

All the World's a Stage

HEIMO ZOBERNIG
MUMOK
19 JUNE – 17 OCT 2021

Love him, like him, or hate him, Heimo Zobernig (*1958) is *éminence grise* of the Viennese art scene and an influential proponent of a theoretical, less-is-more approach to installation sculpture. As such, he's spawned off a thousand imitators, acolytes, and more than a few protégées. His toolbox is repetition, order, lighting, recycling, modularity, and geometric blankness, in shades of black and white or codified colour schemes. In his lexicon, reductionism is a euphemism for the rational over the chaos of a mad, mad world. Unperturbed by the lustful passions of surrounding Dionysian excess, he embodies prototypical Apollonian composure.

Yet, don't let this emotional coolness fool you, as there lies embedded in his pedagogy an alpha-dog personality. The relational stage is his; we are but mere players upon its void. Enter its silent environs with a Presbyterian sense of duty and repent your hasty judgements.

Here, etched upon the shadows of the mind, a carousel of scenarios emerge. The dramaturgy has no beginning, no middle, and no dénouement, let alone an end. Your body navigates the gauzy partitions through the pristine set pieces of a sci-fi ballet. Are you levitating in the biospheric confines of a geodesic dome, or are you lucid-dreaming of the Pythagorean theorem ad infinitum? Is it real? As social sculpture, Zobernig's themes and clinical obsessions are 360 degrees of a self-contained utopia amidst the hiss of disintegration. His god is the aesthetic-technological landscape of a J.G. Ballard novel. Laced with understatement and

latent decadence, style and form adhere to an ethos of perfectionism. Perspectives alternate within the movements of the body like the calibrated mechanisms of a clock in a controlled environment. What is time in the Gregorian calendar; where is your place in the cosmology of the setting sun?

Rows of hacked Ikea bookcases; checkerboard and coloured grid patterns

relational sieve of object/subject within the contiguity of a preconceived plan. Are you with the in-crowd or outlier? Have you missed the boat altogether?

Dante Alighieri claimed that “he who can read and write does so on four different levels” – the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical. As such, in its material specificity, Zobernig's *modus operandi* is a transitional state on



Untitled, 2014
Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 200 cm

on canvas; huge swaths of squared photographic paper interspersed with large-format primed canvases fill the space. Entrances and exits are open-ended. This is Zobernig's kingdom, an arena of hardcore fabrication tilted with an autocrat's sense of temperature control. He is absolutist in fifty shades of grey; benign on the one hand, severe on the other. Hardboiled reasoning demands that his nomenclature be read through the

the verge of a VR encounter where anything can happen. Then, his methodology veers to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of a neo-Mondrian comingled with an aesthete's taste for sensuous material things.

Where art and industrial production are concerned, Donald Judd is the contemplative Carmelite nun to Zobernig's satiated Archbishop. Zobernig is more user-friendly; like the utilitarianism found in Shaker craftsmanship, there can be

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honour in refined functional beauty. Yet the tastefully decadent underpinnings play to the 'A' crowd too. Is he high priest of the seductively understated, or an optical conjuror of special effects where not a single hair is out of place? Well, maybe, and maybe not. Here you see an ogre of a decomposing plaster body climbing through one of the mass-produced bookcases, suggesting entropy is just around the corner from orderly structure. Meanwhile, repurposed gypsum walls emphasise the rough cuts of their deconstruction from other exhibitions, framing the entire architectural organisation of the show.

It's a universal axiom that whatever you impress upon the subconscious may be concretely expressed on the screen of space as condition, experience, and event. Zobernig makes you take notice of the perfume of his flowers, his detachment over passion, and the cerebrum of his architectonic jigsaw puzzle of a system. A bevy of muses in the guise of figurative sculptures are statuesque performers by proxy. The readymade mannequins have been given a makeover, frozen in synchronised poses. Male heads on female bodies play gender-bender roles as the rigidity of his geometric formats loosens up.

Within the girdle of Zobernig's lapidary arrangement of colour and geocentric mobility you may partake of anything you desire. Through the latticed network of grids, cubic blocks, and colour field noise, the decorative paintings are flatness personified. They're not of painting itself but of a textual basis: embedded words are stencilled in Helvetica typeface both concrete and semantical in nature. A series of large horizontal paintings (that look like loose arrangements of small squares of post-it notes) are based on television text patterns. Passively, they fill a whole side of the room but don't arrive anywhere. Where theory, colour, and painting retinally converge, the painter Cheyney Thompson takes it much further aesthetically. Zobernig in this situation at mumok is too strung out on all the formulae – his fecund intellect doesn't meet

Photos: Georg Peternichl ©mumok



View of “Heimo Zobernig”, mumok, 2021

the pragmatism of the individual vessel, so this exhibition about his “painting” shows both strength and weakness. Strong on his boldness of conviction that he takes centre stage; all the interchangeable components have a rational logic, and objects cross-pollinated with theory makes for evocative settings. Weak in that said objects are commodified; there are no affronts to the bourgeois audience à la Franz West (with whom Zobernig has collaborated and indeed held his

own). He's done better iterations before. The curator, Karola Kraus, should have pushed his buttons more, so let's just say that the weighty glossy catalogue reveals just how fabulous the kingdom of Heimo can really be. And one last point: apropos that in American English the word *baem*, as a derivative form of *bem* (to fence one in) is a variant spelling of the word *baemo*, meaning combining form. Everything connects.

MAX HENRY



View of “Heimo Zobernig”
mumok, 2021