows of expensive shops. Designer clothes and jewelry seem unreachable. Because he has no money, he must remain outside and thus finds other ways of obtaining the goods on display.

At the end of his breathtaking tour de force Kramhüller loses his breath. In 1999 he produced two torn down posters, writing on the de-collages "Air Supply." He suffered from shortness of breath, nobody knows whether it was real or imagined. One year later he committed suicide. And yet his pictures burst with lust for life.

Kienzle Art Foundation, Bleibtreustraße 54; until September, Thur./ Fri. 2-7PM Sat 11AM-4PM