

Helmhaus Zürich

25 April to 22 June 2014

Opening: Thursday, 24 April 2014, 6 p.m.

Alex Sadkowsky
Mickry 3

Helmhaus presents four young artists: one of them – Alex Sadkowsky – has just turned eighty. He is a living legend, a creative powerhouse with 1001 facets and just as many talents. He is joined by three young women known collectively as Mickry 3. They, too, follow figuration and fabulation in their art. Together, they ensure an exciting exhibition that is seriously fun and full of life.

Whenever Zurich artists from different scenes and generations are juxtaposed, Helmhaus remains true to its principles. This latest exhibition is dedicated to figurative, narrative art – a field with which Zurich is not traditionally associated. That in itself just goes to show that there is more than enough room for diversity and that even seemingly contradictory approaches can emerge and exist in parallel.

The artists selected in this instance are remarkably similar. Their art dares to grasp topical issues, while at the same time remaining as distant from them as a fairy tale. Their art displays desire and delusion, trumpets itself loudly and stridently, and builds hope out of inhibition. Inventive, associative and combinatoric, as focused on animals as it is on humans, the work of the incredibly inventive Sadkowsky and the three mermaids of Mickry 3 swims in a tide of boundless possibility. The exhibition taps into the potential of the untold possible narratives of our world and rephrases them into fantastical worlds that wrench us from our familiar threads of thought, wakening and challenging our perceptions.

The exhibition presents a vibrant spectrum of all the media in the visual arts: painting, sculpture, installation, object, relief, drawing, prints and film. The fact that this is also underpinned by performance art is evident from the films of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Finally, Sadkowsky is also known as much for his breathtakingly prodigious writings as for his paintings and drawings. This talent, too, is in evidence here.

Though **Alex Sadkowsky** was one of Zurich's most celebrated painters in the 1970s, along with Friedrich Kuhn and Hugo Schuhmacher, his work drew less attention as the focus of the art world moved away from the figurative from the 1990s onwards. Sadkowsky was an early recipient of municipal grants; the first retrospective exhibition of his works on paper was held at Städtische Kunstammer zum Strauhof in 1968, which also mounted a show of his paintings in 1975. His 1993 exhibition at Kunsthaus Zürich was to be the last major presentation of his work. It was not until 2010 that the Kunstmuseum Olten, threatened with closure, took up the baton for him again with a large-scale exhibition of his oeuvre.

The world, which he has seen on his countless travels to Ireland, India and Italy (to name but three alliterative examples) and on his regular annual winter sojourns in northern Thailand or the USA since 1994, has never been big enough for him. “Everything is reality (even a dream)”: everything he has seen becomes the source and inspiration for exuberantly fantastical expansiveness, symbolically laden overdrawing, immeasurable metastasis. In his oeuvre, all the world becomes a stage.

Sadkowsky is driven by his creativity. It is as though he simply cannot stand still. “My mind never rests – not even in sleep.” His inventiveness is inexhaustible, to the point of becoming an imposition: “An eye, a lip – it’s not enough for me. One eye could make me dependent, just as *one* father would make me dependent.” Of course, he is perfectly aware that he only had one father – a rather special one, in fact, who he rarely met and who was deported from Switzerland in 1937. Of Russian-Polish-Greek extraction, from a family of artists, at home throughout the world and at ease across all social strata, pan-religious and by no means averse to the cultic, he is very much a people person, constantly on the run from solitude. “I created a flood of images out of fear.” What sounds like a confession is a crucial motive in the excess of his art. “If you can be pinned down, you can be oppressed.” His restlessness and insatiable curiosity are a strategy, a security measure – uncertainty as a form of independence: always ready to up sticks (“in three minutes”), with a suitcase as symbol, a sandwich for the road, and shoes for walking. Where to? Throughout the world and beyond, constantly on the run from standstill, from melancholy. Amidst this restlessness, art becomes the place where melancholy is allowed to catch up with him. Where its power can settle over him like a warm blanket. For a moment of calm, of security, of happiness.

This melancholy of the autodidact is perhaps most clearly expressed in his sensual early work, little of which remains in his own immense collection that has furnished much of this exhibition. Contemplative portraits redolent of Russian Orthodox art, Picasso and Chagall, clocks as reminders of *tempus fugit* ... and parallel to the social unrest of 1968, the production suddenly ramps up, with this active and passionate artist, having done everything from playing banjo in jazz clubs to being a travelling salesman for washing machines and even tried his hand at professional boxing, finds his ultimate dynamic in art and literature.

One of the key pieces in the exhibition is Fredi M. Murer’s 1969 film *Sad-is-fiction*, which might be described as a cinematic double portrait or even as a duel between two creative figures in front of and behind the camera. Here, Sadkowsky makes the remarkable statement that his surrealist expressionism, his expressive surrealism, is channelled into “undepressionism”. He presents himself, restless once more, as a wanderer, as a radically uninhibited breaker of conventions, as a prophetic visionary: he predicts that luxury will lead to the ludicrous, and haste to brutality and terror. The energy that radiates from this superbly frenetic experiment by self-taught film-maker Murer, inspired by his protagonist Sadkowsky, is utterly infectious. Amusing and charming as this gem of a cinematic document, relegated to obscurity for decades, may be, it also strikingly reveals the duality of Sadkowsky’s art. “Every painting, every drawing, is a serious matter,” he announces, and also: “There is nothing more serious than play.”

