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Early Work, Newly Discovered

The Bündner Kunstmuseum in Chur recently caused a sensation with its exhibition of David Weiss's early graphic work. Now this little-known phase of the acclaimed artist's oeuvre is on display at the Swiss Institute in New York.

Passages

David Weiss: Works, 1968-1979
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An ink blot turns into a witch on a broom: *Wandlungen* is a 57-part pen-and-ink series on the theme of metamorphosis.

By *Konrad Tobler* – Creative, subtle, curious – and melancholy. These could be the keywords for the work that Zurich artist David Weiss (1946–2012) created before he and Peter Fischli teamed up in the late 1980s to become the world-famous artist duo Fischli/Weiss, whose signature style was also based on creativity, subtlety and curiosity.

The solo work Weiss created between 1968 and 1979 was little known until recently; for years it was largely neglected by the artist himself. All the more surprising – and enlightening – was the exhibition launched by director Stephan Kunz at the Bündner Kunstmuseum in early 2014.

Kunz had long spoken with Weiss about the possibility of an exhibition, and Weiss worked on it until shortly before his death in April 2012. A few days before he died, friends brought him paper and ink at the hospital, where he painted a series of three flower pictures. The black flowers seem like a late reflection on his early work.

For the artist's son Oskar Weiss, who manages his father's estate, working on the Chur exhibition was of existential importance. "For two years now, I've been dealing with my father's early artistic works. I've known since my childhood that they were in boxes and files in his office. David's close friends from the 1970s also knew about

them. But we were all astonished by the extent of what we found." With help from David Weiss's friends and assistants, the works were viewed, reproduced and inventoried. "For me," says Oskar Weiss, "it was an important process that helped me get to know my father's past – but it was also an emotional way of dealing with his early death."

Revolt and renewal

Now the exhibition will be shown, in somewhat different form, at the Swiss Institute in New York. "When I went through the exhibition in Chur together with Simon Castets, the new director of the Swiss Institute, and he showed great interest, I was extremely happy. Taking the exhibition from the lovely and intimate Villa Planta in Chur into the wider world makes absolute sense. For us it is a sign that the work is as relevant as ever, and can live on."

Simon Castets is thrilled at the exceptional opportunity provided by this exhibition to explore the formative years of a highly influential contemporary artist. The early work already displays some of the characteristic traits of Fischli/Weiss's joint oeuvre. The exhibit in New York includes additional works from Weiss's estate that will be shown in public for the first time. "Much of the work presented in our exhibi-

"Much of the work presented in our exhibition is reflective of the multiple trips that David Weiss took to the United States, conjuring up cartoonish imagery, abstract compositions and cinematic cityscapes," says Castets.

Weiss began his artistic career in turbulent times: with the demonstrations and riots of 1968, communal living, "the personal is political," student unrest at Zu-

rich's art school. He made many trips to the United States, as well as to Cuba and North Africa. Weiss studied sculpture at the Basel art school, but it was completely unclear then whether he wanted to be-



A subtly humorous watercolour

come an artist afterwards. He ran an "all-purpose" office, wrote scripts, pitched ideas for news reports. But as the earliest works in the exhibition show, he was always an artist through and through: a

always an artist through and through: a highly talented draftsman who followed contemporary art movements like Pop Art and conceptual art, and who loved to experiment. He was part of the artistic revolt and renewal of the time.

Even today, the work still seems fresh. Drawn with just a few brushstrokes or the finest trace of a pen, small and figurative or large and geometric: this is the work of an absolutely self-assured hand. And of an eye with an instinct for compositions that are perfectly precise – or purposely out of kilter. His technique seems to know no limits; his watercolours are the finest. And the kindergarten technique of crayon etching is exploited with virtuosity. First, abstract patches of colour are made on a piece of paper with different-coloured crayons; then the whole thing is covered with black crayon; and

finally the drawing is scratched out of the layers using a needle. The world that emerges is at once dark and colourful, and Weiss uses it to create a self-portrait in miniature, as well as night-time bar scenes or cosmic-psychedelic worlds.

A new concept for New York

All of this will be on view in New York, the city with which Weiss maintained a special relationship from the mid-1980s onward. At that time, Fischli/Weiss showed their work at the legendary Sonnabend Gallery. In 1986 they had an exhibition at the MOMA, and in the 1990s they were represented by the Matthew Marks Gallery. A large retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum is planned for 2016. But first there is the exhibit at the Swiss Institute, which demanded a completely new concept. Oskar Weiss explains, not without curiosity: "I think the biggest and most fascinating difference will be in terms of the space. The exhibition in Chur was conceived for an Art Nouveau villa, where the works could be organized thematically in a series of separate rooms. In New York, we have one large white high-ceilinged room, the exact opposite of the space in Chur. Although most of the works will be the same, the exhibit has to be approached in a whole new way."

Back in Switzerland, in Chur, a de-

Back in Switzerland, in Chur, a delighted Stephan Kunz is looking forward to the Swiss Institute show. "The fact that the exhibition is now moving to New York makes me very happy for the artist, first of all. But also happy as the director of a museum hoping to attract more attention to our unique exhibition programme."

The exhibition at the Swiss Institute in New York opens on 9 December 2014 and runs until 22 February 2015.
www.swissinstitute.net

Konrad Tobler (b. 1956) studied German literature and philosophy in Bern and Berlin. He has been a freelance writer, journalist, and art and architecture critic since 2007. In 2006 he received an award from the Canton of Bern for his work in the service of culture.

Translated from the German by Marcy Goldberg



David Weiss on a trip to the USA

