

Press Release

Dieter Roth. Islandscapes

25 February – 19 April 2025

Hauser & Wirth New York, 18th Street



New York... Renowned for his adventurous experimentation with both materials and subject matter, Dieter Roth (b. 1930 Hanover, Germany – d. 1998 Basel, Switzerland) generated a multifaceted oeuvre that transcends boundaries between painting, sculpture, design, literature, poetry and music. Featuring a selection of graphic works, monoprints, multiples and unique pieces spanning from the early 1960s to 1975, this exhibition, titled 'Islandscapes,' focuses on Roth's printmaking, which accompanied every phase of his life and practice.

Roth produced his first etchings on tin sheet metal at age 16 in St. Gallen, Switzerland. He would go on to master traditional printmaking techniques, including intaglio, woodcut, offset and screen-printing, via a roundabout education that included an apprenticeship to prominent Swiss graphic designer Friedrich Wüthrich, as well as lessons in lithography and typography with artist Eugen Jordi. Centering works in the landscape genre, 'Islandscapes' highlights Roth's heterogeneous techniques, the radicality of his approach and the key aesthetic principles he explored through printmaking, such as repetition, doubling, symmetry and inversion. Never one to consider printmaking a minor art form, Roth tested the concept of reproducibility—not only with his prints but with his sculptures and installations—deconstructing the ideal of a fine artwork as a discrete and original aesthetic object. Moreover, through his notorious use of foodstuffs as an art medium, Roth created works that challenged conventional understandings of display, conservation and ownership. His persistent use of commonplace materials, from mass-produced images to supermarket goods, allies Roth's art with a tradition of subversion that extends from Duchamp's concept of the 'Readymade' to the Pop art movement.

The vast panoramas of Iceland, with its striking topographic contrasts, figure decisively in the works which comprise 'Islandscapes,' revealing the deep psychological impact of Roth's move to Reykjavik in 1957, as well as his lifelong engagement with the island country thereafter. Popular images of Iceland co-opted from postcards (which Roth termed 'Melancholic Knicknacks') served as the starting point for several of the bodies of work in this exhibition. Some, shown here, are constructed from a basic act of assemblage. By cutting two copies of the same postcard along their horizontal axes, rotating one half 180 degrees, and taping either two top- or two bottom-halves together, Roth produced uncanny symmetries and inversions, simulating the effect of an island, city or skyline reflected in an undisturbed body of water.



Extant images of Iceland's landscapes also provided fertile ground for Roth's experiments with printing techniques. To create the four 'Icelandic Landscape' works shown here, Roth reproduced Polaroid photographs using halftone block intaglio, a pointillist printmaking technique which translates the tonal range of an image into circular divots of varying depths and diameters. By reducing the precision of the original photograph to a muddled impression, the prints in this series emphasize the defining feature of any landscape: a horizon line.

In 'Hut (Hat)' (1966), Roth screen-printed the distinctive silhouette of a bowler hat on colored paper, using its simple form—a dome ascending from an oval—as a frame in which to stage four-color screenprints of a postcard depicting the pristine valley of Glerárdalur. By altering the sequence of his screens and the color and qualities of his pigments in the serial production of these prints, Roth repurposed the landscape as a site of limitless variation and novelty. He likewise modified the hats themselves with airbrush and spray paint, lending some works in this series a convincing sense of dimensionality. Similarly, in both 'Surtsey' (1973/1974) and 'SURTSEY – Dinner' (1973-1993/2003) Roth iterated on a clichéd photograph of the titular island, which was taken as it was being formed 30 kilometres off Iceland's coastline by an undersea eruption. Roth's conflation of two key motifs in these series—a volcanic phenomenon and a steaming serving platter—reflects his profound interest in dynamic and volatile substances, and in change as a necessary precondition for creativity in general. Like many of Roth's artworks, the real island of Surtsey began to erode as soon as it came into view. Having emerged in 1963 in an explosion of fire and steam, it's estimated that the island will vanish beneath the ocean's surface by 2100.

As a lecturer in printmaking at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, in the mid-1960s, Roth famously began to implement perishable materials—including chocolate, cheese, butter, mayonnaise and yogurt—in conventional printmaking processes. Concurrently, through his friends Rita Donagh and Richard Hamilton, he came across a postcard depicting London's Piccadilly Circus, a major traffic junction that hosts an array of illuminated commercial advertisements, much like Times Square. Roth enlarged and reprinted this source image on many occasions, adding and subtracting visual information with overprinting and overpainting, or by introducing collage elements like iron filings. Over the course of his decade-long preoccupation with the Piccadilly postcard, he produced dozens of variations on the image and a handful of discrete projects. The 'Giant Double-Piccadilly' (1969–1973) in this presentation is entirely unique: it's remarkably large—a consequence of Roth's having blown up the original postcard image twice as much as he did for other Piccadilly prints—and there is a pronounced asymmetry between its recto and verso compositions, a feature that compels the viewer to orbit the artwork much like a vehicle in the traffic circle that it portrays. Furthermore, the chocolate, glue and cocoa powder that Roth used to obscure and recast the original picture have created unexpected colorations over time, due to their gradual degradation (Roth made a similar gesture in 'Little Cloud' (1971), spreading mayonnaise and butter across a minimalist intaglio print).



