

Projects 22 : Franz Gertsch : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 11-June 26, 1990

Author

Gertsch, Franz

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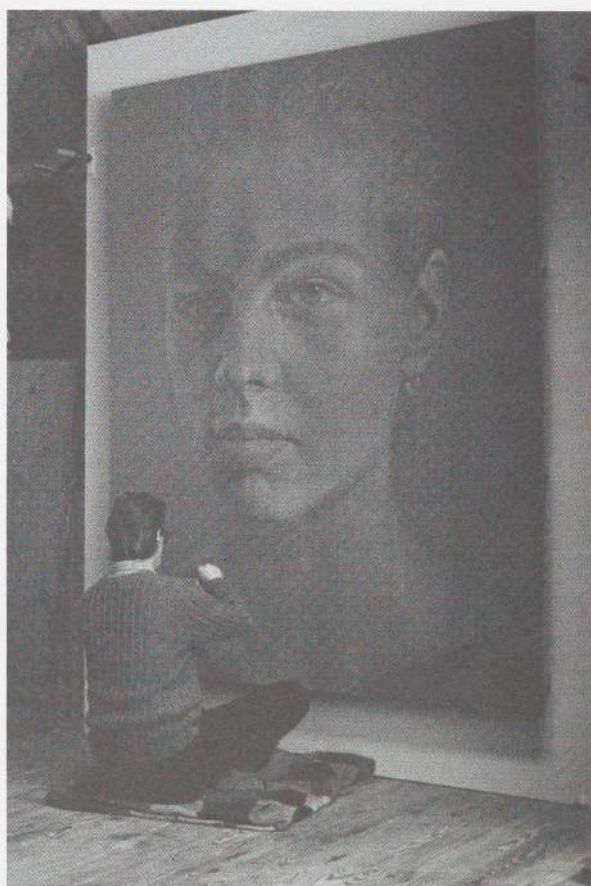
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primary documents, installation views, and an
index of participating artists.

The Museum of Modern Art
New York
May 11–June 26, 1990

projects: franz gertsch

22



Franz Gertsch working on the woodblock
for *Natascha IV* in 1988.
Photo: Balthasar Burkhard, Bern

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franz gertsch

From the earliest impressions of a muddy human hand upon a rock to the complex techniques of etching and lithography, the tradition of printmaking has been one of personal identification and communication. Print's accumulation of cultural references, first as a devotional object and later as a means of having at hand an infinite measure of information, has enhanced its potency to the point that an artist using a print medium today is creating within a broader context than simply that of contemporary aesthetics.



Doris. 1990. Wood engraving, printed in color, sheet 8 $8\frac{1}{16}$ x $6\frac{7}{16}$ (244 x 184 cm). Private collection, Hamburg

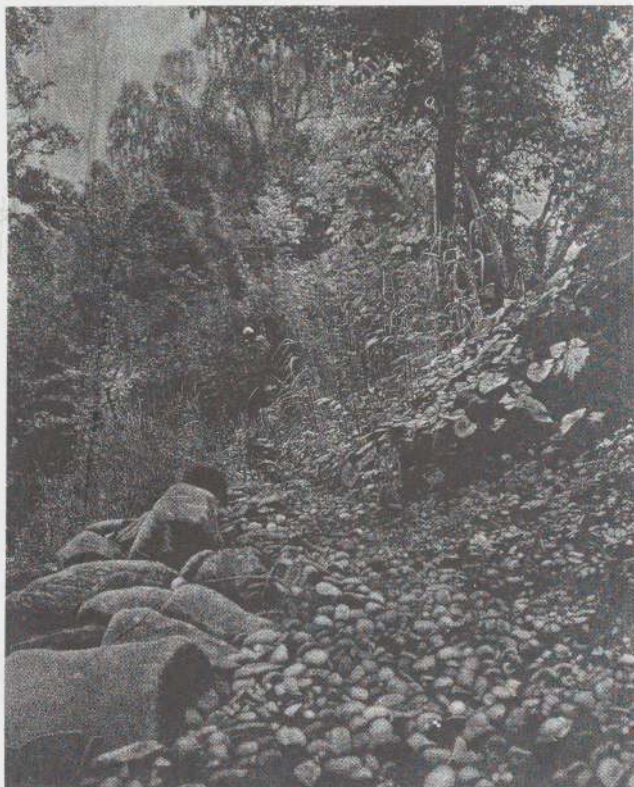
After experimenting with various wood-cutting techniques in July 1986, Franz Gertsch's decision to devote all his working time to making prints seems to have been in conscious recognition of this potency. A photo-realist since 1969, Gertsch created paintings that represent people in larger than human scale. It followed that his prints, too, would be quite big. That he chose to make relief prints, the oldest technique, but in a format and size that could only be accomplished as of this century, increases the power of an already loaded medium.

