



**Klaus Zeyringer**

## The social is not abstract

*Josef Schützenhöfer's "Social Painting" and the provocation of the figurative*

Residual authoritarianism and social inequality, be it in his native Austria or in the US, are both target and spur in Josef Schützenhöfer's painting. Literary critic Klaus Zeyringer describes the artist's development of a painterly aesthetic in keeping with his social-political commitment, first in the political paintings executed in the US in the 1980s and 1990s, and later in the work at the Steyr-Daimler-Puch and Semperit plants in Austria. Now, with the hegemony of abstraction losing its hold, Schützenhöfer's "Social Painting" is having its day.

A seventeenth-century naval battle, galleons with their bow waves, and huge sails, billowing in the wind. The fire-ship versus an armada, a huge ball of fire in the middle ground of the approximately three-metre-high and four-metre-wide painting. In the foreground, present-day workers row a lifeboat, one points to the melee, alongside the boat two canisters of a US oil company float in the spume. And foreground left, standing on a round mine, painted life-size in a dark suit, hands casually in pockets, smiling sardonically and exuding confidence, is the chief executive, the personification of the feudal order. He takes the form of Frank Stronach [car magnate and managing director of Steyr-Daimler-Puch — trans.], however, he doesn't need a name, he is universally recognizable as the (bad) social joke. Here, social and political conditions are backgrounded, historicized, suggested. Whatever else happens within the frame, whoever or whatever is in flames, is sinking, rowing, or sailing — in the foreground there is always this grimace of authority, untouched and unaffected, only widening the social divide, looking beyond the frame. The realistic metaphor ambushes the viewer.

This powerful painting has never been shown in Austria, neither in a gallery nor in an exhibition. It hangs in a room of the former monastery in Pöllau in Styria, whose windows face out onto the door of the town church. Here, in his studio, Josef Schützenhöfer works against age-old facades of power, habitual faiths, and baroque bigotries, militant "we are who we are" attitudes in national dress: hate-poet Ottokar Kernstock [German nationalist poet 1848–1928 — trans.] is widely admired in the district, and behind, in the churchyard (in Schützenhöfer's mental field, if not his visual), set into a bulky war memorial, a dragon-slayer with oak-leaf cross. For Schützenhöfer's painting, the residual authoritarianism, xenophobic aggressiveness, social inequality, be it in his native Austria or in the US, his home for over twenty years, are both irritation and spur; the paintings derive their interest both through (art) history and contemporary imagery, creating a content-oriented aesthetic of their own.

In his "Social Painting", Schützenhöfer relies on technical skill and expressive composition, in which form and colour theory play as much of a role as "impurities", breaks, or empty spaces, where splashes and drips are allowed to show. Politics, social conditions, factories aren't clean; and even in his

landscape painting he's interested in lesions and the apparent periphery. He draws on satirical means and an overarching idea, an important element of which are linguistic references, mostly in the illuminatingly thought-provoking titles. His "Work in progress" always understands art as pictorial and communicative, as social action. Hanging in his studio is a quotation from Eugene Debs, founder of the US socialist party in 1902, who in the 1920 presidential elections received a million votes: "As long as there is a working class, I am in it. As long as there is a criminal element, I am of it. And as long as there is one soul in prison, I will not feel free."

In 2003 he painted the last Semperit [Austrian tyre manufacturer — trans.] workers on the factory floor and knows them all by name. Together with their colleagues and friends, they visited him at his easel, which stood next to the big tyre machine and obstructed access to it, thereby preventing it from being dismantled, and in this position of protest were painted by Schützenhöfer. He arranged the lifesize portraits to form columns, on top of which he placed another block of paintings of machines, creating a tower like the Semperit chimneys that still stand above the plant in Traiskirchen. At the beginning of 2003, the Semperit men and women, together with the entire works council, attended the opening of the work, entitled *Hard Labour*, in the public square in Graz, between the ÖGB (Österreichische Gewerkschaftsbund — Austrian Trade Union Association) building and the city art gallery. And whoever had seen Schützenhöfer painting during the disassembly of this image-laden factory knew the importance of the social aspect of his activity. In his short and concise opening address in Graz, he expressed *Hard Labour* as such: the Semperit–Traiskirchen plant, where workers had laboured for 110 years, in order "day after day, to pull the sun up over the factory", was now being closed down by the company.

