

OUTCUTS

In the Czech author Bohumil Hrabal's Too Loud a Solitude, the man who lies at the center of the story compacts trash for a living. In Soviet Czechoslovakia, this means that his bundles of compacted waste are often comprised of the pages of banned books, making him one of the only men in the country able to quote the Talmud, Hegel and Lao-tzu. His bundles become visual and literary works of art: each striking a tenacious balance between printed pages and waste, philosophers and artists; and each embodying a political resistance that refuses the didacticism of the regime it tacitly condemns, precisely by infusing each compacted bundle with play and joy and spirit.

It is precisely this ebullient quality that runs like electricity through the network of cut-outs that make up the new exhibit of artist Stefan Saffer. Like Hrabal's "Hanta" Saffer borrows from the work of others (amateur drawings bought at auction, advertisement typeface, coloured poster board, to name a few) always knitting together at least three layers of image in a single cutout. The result is a fragile and beautiful intermingling of coloured lines and joints, each containing its history within itself and each being something utterly different than what it was before.

The pieces hang from no more than two small pins in the wall, inserted through the uppermost holes of the drawings. This gives them a sense of transience and fragility that stands in direct contrast to the boldness of their colour and the definitiveness of the action (the cutting out) that produced them. They hang centimeters from the wall, generating shadows behind and between them, calling attention to the surface on which they hang—be it the white wall of a gallery or the wallpapered interior of a home.

The very nature of the cutouts calls into question not only their relationship with each other but also the relationship they establish with the environment in which they hang and the viewer that comes to bear witness. Because they stress the space between and within themselves (the negative or cut out space), it is difficult to assign them a peripheral boundary or a perimeter. The spaces between each piece can suddenly seem contiguous to them in such a way that the gallery itself becomes transformed into an installation of connectedness and intermingling. Likewise, the viewer that wanders through the web of lines and shadows becomes a kind of vanishing point or third angle, connecting drawings to one another through the space that is the human subject.

This connecting is not limited to the visual realm. On the contrary, the quotational nature of the work—the fact that Saffer borrows from any and all kinds of source material (he wrote recently, "I do like Jackson Pollock (and will cut into him soon)")—lends itself to provocative questions concerning authorship and appropriation. Similarly, the tradition of the cutout is not forgotten here either, particularly in those pieces that incorporate amateur drawings of landscapes and farmers working, citing the folk-art genealogy of which they are undoubtedly a part. As Saffer himself has pointed out, cut-outs "...were seen as the people's art...affordable and easy to make," a way in which any person might intervene in the daily material of their lives in order to produce something that is at once radically their own and immediately also a part of a larger whole, a cultural and historical contingency that is the web of life.

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