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COLOGNE

Georg Herold

MUSEUM LUDWIG

New to Georg Herold's sculpture are the five oversize figures that dominate this one-room display of his work. Constructed from canvas stretched and stitched over lengths of timber, and sprayed with glossy car-body paint, they appear caught in some epic, spastic struggle with an invisible enemy. These ungainly antiheroes, generically titled *Figur I-V*, 2007, have enabled Herold to create a dramatic staging of the handful of earlier works also on display. One, for example, points accusingly at *Künstlerische Medizin, Patho-Ontologie (Cabinet patho-psychologique)*, 1995, a makeshift vitrine containing jars with faux-scientific labels. Another appears unimpressed by *Delivering the WOW*, 2005, a bare linen canvas from which jut five stacks of crudely cemented, unspectacular bricks. Small, mock-Beuysian drawings for the five large figures are displayed deliberately too high on the walls to be properly viewed, against a wide band of thinly brushed cheap green paint.

Herold's satirical cynicism is aimed both at the inflated mysticism of some contemporary (German) art and also at the self-satisfied *Spießbürger* (petits bourgeois) of postwar West German society. His target is the "creative stultification" that Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich psychologized in their famous book *Die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern* (The Inability to Mourn, 1967) as the "ego-depletion" of the German people after World War II, when all efforts were concentrated on reconstruction and none on interrogating the country's guilt. But whereas the Mitscherlichs retain some faith in the expressive language of psychoanalysis, for Herold all meaning is ironic and contingent. He reads creative failure through the elements of postwar reconstruction—softwood lathes and bricks—which, to recontextualize the Mitscherlichs' description of forms of postwar German public life, can be seen as "stage props" that "conceal a very inarticulate way of life."

But as the display here shows, Herold's works constantly undercut one another, revealing an attitude cynical even about cynicism itself. In his so-called caviar paintings, begun in 1989, inarticulacy is exchanged for a self-consciously beautiful image. The example on display here, *Untitled*, 1991, comprises DNA-like spirals of caviar suspended like drifts of smoke, each egg laboriously numbered. The spirals recall Herold's earlier spoof of genetic description, *Genetischer Eingriff in die Erbmasse bei Frau Herold* (The Genetic Alteration of Mrs. Herold's DNA), 1985—not on display in Cologne—a makeshift model of DNA made from bits of old wire and wood. Both works recall the example of Herold's former teacher, Sigmar Polke, but have a focus and direction often lacking in Polke's work. Herold asks questions of material and spiritual value in a consistently more engaging manner and, as the display here shows, proves the depth of his attack by not flinching from taking his own work as a target.

But relentless engagement of this sort does have its drawbacks. Herold's insistent criticism of the art market borders on a solipsistic withdrawal from the "dirty" world of carpet dealers and back scratchers. Yet he cannot escape the rather obvious point that rather than destroying the valuable Beluga eggs, paintings such as *Untitled* increase their value by placing them in the luxury market for art (as Boris Groys observed in the catalogue for the first museum exhibition of the caviar paintings, at the Kölnischer Kunstverein in 1990).

Political commentary also falls flat when explicitly expressed. The sore thumb in the Cologne display is *There is nothing left—There is no right*, 1992, which comprises two gray doors, each bearing one part of the work's title. The punning suggestion of an ideological *huis clos* is weak and opportunistic, and it fails to function as Herold's rude-avuncular humor does elsewhere: to diffuse the potentially hectoring tone of his discourse on the morality of value. We already know that traditional political ideologies have been frustrated, that the art market is venal, that to fail is human, and so on. It takes the use of surprising satirical forms, and the détournement of common materials that Herold has otherwise made his own, to give such assertions any force.

—John-Paul Stonard



Georg Herold,  
*Untitled*, 1991,  
caviar, acrylic, and  
lacquer on canvas,  
11' 9 3/4" x 20' 8".