Josef Schützenhöfer was born in 1954 and raised in Pongau and Friedberg in Austria. At the age of nineteen, while a student at the Vienna School of Fashion, he left Austria because of his "deep revulsion at the authorities". The trigger for Schützenhöfer, who has a working class background, was a "social act". Because he came to the defence of a tramp (probably more vigorously than was allowed), he was sentenced to 28 days behind bars. After that, he went with his wife, an American, to the US, where for a decade he was unable to afford a flight to Europe, not even for his father's funeral. He received basic training in the renowned Cleveland Institute of Art, where great value was placed on craftsmanship. Unable to live off small-time jobs, he hired himself out as a dental technician with the US Navy for three-and-a-half years, thereby enabling himself to obtain his high school diploma. During this time, busybody Austrian civil servants appeared to be unable to make up their minds: while he had his Austrian nationality removed for having worked in a medical capacity for a foreign army, VÖEST [national Austrian steel company — trans.] sister-company Noricum was selling its military equipment to warring regimes, a fact not lost on the Austrian government at the time... On his first visit to his home country in 1984, Schützenhöfer was detained in Vienna airport as a "stateless person", until being released with a short-term visa and an order to report regularly to the police. The authoritarian structures, it seemed, appeared to be still intact. In 1992, the artist was eventually allowed to become an Austrian again, having long ago given up repairing neutrality-endangering dental weapons.

When he began studying at the Art Department of Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, the "Yale School of Thought" dominated, as it had done in the US art world since the 1950s. The former Bauhaus master Josef Albers,

first at the famous Black Mountain College from 1933 to 1949, then as Yale professor from 1950 to 1960, had sanctified abstraction, forcing the expressionist ever further into the geometric minimalist corner. Albers, who in 1937 established the American Abstract Artists association, found an ally in the godfather of US art criticism Clement Greenberg. The latter promoted "pure art" and the radical rejection of figuration, and his programmatic 1940 essay "Towards a New Laocoon" declared that, "Taking cue from the right-angular form of the canvas, the forms become geometric and simplified, because simplification too is part of the instinctive adjustment to the medium."

Another authority to which Schützenhöfer was unwilling to submit. He considered Albers a handicrafts teacher and the right angle as a restriction; he preferred the "impure". His paintings are not defined by a geometric frame, but are able to point beyond it in a variety of ways. And when the army marched on the campus, he wasn't able simply to see a "square", a theoretical exercise — the instruments of murder were put on display and no one found them remotely obscene, while an exhibition of Schützenhöfer's "meat" paintings was censored. The slogan, "Join the US army and you'll get to see foreign places" lacked the necessary addendum, "and you get to kill some people too", said the artist, who likes to make pointed use of language, and continued his revolt against authority by tipping two gallons of red paint over the advertisement. His professors understood it as an "extension of his art"; the authorities did not.

Grace Hartigan, the well-known representative of abstract expressionism, took Schützenhöfer onto her highly selective master class at the Maryland Institute of Art, Baltimore. He received additional important stimulus from his engagement with realistic, socially engaged forerunners in the US. He read *An Artist in America* (1937) by Thomas Hart Benton, who had created naturalistic images of ordinary life, and whose painting *Huckleberry Finn and Nigger Jim*, displayed in the Jefferson City Hall in 1937, had triggered off a great deal of protest for its critique of the repression of blacks. He was impressed by the Federal Arts Project, which, under the umbrella of the New Deal in the 1930s, had sent artists into the countryside, and whose commissions for paintings for public buildings, in post offices for example, were awarded almost exclusively to figurative painters.

