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ARTFORUM

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FRANZ GERTSCH
November 8, 2018



Franz Gertsch, *Luciano I*, 1976, acrylic on unprimed canvas, 78 x 117".

NEW YORK

Franz Gertsch

SWISS INSTITUTE / CONTEMPORARY ART
38 St Marks Pl
September 19 - December 2

Installed in the back room of the Swiss Institute's ground-floor galleries, like the children's section in a bookstore, are some of Franz Gertsch's earliest works, such as small drawings based on fairy tales of teapots come

to life, *Begegnung* (Encounter), 1957, and a woodcut print of a man cursed to become a bear, *Vor dem Spiegel* (*Tristan Bärman*) (In Front of the Mirror [Tristan Bärman]), 1961. The artist returns to the subject of the mirror stage in his later photorealist paintings, based on photographs he projected onto canvas and painted in darkness. *At Luciano's House*, 1973, depicts adolescents preening themselves, in the process of going out and growing up. These works overpower in their scale and precision; one can almost smell the cigarette smoke staining the frayed wallpaper in *Luciano I*, 1976, a monumental picture of a boy sitting amid the remnants of a dinner party. But the hyper-detailed rendering also manages to turn the image into an abstraction of pure texture, and Luciano's skin, awash in a moody celadon, calls to mind the slippage between porcelain and flesh.

"Natascha," 1988, a triple portrait comprised of three oversize woodcut prints, darkens in gradations, from hospital-gown green to sanitarium blue. The series is punctuated by a fourth woodcut, *Schwarzwasser* (Blackwater), 1991, where, in place of a face, we get the dimples and reflections of a dark body of water. Subject becomes object becomes vapor. As with Christian Schad's *Neue Sachlichkeit* portraits of the 1920s, there is something intoxicating about the glacial potency of Gertsch's human subjects, who live within a beautiful state of arrested development. An odd space that, like the world of fairy tales, is tinged with a touch of horror.

— Hiji Nam