Two rounds of cheese replace ink or paint altogether in 'Kleine Landschaft (Small Landscape)' (1969). Pressed side-by-side in a plastic sleeve and bisected by a horizon line, the cheese circles have progressively decayed into rich circular palettes, and now resemble twin suns setting, or two islands rising from water. Roth assembled edible material into landscape again in 'Gewürzfenster (Spice Window)' (1971), a work that is perceived as much by smell as by sight. For this wall-hanging sculpture, he layered assorted spices in the spaces between five double-sided windowpanes, producing arcing bands of color that recall sediment samples or expansively receding mountain ranges. The effects of time on Roth's mutable materials are exceedingly visible in 'Am Meer (By the sea)' (1970–1974), a phalanx of 54 wood-and-paper flags planted in individual cones of molded sugar. Having reached various stages of disintegration, the sculptures resemble islands conquered by an anonymous empire that is fated, like all matter, for a fleeting existence.

Public Programming

On Saturday 1 March and Saturday 15 April, Hauser & Wirth will host screenings of filmmaker Edith Jud's 2003 documentary, 'Dieter Roth,' in the amphitheater at the gallery's 18th Street location in Chelsea. Through archival footage and interviews with Roth's friends and companions—as well as extensive conversations with his son, Björn, who worked with Roth for the last 20 years of his life—Jud's film presents a fascinating portrayal of a truly singular artist. Viewers will embark on a journey exploring the link between Roth's peripatetic life and his expansive, genre-bending oeuvre. For more information, please visit hauserwirth.com/events.

About the Artist

Through much of his life, Dieter Roth was itinerant, moving between studios in many cities. His two primary bases of activity—Iceland and Basel—were decidedly outside the mainstream. Throughout his career, the artist continually circled back to earlier ideas and processes, reinterpreting and transforming works so that linearity and closure are consistently defied. Transience and order, destruction and creativity, playful humor and critical inquiry, the abject and the beautiful, all maintain a consistent balance throughout his work.

Roth represented Switzerland at the 1982 Venice Biennale, and received a number of awards and prizes, including the 1991 Genevan Prix Caran d'Ache Beaux Arts, a prestigious Swiss prize. In 2004, The Museum of Modern Art and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in New York City jointly presented the major historical exhibition 'Roth Time: A Dieter Roth Retrospective,' a project co-organized with Schaulager Basel, Switzerland, and the Museum Ludwig of Cologne, Germany.

Roth's first solo exhibition at a North American museum was held at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 1984. Today, 40 years later, a major installation amounting to a life-sized portrait of the artist's studio in Bala, Iceland, is currently on view through 6 July 2025 at the MCA Chicago. 'Dieter Roth and Björn Roth: Balabild 5' presents a single dynamic sculpture composed of materials from Roth's studio, including paint tubes, brushes and even the studio's original wooden floor, as well as traces of the artist's domestic life, such as musical instruments and bicycle wheels.

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Caption and courtesy information:

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Dieter Roth

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SURTSEY

1973/1974

18 prints in cassette; collotype printing

(1-8 colours) on white paper on cardboard

50 x 65 cm / 19 5/8 x 25 5/8 in

SURTSEY - Dinner

1973–1993/2003

Portfolio of 18 unique prints; collotype

printing and screen printing (3-11

colours) on white paper

50 x 65 cm / 19 5/8 x 25 5/8 in

Hut (Hat)

1965–1966

Screenprint (4 colours) on colored paper, photomechanical

reproduction of a postcard, with additions (hand painting and

spray paint)

65 x 90 cm / 25 5/8 x 35 3/8 in

Photo: Chicago Albumen Works

Hut (Hat)

1965–1966

Screenprint (4 colours) on colored paper, photomechanical

reproduction of a postcard, with additions

65 x 90 cm / 25 5/8 x 35 3/8 in

Giant Double-Piccadilly

1969–1973

Chocolate, acrylic paint and/on photographic colour print on

canvas (double-sided)

160 x 220 cm / 63 x 86 5/8 in

Private Collection

Photo: Sarah Muehlbauer