The Albers dictum forbade art after Piet Mondrian to imitate nature, or even the social, but instead to base itself on autonomous form and art itself. His opposition to this doctrine influenced a number of his paintings from the Hartigan era. *We, Piet and Adolf* (1987) depicts Mondrian, slightly bowed and lop-sided, like an awkward toy figure, in front of a ruined natural landscape, out of which project cubic monoliths. In his right hand he holds a set square, with his left he sprinkles water on Hitler's shoe, which dangles just outside the frame, while the latter, sitting on one of the cubes, in his right hand a pair of scissors, sows Mondrian's angular tie. The somewhat "bleached" background, which nevertheless asserts itself through signifying elements, was described by Grant Kester in his long article "Exposing Fascism", published in the *New Art Examiner* in 1988, as a fundamental element of this art: "It serves as an interdimensional ground (neither entirely substantial, nor fully atmospheric) which allows him to float various symbolic materials" — thereby creating a second or third level of commentary on the figures in the foreground. In the top left corner of the painting are scraps of a slightly altered text from *de Stijl*, the newsletter of the Mondrian circle, which at the end reads: "We, Piet and Adolf, summon from within ourselves therefore we elevate ourselves beyond the moody reality of nature towards pure reason."

In the background of the oil painting *Hitler and Colleagues at Yale*, also from 1987, there are four square boards on the wall, referring to the geometric Albers works, and prompting formal associations with the swastika. In the foreground, seated and standing unevenly, are Gropius, Hitler, Albers, and Speer. On a slanting table before him, Speer has two slightly bent and phallic model towers, quotations of Speer's designs for motorway entrances; on top of each fly the flags of Princeton and Yale. Grant Kestor emphasizes that in this work, Schützenhöfer is not just exposing a latent affinity between Nazi architecture and the rigid modernism of Gropius and his colleagues, but also the ready acceptance of Bauhaus abstraction by postwar US culture.

Political affairs and social conflicts such as the Caterpillar strike enter the works, which were regularly to be seen in the New York gallery Walker, Ursitti and McGinniss between 1988 and 1991. In mocking contemporary outbreaks of totalitarianism and populism, Schützenhöfer removes their false fronts. In the yellow and gold *Let Us Sing You a Song of Democracy* (1986), Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos pour forth a flood of empty democratic—rhetorical words and a stream of urine from their presidential balcony; in *The Dance of Death* (1988), Kurt Waldheim, Pope John Paul II, and the US general mixed up in the Iran Contra affair are placed in a Breugel—esque battlefield, watched over by Death on horseback, who wears the uniform trousers of a German general. As triumvirate of political, confessional, and military cover—ups, the contemporary figures in the artistic quotation point to a continuum of oppression, whose effects are drastically and eternally the same.

In 1988–1989, at the same time as the Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore was condemning contraception and calling for abstinence, West Coast artists took part in a competition run by the North Eastern Center of Contemporary Art around the subject of Aids. Schützenhöfer responded with the triptych altarpiece *On the Battlefield of Love* (1988), which shows Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Józef Glemp [archbishop of Warsaw — trans.], and Bishop Kurt Krenn [the bishop of St. Pölten, Austria, involved in a paedophile scandal in 2004 — trans.] on an Opus dei—warpath, shooting at inflated condoms with bows and arrows in front of a pink background. During the exhibition, visitors could write their messages to the Vatican in a book lying next to the altarpiece. In contrast to its Viennese variant, this performance didn't focus on the artist's own body, a technique adopted by the Stylites of the art world, which, in an extreme extension of the Baroque Catholic tradition, went as far as self—flagellation. Instead, it saw itself as unequivocally social: you strap the altarpiece on your back and, like the early Christians, go your way.

Schützenhöfer chose a similar approach in Autumn 2003 in the "Verschwundene Galerie" [The disappearing gallery] project ([www.galerie.kultur.at](http://www.galerie.kultur.at)), one of a series documented online, in which he took the works of six artists and transported them one by one in a yellow crate to public squares in Styria. His own contribution, *Kernstock reads the Kronenzeitung*, shows him carrying the box on his back, on his way to the memorial of this German nationalist poet—priest, whose battles waged with the pen prepared the intellectual ground for campaigns against unwanted neighbours.

Schützenhöfer's gaze doesn't stop at the church door opposite his Styrian studio. In a painting exposing the totalitarian and financial undercurrents motivating various US television priests, he shows two well—known "religious

broadcasters" in the studio. The screen behind them is a huge twenty-dollar note with the façade of the White House. One preacher has his trousers around his ankles, beside him is a toilet roll, and on television appears the title of the painting: *Let Us Shit Into Your Living Room*. It was one of the works in Schützenhöfer's much-visited 1993 exhibition In Norfolk, Virginia *Of God and GOP* ("Grand Old Party" for the Republicans, in Schützenhöfer's ironic treatment "God's Own Party").

