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BROOKLYN RAIL CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Robert Storr. "EUGEN SCHÖNEBECK, 'Saxon Landscape' (1964)." *The Brooklyn Rail*. September, 2012.



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"Sausage clouds" were the first words out of my mouth—to the apparent dismay of the artist whose drawing I was looking at. I couldn't help myself. That's what they look like. Which is unsurprising given that I was in the world's wurst capital—home of bratwurst, bierwurst, bockwurst, blutwurst, and braunschweiger, to mention only the Bs—and given that I had had two of the five mentioned above for lunch, plus knackwurst, several types of mustard, and potato salad. Beyond all that, clouds were also on my mind because the artist and I had just been discussing the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, whose likeness he had painted and drawn.

I once heard Yevtushenko recite Vladimir Mayakovsky's Socialist-Surrealist ode "A Cloud in Trousers" (1915) at a dinner party at Irving and Lucy Sandler's that was also attended by Elizabeth Murray and Bob Holman. Holman too recited Mayakovsky's poem. Yevtushenko declaimed it in the small NYU apartment as if he were addressing a thronged Soviet stadium, which, of course, he had done countless times. His delivery was correspondingly stirring but emotionally abstract. Up close but impersonal, one might call it. Holman spoke Mayakovsky's lines like a guy on the street, with an ear for the syncopated rhythms of everyday speech, rendering the poem intimate in ways I'd never before thought possible.

The painter, who'd twice drawn Mayakovsky's likeness and painted it once, managed to do the same thing with line and color and form, taking well-known photographic images and rendering them

palpable and affecting because his stroke was so, like the obsessive hatching of someone doodling while others chatter and argue. I wonder if the artist—his name is Eugen Schönebeck—would like Elizabeth Murray's paintings and drawings. I think he would. After all, they too make the most of an occasionally awkward but always engaging touch, of the sense that drawing is indeed feeling one's way over and into an image.

Now I must confess that the sausage clouds that caught my attention and prompted my spontaneous analogy were not exactly clouds in the first place. They were pneumatic lozenges of smoke, stretching laterally from two chimneys like inflatable pennants or an airfield's wind sock in a steady breeze blowing across a humble village over which chimneys rise. Those lozenges remind me of the cigarette smoke in Claes Oldenburg's metamorphic caprices which, by way of his shared affinity for Walt Disney, bring me back once again to Murray. However, Schönebeck's inflated forms are gritty and nervous in ways that neither Oldenburg's nor Murray's are and, by the same token, they distance themselves from Pop cartooning's double-edged—cute and cutting—arabesques.

True, the figure to the right of the chimneys has a doll-like head; however, it isn't really a figure but is instead one of two crucifixes in the composition. The other hovers in the middle of the scene near the horizon line, and the doll's head uncomfortably suggests the impaled head of a decapitated child. So we're not in Kansas anymore, nor in California or New York. We're somewhere at the edge of town in Mittel Europa, in a place where the boy-protagonist of Jerzy Kosinski's novel *The Painted Bird* (1965) might be right at home, inasmuch as anyone is at home in a nightmare.

Schönebeck is clearly at home in this drawing; he seems to know every nook and cranny of the buildings and terrain before his pencil gets to them. We learn this from the tenderness with which he accounts for details large and small in blunt, gray annotations—from the contours of small factories in the background and the bridge in the foreground to the uncanny balloon of foliage that swells behind the crucifix. But since the artist offers no explanation for that ambiguous religious symbol or what billows back of it, the foreboding that imbues this weird provincial vignette is mostly projection, mostly a habit of mind acquired after years of reading about the terrible things that once occurred in the obscure corners of a Germany whose friendly folkish face was a mask for horror.

Schönebeck provides no evidence of actual torture, no references to the Holocaust; the ubiquitous crucifixions of "Christendom" refer to suffering and, in the Medieval German tradition, often depict it with excruciating precision, but they remain archetypes. It is as archetypes that they function in Schönebeck's image—but with a twist. For nothing is so disconcerting as turning Christ in agony into a Christ child-as-semblage, or transforming Golgotha into a roadside shrine on the way out of one tiny berg and on to the next. German Expressionism is often spoken of as if it had only one hysterical register. Schönebeck's way with graphite demonstrates that it has minor modes as well—with major resonances.