The serious and the playful interweave in a room full of large-format drawings (*Animal metaphysicum*, multi-faceted, visionary), a cabinet of prints (in which Sadkowsky’s illustrative and imaginative talents are perhaps most clearly evident) and in two rooms of paintings (one of which confronts the visitor with a wealth of salon-style hanging, the other with typological variety). “Enamoured of the melodious line from which he draws the profiles of his many,

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idealized female icons” (Fritz Billeter), the result is an oeuvre that does not shy from the ornamental, the mannerist or even the decorative. To the contemporary eye, this may take some getting used to (again). As do his unashamed views of the opposite sex, reflected for instance in hundreds of variations on *Womanslip*. And yet, he counters, “Not only women are feminists; I too am a feminist”, adding with reverence, “I love the person within the woman – her creative intelligence.”

Philosopher Hans Heinz Holz summed up Sadkowsky’s unique and enigmatic character as follows: “What contrasts: childishly egocentric and at the same time lovingly caring, cruel and tender, driven and secure.”

Alex Sadkowsky’s output continues apace to this day. This archetypal creative figure cannot stop; with his effervescent spirit and keenly alert mind, he still looks ahead in life, and wants to live to a hundred years or, better still, be immortal: “I’m not painting against death, but for life.”

This pyrotechnic oeuvre spanning 55 years is juxtaposed with the collective 45 years of work by the three young women who make up **Mickry 3** – Christina Pfander, Dominique Vigne and Nina von Meiss. All are in their early thirties and all began creating art in their teens, at 17, 18 and 19. For them, as for Sadkowsky, art was play – a (distorted) mirror of society that draws the viewer in with fun and wit, only to reveal the seriousness below the surface. There is, too, a theatrical dimension to their work. They have always created characters, whether human or animal or anthropomorphic objects, to populate their settings. Mickry 3 became known to a wider audience with their *Supermarket* – caricaturing the art market system. Everything was available to buy here, even by mail order: from happy pills to a new brain, from flesh-eating plants to female orgasms. All vacuum-packed, of course. In Mickry 3’s *Supermarket* the world of consumerism did not stop when it came to art. And with that statement, they raucously ridiculed the holier-than-thou art world, pulling the rug from under its feet on its own self-styled moral high ground.

To this day, the three Mickrys take an approach that is both exposed and exposing. Their latest work, created for this exhibition, leads the viewer into fairy tale ensembles of figures, props and attributes, riddles and rituals. Interlinked by mysterious connecting lines, the protagonists design an open system of narratives for the eye to follow, like so many wrong leads. The narratives themselves always have two faces: the already ambiguous flame becomes a fish devouring a mermaid – or perhaps spitting her out, because she doesn’t taste good? As with Sadkowsky, this is combinatory art. Axes adorn the walls as in some ancient mountain hut. Their uses are many. Buckets of silvery-grey slime are emptied out, sometimes over themselves. Black tresses billow in the breeze, a wood nymph tosses and turns on the floor, in madness or in ecstasy. A figure with his trousers down his ankles is having a good time in a hedge.

Any attempt to decipher the narrative strands in this *Hidden Story* – as the work is called – leads only to confusion. Obvious symbolism tips into shadowy vagueness, and what appears to be freighted with meaning proves unashamedly empty. We are not accustomed to narratives being spun so deftly. Mirrored multiple times, especially at the interfaces between the figures, we find ourselves losing our way in the dense narrative undergrowth. It should be pointed out that everything created by Mickry 3 is crafted entirely by hand, with great precision, on the grounds of the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Zürcher Bildhauer (AZB) in Schlieren, in an enchanting studio. It goes something like this: fibreglass and coloured acrylic are applied to pink polystyrene, a sculptable foam, and then marbles are added as sparkling

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eyes. With that, today's "crazy little world of Zurich" (to borrow a phrase by Paul Nizon from the time of Sadkowsky and Friedrich Kuhn) is perfected.

The **programme of events** once again offers two concerts: a CD launch by the renowned label ECM Records in the Wasserkirche features the composition *Babylon-Suite* by the duo KAPPELER/ZUMTHOR. The whimsical mini-dramas by Vera Kappeler (piano, harmonium, toy piano, voice) and Peter Conradin Zumthor (drums, toy piano, voice), charged with melancholy and sentimentality, possess a simplicity reminiscent of Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The double concert by the young Zurich duo UOM – Li Tavor and Nicolas Dauwalder – and by CALLBOYS and WASWOTSCH – Andalus Liniger and Moritz Wettstein – offers ... what, exactly? A mix of progressive noise and structured products! Distinctive and innovative to a degree rarely found these days, and performed in the unique setting of Mickry 3's *Bühnenbild*. An unmissable opportunity: you will never see or hear the like again.

The writer Alex Sadkowsky has a double billing: the launch of a new publication – *Der Titel II*, and at the same time his "selected compendium of unwritten novels, stories, pamphlets, manifestos, screenplays, poems, speeches, manuals, treatises, dissertations, analyses, lectures, articles, plays, tragedies and comedies, reviews, comics, fairy tales, essays, communiqués, love letters, patents, songs, sermons, recommendations, statements, recipes, columns, dispatches, forewords and afterwords, obituaries and more ...". There will be a reading from his new work published in collaboration with Edition Howeg, which will also include cameo excerpts from Alex Sadkowsky's three-volume monumental novel *Die Chinesische Wespe – Geschichte einer Liebe*.

The 5 o'clock thesis also returns. This time, Daniel Morgenthaler's guests are film-maker Fredi M. Murer and arts journalist Simone Meier. The theses addressed are *Seltenheit kommt vor Sicherheit* [Rarity Comes Before Security] – applicable to Karl Valentin and Alex Sadkowsky – and *Die Bildhauerei ist ein Supermarkt* [Sculpture is a Supermarket], addressing how Mickry 3 turn the everyday into the intoxicating.

As ever, the programme is rounded off with authoritative and informative guided tours and, once again, this exhibition is ideal for inspiring children to paint and tell stories ...

Simon Maurer, Director of Helmhaus Zürich and Curator of the Exhibition