It created just as much of a scandal as the large-scale 1992 oil prize-winning painting *A Peace Treaty and the New World Order*, shown in Frederick, Maryland. Painted shortly after the first Gulf War, it portrays George Bush Sr as a naked Boticelli's Venus. Next to him, other warmongers find themselves stripped of the garments of power: the entertainment industry in the voluptuous shape of country singer Dolly Parton, General Schwartzkopf in a Roman breastplate, foot on the back of a kneeling Saddam Hussein, and the ultra-conservative Senator Jesse Helms, whose statement that art with a critical social and political message, such as that of Serrano, Mapplethorpe, et al., ought not to be supported from the public purse, was later to influence the policy of the National Endowment for the Arts. There were protests at Schützenhöfer's exhibition, funding for the gallery was cut, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and even the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* ran reviews — finally the painting was bought by an anonymous buyer.

*Peace Treaty* belonged to the "Work in Progress", with which Schützenhöfer, increasingly working on large-scale and painting on wood for durability, was addressing the "national prototype". Taking a lead from the monumental 1882–1883 Civil War cyclorama by Paul Philippoteaux of the Battle of Gettysburg, current events were now presented in the "depth of the battlefield": "what goes around, comes around". They portray aggressive human incursion, so that traditional naturalist painting also appears perverted. Likewise, Schützenhöfer's landscape paintings — an impressive view of the underside of the bridge leading to Jefferson's Monticello estate, later views of Austria and Croatia — attempt, by seeking out topographical lesions, to disturb and destroy the idyll, the romantic gaze. By the time he returned to Austria, he had painted twenty-one metres of the cyclorama, exhibiting it at the Artemisia gallery in Chicago, among other places. It brings quotations of the Gettysburg painting into the present day through images of Helms and Newt Gingrich amputating a leg, representations of election conflicts, the deformed effects of the US leisure industry, crude satyr poses, and the Gulf War picture "The Sand Trap", that proved one of the main attractions of Schützenhöfer's 1994 exhibition *Arsenal of Democracy* at the Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. "Artist makes social protest an art form", ran the headlines.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 introduced a new cast of actors into his work. He also continued work on his naval battle painting. At the beginning of the 1990s, Jesse Helms had complained in a senate debate that the army did not do enough to push for the interests of the economy; according to Helms, it was up to the military to create "a suitable setting" for consumerism. Like "Atlantic swimmers" and "Pacific swimmers", exports were to go forth in every direction. This "Man of war" image reminded Schützenhöfer of the seventeenth-century battleships. And because, for him, this militantly expansionist urge was most clearly manifested in the car industry, which had its products shipped, it was initially Chrysler manager Lee Iacocca on the mine where Frank Stronach now stands grinning. The latter took over Steyr-Daimler-Puch at the time Schützenhöfer was painting there — the

conflicts he experienced in the plant in Graz underwent immediate artistic transformation. Alongside the large-scale portraits of workers, he reworked the naval battle painting, replacing the managers in the lifeboats with workers fleeing from Stronach.

This picture coincided with the artist's move across the Atlantic, having long been seeking the chance to begin again in Austria. In the closed circle of the Austrian art world he met the aristocrats of aesthetic vanity. Too figurative, too much content, so it was said; why paint when photography can do better? The director of an important gallery in Graz told Schützenhöfer he had no affinity for his kind of art; his associate in Vienna informed him that he was permanently booked out. Art enthusiasts like to carry the critical torch of the Enlightenment; and yes, that light should glow abstractly, or come from the slightly elevated lantern of the conceptual-medial. On the other hand, Schützenhöfer found support from Herbert Völker, the publisher of *Autorevue* magazine, who from 1992 regularly made reference to "the painter as worker"; from Michael Pilz, who in 1996 made a film about him entitled *Bridge to Monticello*; and from the artists and journalists Martin Behr and David Staretz, who called him "the social democrat of the painters". His attitude, they said, "was through and through that of the class warrior, one that seems almost romantic in its sincerity". No surprise, compared to the positions of contemporary Social Democratic politicians. A certain Josef Cap [Austrian Social Democrat politician — trans.] let him know that his social demands were communicated too aggressively or naively; and when Schützenhöfer remarked that a SPÖ mayor in eastern Styria ought to travel to Vienna by train rather than in a Mercedes, he had the local bigwigs to deal with.

