

PRESS RELEASE

Arnulf Rainer's Piranesi Works

One of the leading exponents of some of the most significant currents in contemporary art in the latter half of the twentieth century, Arnulf Rainer is returning to Gallerja in Via della Lupa in Rome. This comes after his "Je est un autre" exhibition, in which some of his historic works based on body poses were shown, revealing how they had paved the way for Body Art. This time the great Austrian artist is in Rome with a series of works that adopt authentic engravings by Giovan Battista Piranesi as their supports. Using the method he has employed in other circumstances – in his *Überzeichnungen* – he works on them with pastels, coloured pencils, and oils, superimposing designs and colours on the existing imagery of the ancient prints.

The outcome of these intensely compulsive and gestural actions is stunning, both because they are carried out on the works of other artists - in this case Piranesi - but also because they reveal a constant and intense desire for a relational otherness that is not without considerable existential impact.

The choice of works based on Piranesi's prints for the exhibition in Rome is highly significant, since a feeling of aversion and amazement in the viewer is brought about by his iconoclastic gesture and the violent way he uses graphite and oils to cover the *vedute*, which celebrate the pomp and glory of ancient architecture. At the same time, the works also produce the most stunning effect on the observer.

Arnulf Rainer's artistic career is packed with different approaches and, what is more, they are dictated by a variety of techniques and materials. From engraving to photography, to painting and use of the body, his entire opus is permeated by a desire to go beyond traditional media in a search for freedom that is characterised by a number of constant preoccupations. These include recurrent thoughts about death,

and about the condition of death, as well as destruction and catastrophe as something that is ever-present in life, and that looms over it.

Once he had gone past his surrealist beginnings (1947-51), Rainer started working with the principle printing techniques and lastly, in the mid-1950s, he based many of his works on photography. *Dead Self-Portrait* of 1955 became a famous cycle and later he created works in which a mass of signs assaulted the human faces of the deceased, making their features unrecognisable, though not without a powerful apotropaic tension and great emotional impact.

After his militancy in the Wiener Aktionismus group in 1962-68 (together with Brus, Mühl, Schwarzkogler, and Nitsch), from the mid-1960s he started applying the *Übermalung* method to reproductions of works by artists like Leonardo, Goya, Van Gogh, and others. After buying rare printed works of all ages from antique dealers or at auctions, Rainer systematically overlaps them with drawing, paints, and other materials and techniques, partly cancelling out some of their precious details.

Among the works on display in Rome, together with a large *Schlenkerkreuz*, 1991-93, painted on wood, we also find engravings on the funerary urns (1987) by Piranesi, the *View of the Temple of Antoninus*, 1990, and the *View of Piazza del Popolo* 1990, in which a breezy sky and monumental ruins are branded and covered with closely packed blue, black, and yellow signs. These radically alter the vision of the Eternal City, introducing a melancholy air to it.

Arnulf Rainer has taken part in the São Paulo Biennale (in 1971 and 1993) and has been invited to Documenta in Kassel a number of times (2, 5, and 6), and to the Venice Biennale (38th). His most recent museum exhibitions include solo displays at the Guggenheim in New York (1989), at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1999).

A catalogue, with a critical essay by Bruno Corà and illustrations of all the works on show, is being prepared for this exhibition, which will remain open from 22 June to 12 September 2010.

ARNULF RAINER

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Critical essay by Bruno Corà.

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