



REVIEW - 17 APR 2018

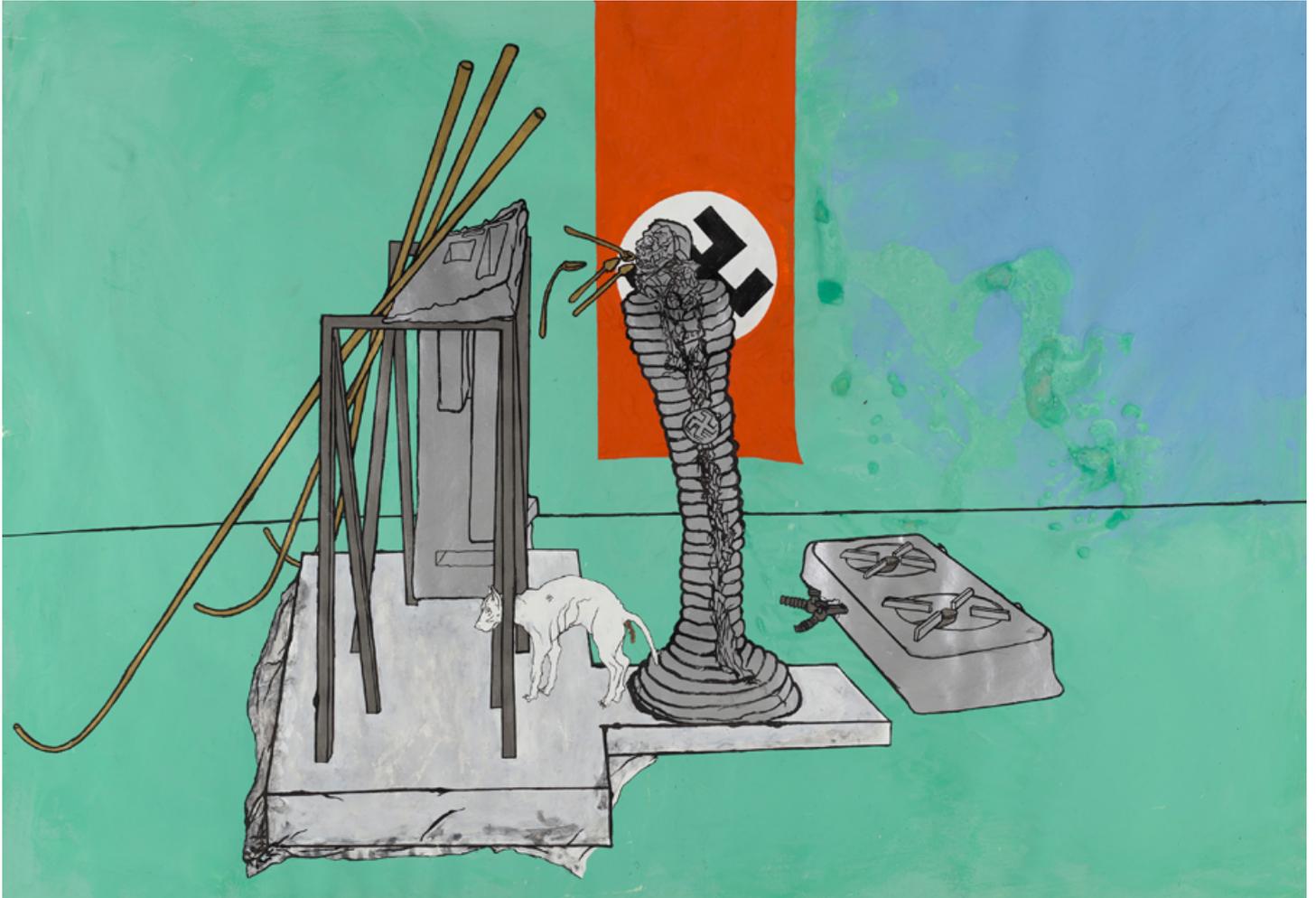
Bruno Gironcoli's Monstrous Machines

Two brilliant shows at mumok and Galerie Elisabeth & Klaus Thoman, Vienna, revive the late artist's surreal visions

BY JENNIFER HIGGIE

In Bruno Gironcoli's world, the human body is a monstrous machine but, like all machines, it has a function. What this function is, though, isn't entirely clear. Perhaps this is apt, for Gironcoli, who was born in 1936 in Villach, southern Austria, grew up in a world gone mad. By the time he was nine, World War II was over, and his shattered country of birth had to face up to its role in the Third Reich's atrocities. It's too mild a question to ask what growing up in the midst of an imploding and then traumatized Europe must do to a child's imagination. Two brilliant recent shows in Vienna give some indication. The revelatory exhibition at mumok, 'Shy at Work', which was curated by Manuela Ammer, focuses on Gironcoli's lesser-known work as a painter and draughtsman. Around 150 paintings and drawings are shown with 25 of his astonishingly weird sculptures, including two which are installed outside, *Untitled* (1996) and *Untitled* (1992-1995/2001). The solo presentation at Galerie Elisabeth and Klaus Thoman, whilst smaller, also includes a range of works on paper (which the

artist described as 'surfaces of considerations') alongside a suite of sculptures made towards the end of Gironcoli's life. (He died after a long illness in 2010.)



