

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

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A photograph of a young man with dark hair, wearing a white tank top with the word 'SUMMER' printed on it, sitting on a windowsill. He is looking out a large window at a cityscape under a cloudy sky. The window has a grid pattern. In the foreground, there are some potted plants on the windowsill.

The Sea

SUBJECTS OF MADNESS: NANOTYRANNUS, RAW CHAMPAGNE, AND BREASTS LIKE CAMELIAS

Nina Prader on “Flying High: Women Artists of Art Brut”
at the Kunstforum Vienna



“Flying High: Women Artists of Art Brut,” Kunstforum Vienna, 2019, installation view

Brut, a qualifier used to classify the finest grade of champagne, generally designates something dry, raw, and unrefined. When Jean Dubuffet coined the term Art Brut in 1945 it was also meant to nominate a kind of artistic practice that was similarly unrefined, a vulnerability within works of art that privileged the pure, uncooked manifestations of unmediated expression. Distinct from “outsider art,” Art Brut was pronounced by Dubuffet as an art of raw originality squarely at odds with the cultural mainstream. So why, then, has the history of Art Brut managed to ape the establishment’s disregard of female practitioners?

Curators and co-organizers Ingrid Brugger & Hannah Rieger recently joined forces to correct

this historic occlusion by showcasing the world’s most extensive collection of female Art Brut artists. The perspectives of these women finally get their due at Vienna’s Kunstforum in the exhibition “Flying High,” which includes 316 works from 31 lenders and considers a wide historical scope on female outsider art in addition to Art Brut, spanning from 1860 to the present. A pressing question for the exhibition seems to be: who gets to be designated an outsider artist? “Flying High” thus puts on display a range of artists, from schizophrenic women locked up in psychiatric wards to people with special needs, lone wolves, and mediumists – witches who can communicate with spirits. Another critical question opened

up by the show: can the import of the art on view only be understood with recourse to the biographical details of each individual artist? Such questions notwithstanding, the variety of positions assembled touches on an incredible diversity of themes, from body positivity and the visionary to dreams, desires, and even occult practices.

Analogizing art world roles, in “Flying High” the patient becomes an artist, the psychiatrist a curator, and the asylum an art institution, where each patient/artist – as in the case of Dubuffet – assumes the role of collector and historian. The Kunstforum’s rooms are also dedicated to historical collections that led to the founding of museums of Art Brut. These manifest themselves as quasi-institutional portals; the collections of Hans Prinzhorn, Jean Dubuffet, L’Aracine, Walter Morgenthaler, and the Austrian Gugging asylum are physically present as gateway arches into each room of the exhibition. It seems you’d have to be crazy to become an artist in the first place. However, you might not be crazy enough to qualify here. For example, just because someone is mentally ill and draws does not necessarily mean that their work will acquire the “Art Brut” seal of approval. However, it is clear that even in the art of the insane, men have received the lion’s share of attention.

Laila Bachtiar’s grid-like pencil drawings are what helped her to become the first female artist to win a residency in Gugging, though as with many Art Brut artists, she lives with her mother. Else Blankenhorn’s Expressionist replicas of banknotes depict lost and buried lovers. She almost made the cut for the seminal Prinzhorn collection monograph “Artistry of the Mentally Ill,” but it is said that the chapter devoted to

her work was either cut for financial reasons or removed because there was talk of making an entire book on her. Regardless, the results were never printed. Often, men were the cause for madness. For example, Blankenhorn, like one of the most famous voices of Art Brut, Aloïse Corbaz, developed an unhealthy obsession with Kaiser Wilhelm. Corbaz’s colorful love scenes of uninhibited desire explode off the walls and roll out in a 10-meter-long scroll, greeting visitors to the show. The works open from the walls like a two-sided window, exposing mostly self-portraits as goddess, with body-positive representations of herself as queen, her breasts like red camellias.

After an unhappy affair with an unfrocked priest, and to avoid family scandal, Corbaz was installed as a governess in Kaiser Wilhelm’s court at Sanssouci in Potsdam. She had a beautiful voice and dreamt of becoming an opera singer. Singing in the court’s choir in the presence of Kaiser Wilhelm, Corbaz formed an unrequited psychotic crush on him, the cause of her later hospitalization. While institutionalized for 44 years, Corbaz had to iron the aprons of the hospital’s crew, but when she was not providing free labor to the asylum, she painted, unselfconsciously. Her scroll *Le Cloisonné de Theatre* (The Confines of Theater, 1950) is a visual opera in ten acts, oozing with her desire and fantastical visions of her fictive love affair with the Kaiser. Her breasts are pink camellias.

The subject matter of the male representatives of Art Brut is also replete with sexual fantasies; the difference in the work of the female representatives on offer here tends to be the violence that animates and haunts the erotic. Corbaz’s scroll shows lust and longing literally sewn together (she did attend a fashion school), where each image enacts her desire: from flying coitus

lotuses to love's disappointments, power-plays, unions of souls, transformations, cameos of her asylum institution, and Psyche and Amor in fleshy pinks, deep reds, and psychedelic patterns. With energetic gusto, Corbaz paints herself as the heroic and empowered diva of her own fictional opera. Kaiser Wilhelm's stature is diminished; he becomes smaller next to her.

