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Artist of the week 79: Andreas Hofer

From clashes of pop culture to doodles, sculpture to collage, the ambiguity of Hofer's work frees us from history as it drags us in



Suprematist doodles ... Andreas Hofer, *Und Ich Stand Inmitten im Paradies* (2007).
Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

It seems that anything goes in Andreas Hofer's artistic universe. You're as likely to encounter dinosaurs as comic-book heroes, Nazis, Sigmund Freud, John Wayne, Veronica Lake or spacemen and cowboys. With scant regard for chronological decorum or the tyranny of taste, his subjects are cut loose from history, to gallivant through a parallel world where their usual meaning slips away. The media carrying this overloaded pantheon of fantastical and historical characters are just as diverse. The German artist's exhibitions have featured comic-strip drawings on notebook paper reminiscent of boyhood doodles, messily gestural painting moving between suprematist-inspired abstractions and figuration; collages, enormous sculptures and collections of junk-store treasures.

Since 1996, when Hofer was studying at Chelsea College of Art and Design in London, he's been signing his work with an alias: "Andy Hope 1930". The artist's alter ego resides in a pivotal year when historical currents swam together and pointed to different possibilities: optimism before the carnage of the second world war, but also the end of the Russian suprematist revolution. In fact, thanks to Hofer's postmodern vantage point, all categories are rendered fluid: past, present and future blend, but so do gender and even species.

The larger-than-life centaur sculpture Kardinal Julian (2006), for instance, has a fanged mouth and an abstract painting in place of eyes, overshadowed by an SS officer's cap. The looming Wooden Spaceships (2007) look like rockets as designed by a caveman. In Long Tomorrow, from 2005, a huge banner bearing a digital print of Captain America is set against a painting of what might be the wild west, a prehistoric wilderness or a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Political ideologies overlap, as with his pairing of American superheroes and Nazi supermen, though while Hofer signals alternative readings, he also suggests that nothing is fixed.

There are plenty of ghosts in Hofer's work, often conjured up as shades of places or things to upend our experience of time. One of his earliest projects, The Puschmann Museum (1996), shifted the contents of his neighbouring junk shop into a Munich gallery. More recently, Phantom Gallery, staged between art spaces in Zurich and Los Angeles, faked a sense of history by painting walls with faded markings to suggest absent artworks. Hooked up across space and time by live video feed, the galleries became spectral doubles of each other.

Hofer has described his work as a "labyrinthine infinity". He is attempting to re-imagine even the most loaded cultural signs, in an ambiguous imaginary world that can feel both liberating and ominous.

Why we like him: His atmospheric installation, Sweet Troubled Souls (2007), featured 13 portraits of haunted-looking women, shown in an old apartment in Paris.

Ahead of his time: Hofer is a long-time fan of cult B-movie director Ed Wood. He particularly cites Glen or Glenda (1953), for its open and forward-thinking take on cross-dressing.

Where can I see him? Hofer's solo exhibition, Andy Hope 1930 at the Freud, is at London's Freud Museum, until 2 May 2010.