Bruno Gironcoli, *Entwurf zur Veränderung von Säule mit Totenkopf* (Design for Modifying Column with Skull), 1971, metal powder, ink und gouache on paper, 62 x 89 cm. Courtesy: Städtische Galerie in Lenbachhaus and Kunstbau, Munich © The Estate of Bruno Gironcoli

Perhaps as a counter to the labour-intensive nature of his sculptures, throughout his career Gironcoli mapped his ideas on paper and canvas. In the selection of works included at mumok, the frenzied spectre of fascism is never far off. (The title, 'Shy at Work', is a rebuttal of the humourless machismo of Gironcoli's contemporaries, the Viennese actionists, to whom shyness was not a natural state.) Despite the cool colours and geometry of Gironcoli's work, humanity is envisioned as a species mired in a temporal and mechanistic confusion. Figurative elements – men in suits, limbs, hearts, skulls, apes, dogs, toilets, tobacco, shoes, beds and bed-springs – mingle with sinister grids, inexplicable towers and dull expanses of monochrome ground. What is going on is near impossible to fathom although a sense of danger – either explicit or hinted at – always looms. In one desolate work on paper, *Entwurf zur Veränderung von Säule Mit Totenkopf* (Design for Modifying Column with Skull, 1971) a sort of upright Egyptian mummy with a skull, engraved with a swastika, is fed nothingness by empty spoons in what looks like a collapsing kitchen; the only living thing present is a starving dog. The relentlessness of the sickly green palette is interrupted by the red of a Nazi banner, as vivid as a slashed wrist, on the back wall.

Before becoming an artist, Gironcoli trained as a goldsmith, and both shows make clear the sculptural precision of his visions. In the late 1950s and '60s, he created ambiguous simplified bed forms – which he called 'beings' or 'organisms of fertility' – from polyester, which he coated in metal in order to create an illusion of

weight and substance. (A small selection of these can be seen in both shows.) Later on, his financial success allowed him to fabricate the enormous, surreal sculptures for which he is best known: nearly impossible to describe, imagine spiky space ships that morph into fantastical beasts captained by alien embryos and staffed by watermelons and you're getting close.



Bruno Gironcoli, installation view, 2018, Galerie Elisabeth & Klaus Thoman, Vienna. Courtesy: © Galerie Elisabeth & Klaus Thoman, Vienna/Innsbruck; photograph: Lena Kienzer

References to Samuel Beckett's absurdist novel, *Murphy* (1938) abound throughout the exhibitions. Gironcoli – who was in thrall to Jean-Paul Sartre and dabbled with communism but was suspicious of ideology – found in the madness of Beckett's masterpiece a narrative that accurately reflected the state of the world he was born into. The novel concerns the eponymous hero with 'an irrational heart', who, realising his desires will never be fulfilled, ties himself to a rocking chair 'of undressed teak' with seven scarves. He eventually finds work at an asylum where he burns to death in 'a classical case of misadventure'. Just before he dies, he has a vision that could have been dreamt up by Gironcoli: 'Scraps of bodies, of landscapes, hands, eyes, lines and colours evoking nothing, rose and climbed out of sight before him.' Murphy's ashes end up on the floor of a pub where they're swept out at closing time, a bleak state of affairs that is alleviated by the one thing fascists really fear: humour. (Beckett, perhaps more than any other 20th-century writer, understood that so-called madness is often the sanest thing around.) In the collage *Entwurf für 'Murphy'* (Concept for 'Murphy', 1968) at mumok, two photographs of a Gironcoli sculpture – a sort of grey metal chariot that appears to have morphed into a swan – float in a grey, fog-like expanse. It's as if Murphy's rocking chair has been transposed to the serenity of outer space, at last adrift from the shackles of the terrible world that created it.

'Shy at Work' at mumok, Vienna <<https://frieze.com/event/bruno-gironcoli>> , runs until 27 May, and 'Bruno Gironcoli' at Galerie Elisabeth & Klaus Thoman <<https://frieze.com/event/bruno-gironcoli-0>> until 26 May. Also recently on view in Vienna were the exhibitions 'Bruno Gironcoli, Hans Schabus' and at Galerie Krinzinger and 'Bruno Gironcoli. Malerei & Skulptur' at Galerie bei der Albertina – Zetter.

Main image: Bruno Gironcoli, 'Shy at Work', 2018, installation view, mumok, Vienna. Courtesy: © mumok, Vienna; photograph: Stephan Wyckoff

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