Gertsch took eight-foot-long blocks made of split planks of aged wood and tinted them so the cut areas would be visible. Incising the blocks with the smallest of gouges, he picked out his compositions, small areas at a time, following photographs he took of his models. These photographs, made with his ultimate image in mind, emphasize organized patterns of light. From them Gertsch made slides that he projected onto his blocks as a guide to highlighting his forms. The finished blocks are covered with dense webs of tiny pits which, when printed, disclose the subject within the granular field of the uncut, inked surface. Two or three blocks were printed to achieve an essentially monochromatic impression of each portrait: the main block providing the strongest color; a second in a lighter tone to give it depth; and a third to outline the shape, further flattening the unembellished background. In the case of *Rüschegg I* (1988–89)—a topical departure for the artist that could be characterized as a "portrait" of his garden—only two blocks were used.

Within the editions the blocks were printed in different colors. *Natascha IV* (1987–88), for example, was printed in an edition of eighteen, divided into three series: one in the full chromatic spectrum from yellow through green; a second in blues (shown in this exhibition); and a third made up of a blue and two reds. Three impressions of the edition of *Rüschegg I* were printed with two blocks, but the others with just one. Gertsch, together with his wife, Maria; Nik Hausmann, the printer who inked the blocks; and another friend, spent an entire day printing just one impression, using optical lenses to rub the back of the special paper made by Japan's National Treasure Iwano Heizoburo. Because of the break in printing activity at the end of each day, the normal practice of editioning identical prints did not seem relevant. That is not to say that there was imperfect printing, for each person worked over all areas of the block, producing exceptionally similar impressions. Yet it was this substantial personal input, among friends, that allowed Gertsch to treat his prints more like unique objects. The finished works, while satisfying singly, cumulatively inspire awe when seen in groups or series.

Intensified by their evocation of classical drawings in white ink on tinted papers, Gertsch's looming portraits are at once intimate and overwhelming. Their uniformly expressionless faces are transformed by their coloration and enigmatically participate in shadowy movement as they seem to observe their observers. While the technical prowess that the artist has exerted is amazing, the sensation produced by the resulting gathering of giant-esses is even more so. It is not only the unrealistic monochromatic rendering of his ultrarealistic forms but the physical presence of these objects that reject most expectations of print and its traditions. Manifest in their remoteness are some incidental images fixed in our minds—the great faces of stars on the movie screen, the beauties of the billboards. Gertsch's printed portraits emphasize, quite succinctly, how complex the concepts of representation and reproduction have become in our time.

Riva Castleman
Department of Prints and Illustrated Books



Rüschegg I. 1988–89. Wood engraving, printed in color, sheet 8' 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 6' 11 $\frac{7}{16}$ " (273 x 212 cm). Collection Sylvie and Pierre Mirabaud, Geneva

Projects is a series of exhibitions designed to introduce to the public work by contemporary artists. The artists presented are chosen by the members of all the Museum's curatorial departments. The **projects** series is made possible by generous grants from The Bohen Foundation and the Lannan Foundation.

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biography

Born Mörigen, Canton of Bern,
Switzerland, March 8, 1930

Resides in Rüschegg, Canton of Bern

education

Max von Mühlernen School, Bern, 1947–50

selected individual exhibitions

- 1989** Cabinet des Estampes and Musée Rath, Geneva. *Bois Gravés Monumentaux*
- 1987** Galerie Turske & Turske, Zurich. *Die Holzschnitte*
- 1986** Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna
- 1981** Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York
- 1975** Akademie der Künste, Berlin; Kunstverein, Braunschweig; Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf; Kunsthalle, Basel. (traveling exhibition)
- Galerie Veith Turske, Cologne
- 1973** Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York
- 1970** Galerie Toni Gerber, Bern. *Neue Bilder*
- 1955** Anlikerkeller, Bern. *Grafik und Malerei*
- 1949** Galerie René Simmen, Bern

selected group exhibitions

- 1978** Venice Biennale. *Dalla Natura all'Arte. Dall'Arte alla Natura.*
- 1974** Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Paris. *Hyperréalistes Américains/Réalistes Européens*
- 1972** Documenta 5, Kassel, West Germany

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Billeter, Erika, Jean-Christophe Ammann, Joachim Büchner, Evelyn Weiss, and Agnes von der Borch; interview with Franz Gertsch by Jürgen Glaesemer. *Franz Gertsch* (catalog). Zurich: Kunsthau, 1980

Franz Gertsch. Arbeiten 1981/1982/1983. Postscript No. 2 to the Kunsthau Catalog and Appendix to the Catalog Raisoné. Zurich: Galerie M. Knoedler Zurich AG, 1983

Mason, Rainer Michael, Dieter Ronte, and Riva Castleman. *Franz Gertsch: Monumental Wood Engravings.* Geneva: Cabinet des Estampes, 1990

Ronte, Dieter, with an essay by Jean-Christophe Ammann. *Franz Gertsch.* Bern: Benteli Verlag, 1986

Ruhrberg, Karl, Jean-Christophe Ammann, Harald Szeemann, and Franz Gertsch. *Franz Gertsch* (catalog). Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1975