He has always, he says, associated Europe with a social nature, a working-class culture. And because the art world didn't want to make room for him, he turned his attention to a factory. It wasn't easy to arrange financing, he says, a lot of effort was involved until he was eventually able to paint at the Puch plant in Graz: the paintings — of industrial landscapes, assembly lines, and products — were shown in 1997 in the exhibition *WORK* in the ÖGB in Graz. Later, Mercedes commissioned from him eight three-part pictures of the Unimog [Universal Motor Gerät, an off-road vehicle — trans.], which were shown in September 2001 in the Museum of Technology in Vienna, and which best illustrate the link in Schützenhöfer between art, quotation, technology, and the social. The paintings of the off-road vehicles are exercises in colour theory; each is placed in a context that lends it a meaning beyond the borders of the frame. Thus, painted in warm colours in the top part of the triptych bearing the modified title of a Janis Joplin song, *O Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Unimog and some other things, please*, is the ceiling of a Baroque church with Rubens figures, under which is the car with its curved roof. Another painting, *Sisters of Mercy*, shows an ambulance in cold neon. And in a wide tryptich, figures from John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, dressed in modern clothing with movements based on *The Nameless* by Albin Egger-Lienz [Tyrolean history and genre painter 1886–1926 — trans.], hide behind a loosely drawn Unimog...

In the Puch plant, Schützenhöfer came into ever closer contact with the workers. They called on the artist, observed, commented — "The tyres need more air" — and talked about their own lives. Erwin, a Swiss, was the first to be painted by Schützenhöfer. With the situation for the firm becoming increasingly difficult and redundancies looming, he wanted to "do his bit". It was the jubilee year of 1999 and staff members were to have been proud of a century of work. But according to the managers, the product was more

important. In that case, replied the artist, he would paint both. The board turned down his offer. *Autorevue* wrote about the project, and he was allowed to go ahead with *Art comes from labour* after all: workers painted life-size onto wooden panels formed columns supporting the result of their labour — a Pinzgauer Off-Road Vehicle — thus forming a walk-through exhibition, taken by Christian Reiser as the basis for a film about Josef Schützenhöfer.

Schützenhöfer understands realistic representation executed within the framework of a multi-level concept as the technical basis enabling him to endow the situation of people with a corresponding physicality, to concentrate on details, for example the blue of a uniform, on "how the creases fall": every overall tells its own story. Figuration is for him a concrete response to concrete authority, which since 1997 have provided him with ever more impetus and artistic aggression for countless caricatures, a rolling of political heads in paint. Through figuration, he creates an expressive as well as sensual way of dealing with social relations, and with technology — a "radical force that changes both us and the landscape on a daily basis". He "paints figuratively", explains Martin Behr, "but he doesn't illustrate. A back-and-forth between plenum and void, between perfection and suggestion, governs the image-making", the sensuality of the painting process recorded in the drips and splashes of paint.

Linda McGreevy has written a recipe for Josef Schützenhöfer's "Social Painting": "Start with a healthy, reassuring dose of traditional representational realism composed of recognizable political and social figures busily interacting in vast landscapes strewn with technological props. Add an unhealthy dose of acidic coloration, art-historical references, and subversive intent. Serve on an epic scale and step back. Contact with audience sure to be explosive."

"On an epic scale". Rich or poor; portraits of the powerful in multivalent contexts, images of workers painted on hardboard.

Can "the sublime" and the emphasis on form be overlooked in the social? Can the social work of art be defined in terms of "aura"? Assuming human value really does lie in the hands of artists, are they not obliged to uphold it with respect to social issues? Can the social enter post-narrative art? As we see in Schützenhöfer: the social is not abstract.

