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Heinz Braun at the Ponova Gallery (April 13 – May 14)

Call it Westkunst, New Image, Neo-Expressionism, Zeitgeist, New Spirit or wild, violent, heftig, vehement painting: a broad revival of German Expressionism brings back old labels and introduces serviceable new definitions. Artists like Heinz Braun belong to the majority of independent German painters who shun such terms to describe their work. At present, Braun is not associated with any closely knit artistic groups in West Berlin, Dusseldorf, Kassel, Frankfurt or Cologne. His friends – film makers, actors, poets and writers – take him seriously and he is known within his milieu, the Munich region, where he works and exhibits.

Braun had a major show at the Galerie Nicoline Pon in Zurich, Switzerland, but this is his first exhibition in North America. There is no doubt that we will hear more about him in the future.

The title of his Toronto show *The Wobbling Landscape* was suggested by the title of a 1981 drawing discussed in an extensive documentary coverage of the artist's career in the popular German magazine *Stern* last September. It is quite possible that the colourful story of Braun's struggle – his commitment and his interesting personal life – has influenced the way his work is viewed in Germany.

Here, the twenty-four oil and mixed media paintings and drawings are seen in a different environment and out of context of the remarkable oeuvre that places him firmly within the many-sided neo-expressionistic movement.

Braun at 45 does not look for a hard-and-fast code or some hallowed formula. He has gone, like most of his peers, through the phase known as "Neue Sachlichkeit", New Objectivity, and for him that is now a closed chapter.

In Germany almost every region has its own dialect and a distinct rhythm of speech that reflects a certain attitude to life, not only in intonation and pronunciation but also in words, colloquial expressions and manual gestures. Braun's Bavarian vernacular is evident in his painting and drawing, ranging from melodic to rowdy, from light humor to dead pan wit. His work reverberates with life, exuberance and a "Zeitgeist" less concerned with troubling tensions than with an irrepressible German way of noticing and appraising objects and sights, pointing out what everybody sees but might overlook: a particular



Heinz Braun/*Self Portrait With Rose*/1982/acrylic and colour pencils on paper/18" x 24½"/
courtesy: Ponova Gallery

pattern in deeply ploughed furrows; the quality of light that enhances a landscape or choppy waters; the way people sit still or move and relate to one another.

Among the twenty-four works at the Ponova Gallery we find a laid-back, bald-headed punkrocker girl ("Punkerin" in German); cows in the meadow; a flower garden; a hopelessly inept windsurfer; a plump carp on a split platter; self-portraits, and left-over Apfelstrudel in a copper basin. Sometimes seriously and sometimes jokingly – but never mockingly – Braun tells us about everyday life with a lighthearted, narrative prose and spontaneity of expression. He knows how to say exactly what he means, no more and no less, using plain rather than affected language.

In his *Rapsfeld* 1981, the wind-tossed motion of yellow rape-seed at harvest time fills the picture space right up to a narrow band of grey sky; in *December Bouquet* 1982 the season's last hues of rust, orange and washed out pink, still damp with hoarfrost, glow against the dark windowpane. In *Self Portrait with Rose* 1982 as well as in *North Sea, Self Portrait* 1983, the artist's face appears in close-up, projecting from the receding landscape. Braun accepts the fact that the one thing we can never see whole and complete is ourselves as we stand in the great outdoors.

His investigations of colour, shape, space and surface evolve through in-

tuitive decision-making, not deliberate image-making as some of his themes and titles might suggest. Initial impulses follow a procedure of painting layer upon layer until a work "feels right".

Like Neo-Expressionist Anselm Kiefer, Braun cannot resist rubbing his wet brush into hay, mud and other organic matter to add a gritty texture to the picture surface. The urge to blend chaff with paint reminds of Dubuffet in the fifties. Dubuffet used materials such as butterfly wings, earth, gravel, twigs, banana-skins, rhubarb, burdock and sponge in the construction of paintings. It also reminds of primitive techniques used by folk painters in Alabama who mix earth pigments, seeds, soot and poke-weed berries with water, sugar, honey or Coca-Cola to produce a substitute for acrylic or oil paints.

The touch, the quick, nervous pitch, the sharp notation that dominates the subject and transforms it, count decisively in Braun's acrylic and colour pencil sketches, still allowing for the unexpected, the happy accident. This quality links him to the very early Expressionists who left the city to discover a world unspoilt by industry or commerce and depicted – long ago – similar subjects, giving them a new authenticity.

For the time being, Braun's studio in a barn near Germering is his refuge. In his words "this landscape in Bavaria ruined me and I stay here until my revenge can be seen". □ Helen Duffy