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# Psy-Alps: Abel Auer at Galerie Kirchgasse

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The landscapes of Abel Auer center on figures, flora, and various symbolist paraphernalia roaming in ‹out there› topographies. His exhibition at Galerie Kirchgasse, titled *Schatten meiner Selbst* (Shadow[s] of Myself), evokes the concept of the shadow in analytical psychology. Being aware of one’s own shadow is probably a good thing. The train of thought of the following review stretches across generations from the nineteenth century to the present, from landscape painting to mountaineering and, in the process, reflects on a psychedelic connection between the Himalayas and the Alps.





Abel Auer, *Sturmaugen*, 2015 - 2017, oil, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy the artist and Kirchgasse gallery

Guitar riffs reverberating between snow-capped mountain tops; wading through ‹neobiotic› meadows; synthesizer glimmers transforming into fractal shapes… Most works in the exhibition are «Wimmelbilder» that are composed in the manner of classical landscape paintings (fore, middle, and background), while the newer «cloud pictures» adopt a more abstract, flat-layered, all-over style. The paintings are like drifting ambient surfaces, on top of which Auer's voice is waxing mystical «Denglish». With titles such as *Third Eye*, *Propheteus*, or *The Rising Son*, they are literally begging to be labeled as quirkily psychedelic. But this self-ironizing aspect points to an awareness of the language being used – an essay-like quality, telling of times past and times to come.

When entering the darkened room in the back of the gallery space (after passing two poorly lighted works hanging in the hallway leading to it), a large landscape painting emerges from a black background. Its auratic presentation feels slightly off, immersive yet lo-fi, like an old-fashioned media room in a small public institution. In the painting, a lone figure wanders through a landscape. The entire scenery is vibrating in the light of a slide projector, which is accompanied by drone music looped on a vinyl record player. It gives the painting a ghost-like presence seemingly emanating from this vintage media set-up from the 1970's.



Abel Auer, *The Rising Son*, 2017, oil and acrylic on canvas, diaprojector, sound. Courtesy the artist and Kirchgasse gallery

What is fascinating about Auer's colorful paintings is the sense of ever-evolving landscapes – they seem like terrestrial coral reefs full of strange symbols inviting decipherment. What is the origin of these symbols and figures and in what kind of ‹habitat› are they running rampant? When thinking about a real-life protagonist in the mountainscapes of Auer's paintings, I'm strangely reminded of the extreme mountaineer Reinhold Messner. Messner is an improbably good example of a psychedelic figure: heroic, naïve, and driven; a controversial figure; a cosmic explorer; a «Bad Dad».[1] [/b-n-l/psy-alps-abel-auer-at-galerie-kirchgasse/pdf#Fussnote1] What sort of cross/rucksack was Messner carrying – and again, what sort of pop-cultural environment had produced this figure?

The soundscapes of 1970s German Krautrock consisted of an amalgamation of American rock, cosmic futurism, Far Eastern mythology, and elements of old folk tales. It helped post-war youths find a new cultural vernacular - a counter-cultural alternative to their «fatherworld». Along these lines, Reinhold Messner embodied that generation's problematic over-compensating for a power vacuum, while falling in another trap himself. What was set up as the handed-down oedipal catharsis against a father symbol (triangle, mountain) turned into a locking horns with the abstract forces of nature. He eventually did reach the top of the mountain (after biblically sacrificing his brother!), only to fall for a narcissist self. But where exactly was he when waking from his obsession? Far away from his Tyrolean home, high up in the Himalayas, on the roof of the world, surrounded by altocumulus clouds, facing cold transcendental nothingness, bursting to tears.

When comparing these ‹Krautscapes› of the 1970s with Auer's amalgamations, similarities become visible. Ranging from a naïve fetishization of nature à la Rousseau, refined as an ironizing response to the Sublime in German Romanticism, to the adaptation of landscape formats from East Asian *shan shui* painting, Auer's works focus on hybridizations rather than generational shifts: paintings characterized by a gloomy playfulness, ignoring discursive blinkers, contaminating the traditional. This artistic practice was likely informed by the shared interests of the painters who, with Auer, were part of Hamburg's «Akademie Isotrop» and

who had set out to grapple with the figurative legacy of historical avant-garde groups such as Blauer Reiter and Brücke.