To the art world, the emphatic return of narrative appears as a provocation. A common binary way of thinking easily confuses content-narrative with cultural pessimistic prejudice; it is a "retreat" from hard-fought aesthetic positions, an attack on textual, visual, and cultural competence. This means an Enlightenment conception of consistent progress and intellectual ground rules in art; and also usually means the concealment of power mechanisms in the field (as described by Bourdieu) — namely the theorization of art in terms of the aesthetic and not the social as well. Literature or painting whose meaning is foregrounded has the disadvantage that it appears to lack enigma, and thus to be less useful to the interpretation-oligopoly and for the purposes of sanctification. Additionally, suspicions are readily raised that it is populist and commercial, and consequently, that it is working for the enemy of art: a neo-liberal economism.

It is against this background that for many arbiters of taste, Schützenhöfer's work — much like the literature of the younger generation — runs against the governing principle of the Austrian art world, namely an ostensible aesthetic resistance. This position fails to recognize that the charge of populism is being deployed in the battle over the distribution of power, and, as a canon-forming

device, has a historical precedent both in the long term and in the short term.

In 1789, Schiller rejected Gottfried August Bürger's demand for a popular art; this was to have lasting consequences. The canonization in the nineteenth century of the "sublime" (in the humanist sense, with respect to sculptures of high priests and gods and goddesses, though not slaves) went along with a bourgeois domesticity, and later with the "modern", or "avant-garde" provocation. Both were more elitist than populist.

The formal attainments of the avant-garde remained at the fore after it had reached its peak. Like with the radical departure from the object in painting shortly after 1900, content to a large extent continued to be regarded as a hindrance in art's progress towards itself, enabling the appearance of a romantic conception of absolute art as liberation from the incursion of the world. The circularity of these value-judgements, which are themselves social phenomena, were emphasized by Hans Belting in 1998: because abstract art, a new expression of the old love of geometry, did not depict anything, it was able all the more easily to take on board any old spiritual or hermetic idea. Once one had projected these ideas onto one's form-world, "it was readily forgotten that they originated not in the cosmos, but merely represented one's own faith".

In Grace Hartigan's master class, it was taught to bear in mind the various possibilities of art: and Josef Schützenhöfer was able to appreciate work of colleagues that revolved around the creation of form, blurring, and surreal constellations. In his understanding of the openness of aesthetic approaches, he finds no dictate more disturbing than the "Yalies's" claim that whoever cannot understand abstraction is also incapable of intellectual thought.

Whilst Albers and others claimed the theoretical high-ground, Schützenhöfer, backed up by art history, moved to the social. From this perspective, he finds the egomaniacal and lugubrious self-portraits in the art world today "embarrassing". His "social painting", in its profound, erudite, and ironic-satiric manner, in its use of "empty spaces" and "impurities", differs markedly from Socialist Realism and its screen-aesthetic, from fantastic realism or Pittura Ritrovata. Schützenhöfer is interested neither in the exalted, nor the idealizing, nor the sterile.

"On an epic scale". Increasingly, narrative has been able to win back the esteem it had been denied by an "advanced" aesthetic. In his time, Oswald Wiener [Austrian avant-garde author of the 1960s — trans.] declared that content is merely the admission of lack of formal ability. Today, on the other hand, an author like Thomas Glavinic [contemporary Austrian author — trans.] criticizes that "over the last forty years, story-telling was banned. You can see where that got [those works]. No one read them." This comment refers to a particular development in Austrian literature; with a small time shift, similar processes in other contexts can be recognized, in Italy, France, and Germany, where a major debate on narrative took place, significantly, in 1989. In Austria, aesthetic realism — also as a "battle cry" against an elitist separation from reality — appeared in textual form in the 1970s, in particular around *Wespennest* magazine, however, later deteriorated into a "respectable literature of description", as Gustav Ernst put it in 1989. For a few years now, more and more works have been appearing with an underlying emphasis on content, which as far as profundity goes, leave nothing to be desired. In painting, too, it might be that an aesthetically founded, gently ironic, realistic, and multivalent narrative is appearing, so that the figurative will represent a

provocation far less to the art world than to the social and political powers—that-be.

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Published 2006-04-27  
Original in German  
Translation by Simon Garnett  
Contribution by Wespennest  
First published in Wespennest 134  
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