

GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC

LONDON PARIS SALZBURG



Arnulf Rainer, *Übermalte Schwiegermutter*, 1961

Oil on canvas. 200 x 130 x 4 cm (78.74 x 51.18 x 1.57 in)

Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac London · Paris · Salzburg. © Arnulf Rainer. Photo: Ulrich Ghezzi

ARNULF RAINER *EARLY WORK*

23 NOVEMBER 2017 – 10 JANUARY 2018

Opening

In the presence of the artist

Wednesday 22 November 2017, 6 - 8pm

37 Dover Street, W1S 4NJ London

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PRESS RELEASE

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac London is pleased to present the most comprehensive and extensive show to date of Arnulf Rainer's early work. From 23 November 2017 to 10 February 2018, the exhibition will bring together Rainer's *Red and Black Overpaintings* [*Übermalungen*], dating from 1953 to 1971, and *Proportion Studies* [*Proportionsstudien*] from the early and mid-1950s.

Following the exhibition at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in Salzburg in the summer of 2016, this presentation provides an impressive insight into the artist's early work, in which the field of tension between Surrealism, American Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism and European *Informel* reaches a climax.

Arnulf Rainer is regarded as a pioneer of Austrian *Informel*, a movement which moved away from geometric abstraction toward a more intuitive form of lyrical expression. In the 1950s, he developed his *Übermalungen* series, influenced by the surrealist principle of *écriture automatique*, lying somewhere between 'aggression and therapy, destruction and correction' (Hans-Jürgen Hafner, 2016).

Rainer labelled the *Übermalungen* a dialectic reaction to his previous series *Proportionen* (1953/54), which were, in turn, an antithesis to his earlier figurative drawings, the *Kritzelexpressionen* [scribble expressions] and *Blindzeichnungen* [blind drawings], dating from between 1949 and 1952.

'The idea is to dissociate from the work everything that is not immediately involved in organising the functional resources; to abstain from any subjectivity or imagination. This kind of work is rational, unemotional, concentrating on the balance of form. It can be viewed only from this perspective.' Rainer wrote of his *Proportionen*, which were first shown in 1954 in the Galerie Würthle in Vienna.

In an interview with Peter Weibel in 1972, Arnulf Rainer said of his *Übermalungen* that they 'arose from the accumulation of 20,000 gestures of striking through. For me, these additions to the painting were a personal definition of the end of panel painting. Parallel to this, I practised the transition from the brush-stroke, a small, two-dimensional gestural act, to gesture *in natura*'. The following year, Rainer wrote that he pursued his artistic work primarily as autocommunication. 'Just as a dream, for instance, continues in deep sleep, overpainting is the development of this autocommunication in silence [...] with which I hope one day to achieve the expression of a total calm – that of deep sleep or prenatal cosy security or eternal peace [...]. The more extensively the picture is covered, the harder is each step towards obscuring it completely.'

Ahead of this exhibition at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Rainer was interviewed by Hans Ulrich Obrist for the exhibition catalogue. In this conversation, Rainer, referring to the *Proportion Studies*, mentions the philosopher Hans Kayser: 'He said that art consists solely of proportion, and he established laws of proportion. That interested me, so I had to try it out – and only I know that certain works of mine contain pure mathematical formulae'.

The artist also refers to Max Bense, Piet Mondrian and Josef Albers, taking their experiments in colour and proportion as a departure point for his own studies: 'I was familiar with Bense's theories and this is also how I saw the Proportions. Bense believed that an art-work consists of proportions and relations. If these are good, then the work is good. The problem is that, as was soon realised, that colours are very hard to quantify [...]. Every colour is emotionally stored in our brain – but of course not these colour proportions. With primary colours, such as Mondrian used, this works, of course, but it can't be checked. It was an interesting theory, but as you can see in Albers's work, there are often the same triangles, rectangles...'. Talking about the making of these works, Rainer explains: 'I made a passe-partout and different coloured papers. Then I laid these parallel in the passe-partout and played around, using tweezers to shift them back and forth. And also to achieve a balance'.

Early Work perfectly exemplifies this duality of expression: the *Black and Red Overpaintings* and the coloured *Proportion Studies*. The accompanying catalogue, *Arnulf Rainer, Early Work*, includes the aforementioned conversation between Arnulf Rainer and Hans Ulrich Obrist that took place in November 2005 at MUMOK [Museum of Modern Art Foundation Ludwig Vienna], five short texts by Arnulf Rainer, written between 1954 and 1976, and a poem by the renowned Austrian poet Friederike Mayröcker, written on the occasion of the exhibition. 'I live in pictures. I see everything in pictures, my complete past, memories are pictures. I transform pictures into language by climbing into the picture. I walk into it until it becomes language' (Friederike Mayröcker, 2007).

Hans-Jürgen Hafner, 2016 commented: *The impressive thing about Rainer is how unconventional, and above all how quickly he covers the scope of what is possible in painting, and reorganises it for himself alongside local tradition and connection with the international Modern Movement, anti-academicism and outsiderhood, pictorial symbol and the act of painting, conceptualisation and phenomenology, surrealism and abstraction'*

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Arnulf Rainer was born in Baden near Vienna in 1929. He lives and works in Vienna, Upper Austria and Lower Bavaria, and in Tenerife.

After an early interest in Surrealism and Art Brut, during the 1950s Rainer made his first overpaintings, which were to accompany his entire oeuvre. He drew and painted over pictures and self-portraits of his own, over works by contemporary artists and photographs, experimenting with diverse picture supports. During the 1960s, experiments such as blind drawing brought him into contact with Viennese Actionism. The series Face Farces and Body Poses show how he explored phenomena of mimic and body language, and the very question of identity; here Franz Xaver Messerschmidt's Character Heads were one source of inspiration. Rainer repeatedly flouted social taboos such as eroticism or death. During the 1980s, he devoted increasing attention to religious themes, including Madonnas and Crucifixions. His works deal with the major issues that concern him – life, death, violence and suffering.

In 1968, the Museum der Moderne in Vienna organised one of the first large retrospectives of his works. In 1978, he represented Austria at the Biennale in Venice and was awarded the Grand Austrian State Prize in the same year. Several large retrospectives show Arnulf Rainer's growing international importance, including 1984 at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1989 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2000 – to mark his seventieth birthday - at Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and at the Kunstforum Vienna, Austria. The Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich dedicated a room to Rainer in 2002, where his work will be on permanent display. He was the first non-Spanish artist to receive the Aragón-Goya Prize for his complete works and in 2009 the Arnulf Rainer Museum in Baden near Vienna opened.

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