

## DAVID NOLAN **NEW YORK**

527 West 29th Street New York NY 10001

Tel 212-925-6190 Fax 212-334-9139

info@davidnolangallery.com

www.davidnolangallery.com

# Art in America

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## EUGEN SCHÖNEBECK

### David Nolan

“And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” wrote W.B. Yeats in his poem “The Second Coming” (1919). Rough, slouching beasts certainly came to mind upon entering Eugen Schönebeck’s recent exhibition. Horrific homunculi uneasily lurked through a diverse selection of drawings and two intense paintings.

This wide range of work, done between 1957 and 1966, was an amuse-bouche from a complex career. Yet, these nine years are the entire span of that career. Schönebeck, 77, still living in Berlin, simply stopped making art at age 30, just on the verge of commercial and critical success.

The two medium-size paintings stood out in the sea of small ink drawings. *Toter Mann* (Dead Man, 1962) and *Ginster* (Broom, 1963) are composed of small brushstrokes that thicken the surface in layer upon layer of obliteration and doubt: tantalizing hints at an invisible narrative process. In drawings done as a student, we can see Schönebeck developing his form, from pleasant landscape-based pen marks to abstract fields—edgier riffs on Tachisme, the then-popular European version of Ab-Ex.

With its Pepto-Bismol pink field, *Ginster* features a one-armed creature, with a sagging ruby-nippled breast, appearing to smoke a doobie or to extract a booger from its nose. Sitting on a dark form on a floor the color of dried blood, this frog-faced figure churlishly smiles atop a pile of legs that may or may not be its own.

Recognized in Germany for his historical early collaborations with Georg Baselitz (examples of which were on view), Schönebeck arguably did his strongest work after their joint efforts ended in '62, with paintings, such as the two in the show, that forced confrontation with repressed postwar feelings. His influence can be seen in the work of artists such as Martin Kippenberger, and the most recent drawing at Nolan, a portrait of the Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, seems to presage later Lucian Freud drawings.

The color palette and continuous metamorphosis of paint into ambiguous forms recalls Philip Guston’s late paintings, which had a parallel evolution. Guston, 30 years older, started his transformation at about the time Schönebeck, soon after developing a cleaner, photo-



Eugen Schönebeck:  
*Ginster* (Broom),  
1963, oil on canvas,  
63¾ by 50¾ inches;  
at David Nolan.

based, social-realist style, had ended his career.

So why did he stop? The official explanation is that he lost faith in the easel paintings that people were finally willing to buy. But the mural commissions that he hoped would allow him to create a socially engaged public art like his role model and portrait subject, Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, were not forthcoming. Unwilling to move back to a more sympathetic Communist East, he ended his art career.

This seems rather mystifying. But perhaps other issues were at play. Only nine when Dresden, a few miles from his home, was firebombed and his family displaced, young Schönebeck grew up in the rubble, chaos and death stench of a defeated Germany. Try then to imagine the satisfaction of coaxing form out of chaos for a young German painter in late '50s Germany. Even if the forms were grisly and abject, it was willed, real and emotionally honest.

Working from photographic sources granted Schönebeck new creative freedom and allowed him to avoid the painful uncertainty and self-doubt inherent in a process that begins with abstract randomness. Estranged from this creative existential fuel, and lacking the maturity to overcome a setback, it’s plausible that the young artist simply lost contact with his motivation to paint.

—Dennis Kardon