



Exhibition view Erich Gruber. *Panzergast*, photo: Andrew Phelps

Erich Gruber

Panzergast

17 February – 1 April 2018

(Kabinett)

Born in and currently living in Salzburg, Erich Gruber presents a series of wickedly- detailed, black and white drawings based on the corpses and fragments of insects that he finds often in his studio.

We can divide the drawings into two camps. There are those that present the dead insects in a museological, almost teleological manner. Here we see the corpses arranged and presented in rows, as if for scientific study or placed for examination or exhibition by an eccentric collector. Then there are the drawings that are either singular presentations of an insect body or a depiction of a scattering of these bodies in space. These drawings remark upon and depict a senseless lack of order. What was once a perfectly working, living machine composed of symmetrical parts and vibrant, graceful movement is, in death, cast into a cruel disorder and formlessness. Georges Bataille wrote extensively about disorder and formlessness, coining the term *l'informe* to express that which bolts from logic or meaning and may even radically undermine thought. These drawings together create a tension between these two camps of order and disorder, and thus then between knowing and unknowing. While beautiful in their detail, the drawings are unsettling and quiver in an uncomfortable, dark sense of uncertainty.

These drawings are at once the stuff of the beasts and chimera of panic and nightmares, the forms that haunt one's unconscious or childhood fears. The black and white forms of antennae, tentacles, cocoons, husks, holes in torsos, broken wings, stems and legs are immediately reminiscent of the morbid fascination apparent in the short stories of Edgar Allen Poe or the Romantic Gothic depiction of the world in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. We can see the broken forms of science-fiction monsters churning from one transformation into another, and the predation that occupied these insects' lives still persists in their morbid states. Their beastly nature is even further corrupted in Gruber's skilled and detailed sketching. One may wonder how an artist might spend so much time with these lonely, empty-shell companions. And the title of his exhibition, *Panzergeist*, suggests the curious relationship he has established with his subjects, in life and more so in death, in his studio. As living creatures, it is difficult for us humans to fathom their existence. Roger Caillois, a contemporary of Bataille, reminds us that a female praying mantis is able to fight, court, breed and even kill after physically losing its head. There is no other term to describe this as suitably as monstrous, but to hold a gaze or a means of study upon these characteristics is also, as Caillois and Bataille assert, a means of suggesting radical means of thinking – that in one moment may astonish, and in another, may challenge conceptions of reality, politics and the cosmos itself. For Bataille, this kind of radicalness can change the world, and it was no coincidence that he developed much of his thinking in response to the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1930s.

For example, Bataille posits a contrast between what is sacred and what is profane but often asserting that they both derive from similar human urges. While the sacred is the holy, the ideal, the revered, the admired and the celebrated for its perfection, purity, in short, what is pure, benevolent and god-like, the profane is its apparent opposite; that which is down in the gutter, the base and meaningless, that which repulses or is rejected. It can be something rotting, in a state of decay, passed or passing from a state of perfection in life into the muck of non-existence. Bataille asserts that the sacred and profane are interchangeable, and that often elements of the profane arise into something considered sacred. This, Bataille argues, is observable in human behaviour in the forms of ritual, religion, sexuality and violence, to name a few.

Might we not sense this kind of tension between the sacred and profane in these drawings? These depictions of the shells of former living creatures as objects of study may challenge us in their embodied resistance to the notion that meaning may be comfortably contained in form. The drawings undo the sense that bodily structures as formed and governed by the laws of nature themselves posit some kind of greater, overall observable structure and meaning. The forms in these drawings are an act of sabotage within form itself, asserting that mysteries of the universe will always remain beyond our grasp. What balances them as works of art is their sophisticated draftsmanship and undeniable beauty.

Erich Gruber, born 1971 in Schwarzach, lives and works in Salzburg.

Text by Séamus Kealy.

Further information & photo material:

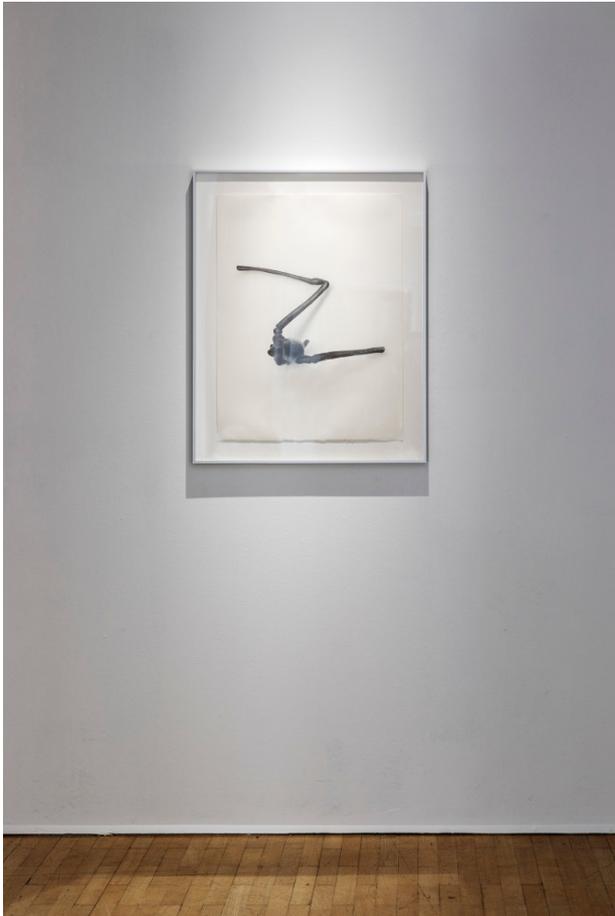
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Hours exhibition: Di-So 12-19 Uhr

Hours Café Cult: Mo-Fr 11-23 Uhr



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