

The work of Gert Tobias and Uwe Tobias (born in Brasov, Romania, in 1973) presents a layered look at the complexity of art making, art history, and the construction of identity. As both artistic collaborators and twin brothers, they work in

a symbiotic fashion in their shared studio space in Cologne; they trade a single artwork back and forth until it is deemed completed, discussing and critiquing each other's progress throughout the artistic process. Once the work is finished, it is always considered the product of both artists, regardless of who may have taken the lead.

At the center of their practice are woodcuts in unusually large

formats, often six by five feet or larger. Among the oldest and most basic print techniques, woodcut has a storied past and a strong tradition in both fine-art and vernacular uses. (See www.moma.org/whatisaprint for further details and a demonstration.) The medium made its first appearance in Europe, probably at the beginning of the fifteenth century, and it was the preferred technique for so-called popular prints—intended for a provincial, partially

literate population—which were produced cheaply and in large editions, often using a direct or naïve visual language to illustrate religious imagery, proverbs, and even sensational news items. Ephemeral in nature, they were sold by itinerant street vendors and would be pinned to doors or even clothing, or pasted into religious volumes. On the fine art side, Northern European iconoclasts have made the woodcut their territory for centuries, from Albrecht Dürer's exquisitely detailed religious carvings to Edvard Munch's Symbolist jigsawed blocks depicting longing and loneliness, and from the primal, aggressive prints issued by the Brücke artists in the first decades of the twentieth century to the Neo-Expressionist works of George Baselitz in recent years. There has also, of course, been cross-pollination between the two categories. In the 1912 *Der Blaue Reiter* almanac, editors Vasily Kandinsky and Franz Marc reproduced German popular prints and their Russian equivalent, *lubki*, alongside their own Expressionist woodcuts.

Gert and Uwe Tobias are adding their own distinct voice to the illustrious history of the woodcut, drawing upon and layering the various aspects of this tradition. Unusually large in size, and frequently appearing as unique prints rather than in editions, their works display a compositional boldness and are completely lacking in the technical fussiness that can sometimes infect prints. These qualities were clearly visible in their first large series of woodcuts from 2004, entitled *Come and See Before the Tourists Will Do – The Mystery of Transylvania*, a playful take on an investigation of their own cultural identity. Although they moved to Germany at age twelve, the brothers were born in Brasov, Romania, a former Saxon colony located in Transylvania. While strongly steeped in national culture, the region of their birth has absorbed elements from the Romans, Ottoman Turks, Russians, Germans, and others who have controlled the area over the years. It also looms large in the Western imagination as the home of Count Dracula, the vampire made legend by novelist Bram Stoker and popularized by Bela Lugosi's Hollywood portrayal. For the 2004 project, the Tobiases conducted an exhaustive survey of B-movie horror films—camp classics like *The House on Bare Mountain* and *My Demon Lover*—and used these titles as jumping-off points for their compositions.



Above:

