

Kunsthhaus  
Graz

English

# *TOMORROW* Herbert Brandl

features

Thomas Baumann und  
Edelgard Gerngross

Space01, Space02  
23.10.2020–07.03.2021

Herbert Brandl is recognized as one of the leading contemporary painters in Austria today. His major exhibition at the Kunsthaus Graz is devoted to TOMORROW, and the many uncertainties it holds. Huge paintings in powerful colours or starkly contrasting black and white, bronze-cast sculptures of fabulous hybrid creatures or vast crystals conjure up associations that draw the works into a coherent whole within this architectural space.

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# Painting

Painting has been the main focus of Herbert Brandl's work since the 1980s. He is one of a number of artists in Austria who continued to paint at a time when art circles were dismissing painting as unmodern, unpopular, reactionary—or had even declared it 'dead'. Around that time the 'New Painting' movement came under intense discussion, also attracting the attention of Wilfried Skreiner, then director of the Neue Galerie Graz. These young painters—including Herbert Brandl—found a prominent advocate in Skreiner. Brandl has to this day remained true to the style he developed in his early years: a direct, impulsive application of paint, together with his interest in natural phenomena.

## Format and Colour

A special feature of his paintings is that their formats are strikingly large, sometimes huge: with surfaces of up to 30 m<sup>2</sup>, they go far beyond the boundaries of panel painting. Their sheer scale draws the viewer into the picture itself. There are few spaces in which they can be observed from a distance, meaning that the way we experience the paint—from up close—becomes very immediate. The paint is pure when applied,

and is only mixed once it is on the painting surface—through wiping, dripping, painting over, covering and uncovering again. Sometimes it is our eyes that do the mixing, by the contrast or juxtaposition of colours on the canvas. The glow of the paintings, their depth and their form are a result of Brandl's quick and very direct application of the paint. The way we experience the image is produced by drawing closer to, and moving away from, the picture—both during Brandl's painting process, and later on when we look at it. Distance and proximity, overview or detail, concrete motif or gestural expression, bold colours or starkly contrasting black and white—Brandl fully explores the possibilities of painting.

## Motifs

Herbert Brandl is a collector. His many interests include minerals, carpets, Chinese scroll paintings, calligraphy, and hand-made hunting knives. Above all, he collects photographs of all kinds. Many are his own photos, taken for some time now using just his smartphone. These and also newspaper clippings, internet finds and tourist brochures can be found stacked up in piles around his studio. They feature all kinds of things: landscapes,

especially mountains, fragments of nature, impressions from his garden, but also comics and cat pictures, all feeding into a pool of resources, an ever-expanding repertoire of visual information, notes and memories. He draws on this for ideas that may later be transformed into something completely different in his work. Herbert Brandl has become particularly well known for his mountain paintings. He says of himself that he is not so much a mountaineer as a 'mountain seer'—he is more interested in looking than climbing. He paints mountains (and landscapes) so that he can capture and condense moods, impressions and memories on the canvas. He might have actually climbed the mountain in the picture, but equally might not—his memories are composed not just of what he has himself experienced, but also of photographs or found image material. This does not produce realistic depictions, but instead images of the landscape that are subjective and emotional.

## Process

Herbert Brandl calls his work process 'disoriented', spontaneous and dirty. He describes painting as a very tense, explosive process—both stressful and concen-

trated at the same time. For him this mental state is a desirable and worthwhile experience, and one which he can only attain through painting. In this state he creates his pictures with intense focus and yet also under physical strain. For him, the most important thing is the act of painting itself, the coming into being of the pictures. He understands seeing and perceiving as a dialogue with the picture, which leans against the wall, lies on the floor, or can be freely placed in the room. Paint drips from above, is thrown with brushes, almost shot, smeared with kitchen roll or slats; constantly circling around the picture, he constructs its surfaces. During this process, paint and gesture cannot remain within the given limits of the painting's edges. Entire fields of colour are created not only on the canvas, but all around it too. He is also interested in the process of how things are coming into being as it occurs in natural phenomena, outdoors, on walks in natural surroundings, in crystals, and also in the sense of handicraft. By paying close attention to what is happening around him, he can make observations that stimulate his processes of abstraction and transform representational things. At the same time, his paintings can also arise from the joy of experimenting with line and colour, from manipulating

the material, when he allows pictures simply to emerge from the gesture itself.

## Sculpture

Between the paintings, we find wild cats, hyenas and mutants made of bronze mingling in the space of the Kunsthhaus. They seem alert, watchful; they are also clearly predators, engaged in stalking their prey. The starting point for these pieces was the Indonesian wooden figure of a hyena that Brandl once used as a brush scraper. This became the model for the various mutations that take up a position here as viewers, while intensifying the apocalyptic mood of TOMORROW. In their durability and timelessness, they become a measure of scale in the space, juxtaposed with the huge pictures and the visitors.

## Time

The works come together in the form of an installation under the vaulted space of Space01, shaping a narrative that speaks to temporality. The fast-paced, small-scale nature of the digital world of images that serves Brandl as a source of inspiration stands in marked contrast to the vast acrylic and oil paintings and the solid,

sturdy figures cast in bronze. The actual process of painting a picture is sometimes very fast—yet can take a very long time until it finally happens. Minerals also take a long time to grow. When Brandl talks about the ideal moment in the creative process, he is following in the tradition of heroic art history, which he has absorbed very carefully. Capturing the fertile moment was the declared aim of painters and sculptors until the beginning of modernism, however the path has now become a completely different one. At the ideal moment the idea is condensed on the canvas, at the fertile moment the narrative is frozen at the peak of tension. In one of Brandl's interests, calligraphy, painting *Ensō* (jap. circle) is the expression of that moment in which body and mind are unrestricted and free—an ideal state.

## Herbert Brandl

\* 17.01.1959 in Graz, lives in Vienna and in western Styria. From 1978 he studied in Vienna and has been teaching in Düsseldorf since 2004. In terms of art history, he is considered a 'New Wild' or 'neoexpressionist'.  
<http://www.herbert-brandl.com>

Edelgard Gerngross and Thomas Baumann were invited to participate in the exhibition at the Kunsthhaus Graz by Herbert Brandl.

Herbert Brandl  
*Exposed to Painting. The Last  
Twenty Years*  
Belvedere21, Vienna  
31.01.2020–26.10.2020

Herbert Brandl  
*24/7*  
Künstlerhaus. Halle für Kunst und  
Medien, Graz  
03.10.2020–24.01.2021