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Karlheinz Weinberger: Rockabilly Revival

Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver May 21 to Jul 17 2011



Karlheinz Weinberger *Untitled* c. 1962 © Estate of Karlheinz Weinberger in care of Patrik Schedler
Courtesy Artist Resources Management and Anna Kustera Gallery New York

In 1950s Europe, while the popularity of the Catholic-Conservative Party crested in Switzerland, and while the *Wirtschaftswunder*, or economic miracle, took hold in Germany and Austria, a youth subculture emerged that defied popular postwar ideals of constancy and industry. Derogatorily dubbed the *Halbstarke*, or “half strong,” the group can be seen as the Mitteleuropean version of the then-contemporary Teddy-boy and rockabilly movements in the UK and US respectively. Rock ‘n’ roll and its associated delinquencies were, of course, the flashpoints; images of sexually subversive bad boys such as Marlon Brando and Elvis

Presley were models for the look, a reinvention of folk tradition with an emphasis on hand-fashioning and vernacular symbology.



Karlheinz Weinberger *The King of Killers*, right side *Blacky*, middle *Levis (Matthias)* c. 1963 © Estate of Karlheinz Weinberger in care of Patrik Schedler Courtesy Artist Resources Management and Anna Kustera Gallery New York

Swiss photographer Karlheinz Weinberger became the unlikely chronicler of the *Halbstarke*, and Vancouverites now get a chance to witness his eclectic, delirious vision at Presentation House Gallery with “Intimate Stranger,” the first large-scale institutional amassing of the artist’s photographs. Originated at New York’s Swiss Institute, where it debuted in February, this event is also the first significant showing of Weinberger’s work in Canada. Weinberger’s own story, reflected in the exhibition title, only adds to the intrigue: a long-time warehouse worker, he took photos of Zurich’s gay scene under the pseudonym “Jim” before meeting a local gang member, whose personal style piqued Weinberger’s curiosity about the boy’s friends and community. Thus began a career that not only captured the style of a time, but also followed that style’s permutations through to the 1980s. Taking many of his photos at home, where he developed them, Weinberger only came to prominence in the art world shortly before his death in 2006, making his large body of work as much a labour of love as the styles of those he photographed.

Viewers can expect the gamut of Weinberger's output. His 1950s and 1960s black-and-white works are perhaps his most famous, and they are highly material, focusing not only on the often outlandish clothing of



Karlheinz Weinberger *Zurich* 1961 © Estate of Karlheinz Weinberger in care of Patrik Schedler Courtesy Artist Resources Management and Anna Kustera Gallery New York

the *Halbstarke*, much of it jerry-built, but on their activities and, notably, their bodies. (Weinberger's affection for men, his gasping attention to their physicality, wantonly blurs the line between soft porn and sociology.) A slide show entitled *Rockers and Bikers* illuminates how the movement progressed from the late 1960s onwards: here, Weinberger photographs in colour, all sun-kissed amber skin tones and denim blue. (There are also traces of red: the neo-Nazi swastika armband remained a fixture of some biker subcultures he photographed, and it grew in prominence in Germany and Austria during the 1970s and 1980s.) There are, finally, vitrines, filled with paper ephemera, clothing and other objects from

Weinberger's motley subjects, who are, in their endearing, utterly original exhibitionism, now proving

muses to everyone from Ryan McGinley to John Waters. (333 Chesterfield Ave, North Vancouver BC)



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