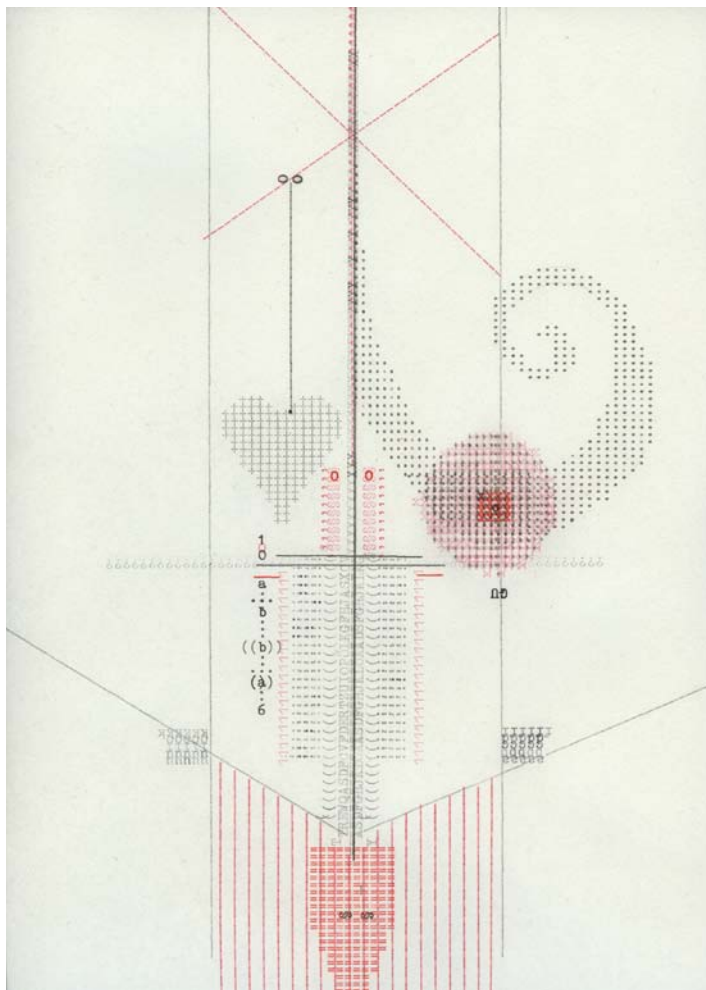
Gert Tobias and Uwe Tobias. *The House on Bare Mountain*. 2005. Woodcut, 78 3/4 x 64 15/16" (200 x 164.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Fund for the Twenty-First Century

Cover:

Gert Tobias and Uwe Tobias. *the museum of modern art new york*. 2007. Woodcut, 78 3/4 x 64 15/16" (200 x 164.9 cm). Courtesy Galerie Michael Janssen, Berlin/Cologne

In these woodcuts and those that followed, the influence of traditional Eastern European folk art is manifest in the bold, luscious colors, simplified floral and decorative patterns, animal motifs, and aspects of traditional costumes and textiles.

Come and See Before the Tourists Will Do – The Mystery of Transylvania also shares its title with a 2004 catalogue/artist's book, which provides a kind of travel guide to the work of Gert and Uwe Tobias. Interspersed among the woodcut images are old-fashioned maps of Transylvania, historical city views, travelogue images of wooded shorelines, and needlepoint patterns for traditional textile



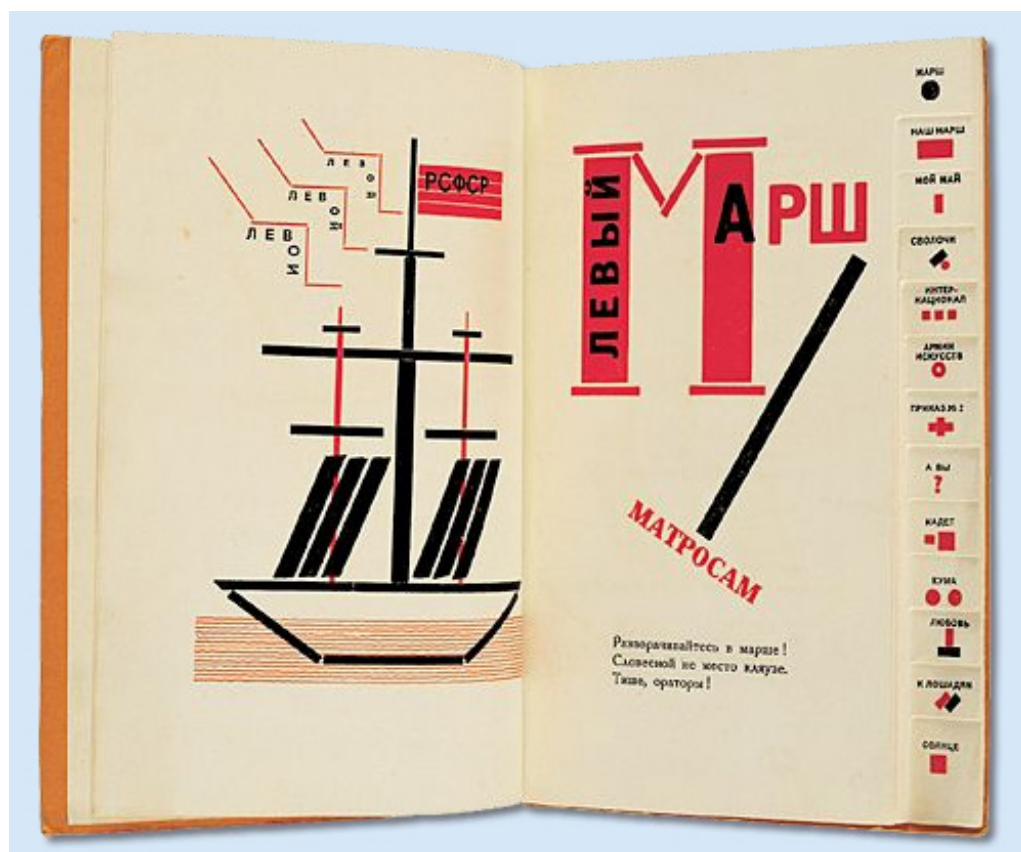
designs. Also present are images of other projects the Tobiases have undertaken—small typewriter drawings, collages juxtaposing images from fashion magazines and newspaper clippings—all distinctly marking the juncture between old and new, and displaying a diverse range of influence, from Hollywood fantasy and pop culture to folklore and Eastern European vernacular arts and crafts.