The most interesting part, though, and the reason why Auer's landscapes remind me so much of that mountaineer figure from the 1970s, is the aftermath of *Messner*, the prodigal's homecoming, so to speak. After climbing the world's highest peaks he returned to his homeland to capitalize on his success. But how could he re-aestheticize a sport so glorified by his National-Socialist «fatherworld»? Today, part of the Messner Mountain Museum in South Tirol is located in a medieval castle; Buddhist sculptures and prayer flags decorate the castle courtyard. Further up the valley is his Tibetan Yak farm which sells dairy produce and beef jerky. Arguably, Messner's motives were in line with the counter-cultural causes of the times: «inviting foreign gods to fight local demons». A kind of lighthearted revisionism that, at certain viewpoints, could alter the perception of an entire landscape. He brought ‹his› Himalayas back to the Alps, creating an «Alpendasein» of sorts fused with Eastern spiritualization. However genuine, the art historical motifs involved could be called Orientalist – or rather ‹Occidentalist›? Terminologies aside, things remain mixed up.

Yet in Auer's recent paintings similar things occur. What used to be a concrete, traditional notion of landscape is becoming more liquified; a horizon *tuned in and dropped out.* And the gaze gets carried away by a carpet of mutant neo-vegetation: tendrils, buds in dense globes, boogers, eyes, thrombocytes; pointed, smooth, hairy; composed of petals arranged in rosettes; of rocailles and baroque cloud formations reminiscent of the cope of heaven of nineteenth century mannerist peasant art; of bead chains resembling ‹Catholic-Buddhist› chaplets – all of it oscillating in shades of gray, purple, orange, blue, and yellow.

But to return to the figures roaming the actual ‹Himalayalps› of today: the «psychedelic dad» generation is now retiring. Unlike the elder mountaineers and their taurine-fueled man-child offspring dressed in toxic-colored function gear, the figures in Abel Auer's work are, while still on a quest, no longer that serious about their heroic persona. They are figures who have an idea where they're coming from and who now even tend to self-dramatize their burdenedness, thus appearing to be more aware of their analytical shadow. In the context of the work on display, this may suggest an idea of persona in symbiosis with its unconscious, while also indicating that projections of the unconscious may create greater surroundings.



Abel Auer, *Jeder hat sein Päckle zu tragen*, 2016, watercolor on paper. Courtesy the artist and Kirchgasse gallery

In conclusion, let’s turn to a more recent self-dramatization of an alpinist, which serves as an apt metaphor for the exhibition at Kirchgasse. The 44-year-old extreme climber Christian Stangl a.k.a. «Skyrunner» was forced to publicly admit that he never made it to the top of K2 and that his summit selfie was actually a fake taken at base camp 3. When asked how he mistakenly could have felt being already «at the top» 1000 meters below the peak, he replied that he had, in fact, been practicing visualization techniques to be mentally prepared for climbing. He explained: «you see images that don’t resemble reality – this can also get dangerous…» He had been in «a trance-like mental state» and honestly believed that he was at «the highest point». Stangl added that he also experienced «physical angst» and an extreme fear of failure «similar to a burnout». And he concluded obliquely: «...like I had written in my book, in my career as a climber it’s my goal to create something that resembles an artwork.» [2] [/b-n-l/psy-alps-abel-auer-at-galerie-kirchgasse/pdf#Fussnote2] It remains unclear whether he was using the term in its artificial or artistic sense, once again pointing to the healthy

difference between one’s vain mirror image and one’s shadow.

[1] Jutta Koether,  «Bad Dad», in Sigmar Polke: *Alibis* 1963-2010, pp. 194 ff.
[2] Christian Stangl, «Ich war doch nicht auf dem K2» (mob, *der Standard.at*, September 7, 2010).

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