Also body affirmative, the young contemporary Cuban artist Misleidys Castillo Pedroso, who lives near Havana with her family, depicts muscle-bound women and men. Oiled up-body-builders, straight out of a pumping iron competition, these figures are fashioned as meticulous cut-outs scotch-taped to the wall. The bodies she draws exude the strength and fighting spirit of what is left of a socialist country. Madame Favre's delicate nineteenth century drawings depict gender benders, bearded and androgynous faces, hipster beards with silky locks *avant la lettre*. Brazilian artist Marilena Pelosi's disturbing drawings are also featured, filled with scenes that on the one hand seem violent, and on the other could potentially be sapphist feminist utopias; vibrant women in lively dreamscapes, secreting bodily fluids.

So what are, finally, the topics of female outsider artists? Ironically, delusions of womanhood such as marriage and loving partnerships. But in the materialities of madness, the harsh reality of these social institutions surfaces. Birgit Ziegert's wedding dress drapes a headless mannequin; tightly bunched and crudely stitched, it looks more like a straitjacket. Ida Buchmann's *Liebes-Paar in der Kiste* (Lovers in a Box, 1980) shows a couple united, their tiny heads on big rotund bodies creating a closed prison. It is as if their true faces have slipped into their stomachs.

Additionally, Ilse Helmkamp's devotion to her husband went to extremes when he died of syphilis. She took it upon herself to prove sex workers were to blame, inventing statistics in a bound notebook and demanding payment from government authorities for her "public service."

The creative process appears here as a therapeutic technique, a medicine to soothe the mind. It is grounds for expression, regardless of whether it is heard, seen, or understood. It comes from the gut, the wounded soul (or undiscovered genius?). The exhibition also highlights the degree to which women artists have often been pigeonholed as craftspeople. Hedwig Wilms painstakingly wove what at first looks like a classic still life sculpture: jug and watering can on a platter (*Krug und Gießkännchen auf Tablett*, 1913–15). However, this was an act of making the weapons used against her body visible. She died of force-feeding in 1915. The tightly knit vessels gain new meaning as utensils of torture, monuments to the conditions under which she suffered and died. In 1894, Marie Lieb revolted, took back her space, turned her cell into an installation, ripped her sheets to make the floor into a starry sky. She is now canonized by the Prinzhorn Collection as the first performance artist of Art Brut. Thankfully, the working environments of most institutions have improved. Since the transformation of asylums from closed to more open institutions, the production of Art Brut began to take place in proper studios. These potentially offer even better working conditions than some art residencies. From Frankfurt's exclusive and competitive Atelier Goldstein, Julia Krause Harder attempts to build sculptures of every dinosaur by studying the anatomy of their skeletons. The bones of the not-yet-found dinosaurs call to her; it is her mission



Madame Favre, "Untitled," 1860

to realize them. The Maiasaura, also known as the "good mother" dinosaur and one of the few dinosaurs with a female name, is made from baby dinosaurs. Rainbow-colored candy wrappers are sewn together to create the dinosaur's hide, casting an imposing and fragile shadow.

Walter Morgenthaler, the famous Swiss psychiatrist, referred to his patients as artists. It is safe to say that these artists are no lesser artists than their more mainstream contemporaries. Mary T. Smith's *Untitled* (1980), a portrait of a woman painted in acrylic on corrugated metal, is said to have inspired Basquiat's strokes in the 1980s. And the floral paper works of Anna Zemánková are every bit on par with Georgia O'Keefe's vaginal botanics. Artists and outsider

artists feed off of each other. The Prinzhorn Collection's monograph *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* became the bible for Surrealists in the 1920s. They are politically charged. During National Socialism, these works by the mentally ill were deemed "entartete Kunst" (degenerate art) in an effort to degrade modern art by characterizing it as similarly pathological. These artists also became victims of the fascist regime. The Austrian-born artist Ida Maly was murdered as part of the euthanasia programs. Her drawing *Röntgenbild* (X-ray, 1934) manifests the bones of a rib cage, inscribed with the words "Raum für Maul" (room for mouth).

"Flying High" is the only show to date to approach the gender topic with such precision, encompassing the personal, occupational, political, and international implications of women outsider artists. Working through centuries, the motivation is to destigmatize gender classification while not reducing the singularity and idiosyncrasies of the respective backgrounds of these female artists. It is a testament to working through history and shows that Austria is capable of working through its past, finally able to celebrate the presence of all Art Brut artists today – how feisty they are! In the words of the hysterical protagonist of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," in which the character takes out her madness and creativity by shredding the wallpaper of her room, the spirits of "Flying High"'s women sing in chorus: "I got out at last!"

"Flying High: Women Artists of Art Brut," Kunstforum Vienna, February 15–June 23, 2019.