In addition, the Tobiases' work displays the influence of the European avant-garde, not only in its continuation of the woodcut tradition, but also in its references to the Russian avant-garde and the Constructivists. Their typewriter drawings, alternately graceful and whimsical, reference the pioneering work of El Lissitzky, praised in his own day for being an artistic ambassador between the cultures of Russia and Western Europe. His ingenious use of typographic elements for artistic purposes is visible in his illustrations for the 1923 volume *For the Voice* by Vladimir Mayakovsky. Lissitzky's work in exhibition design has also inspired the way in which Gert and Uwe Tobias bring a seamless blending to their exhibitions, combining their work in various mediums—from large-scale woodcuts and small typewriter drawings to ceramic sculptures and architectonic wooden constructions—in single installations, often creating a dynamic yet unified space within the gallery by painting the walls with blocky geometric forms or surging vectors.

This dense layering is present not only in their range of inspirations, but also physically in the work itself. The surfaces of the woodcuts are encrusted with layers of pigment, with glimpses of several strata of color visible beneath the surface layer. In an untitled mixed media work from 2007, a similar strategy is at play. The face seems to be constructed from mismatched photocopied elements, including a puffy coif, an ear made from a bird's nest, a rat-like snout, whiskers, and a distinctly human eye. The figure

Above:
Gert Tobias and Uwe Tobias. Untitled.
2007. Typewriter on paper, 11 13/16 x 8 1/4"
(30 x 21 cm). Courtesy Galerie Michael
Janssen, Berlin/Cologne

Right:
El Lissitzky. *For the Voice* by Vladimir Mayakovsky. 1923. Book, 7 3/8 x 5 1/8" (18.7 x 13 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation





stands jauntily, wearing a plaid shirt made of layers of watercolor and colored pencil, before a piecemeal landscape; the roof of a house peeks over the horizon on the left and a pine tree perched on the right, before a background, is covered in numerous layers of dark gouache. The final image is unsettling, funny, the stuff of bad dreams: the rat-rake casually posed in a pastoral landscape.

An untitled woodcut from 2005 ties together many of the qualities present in the brothers' work. The print references abstraction and animation, employs lush colors and a strong graphic sensibility, and seems, at first, a bit cartoonish. At second glance the figure appears horrific, stripped to its bony spine with organs exposed and appendages missing. Look yet again to see the kindly face of a winking peasant woman, a gap-toothed smile shining from beneath her head scarf, and two hearts beating inside her uncommonly kind chest. By turns humorous, haunting, playful, and macabre, but always striking, it is precisely this deft layering of images and influences that makes the work of Gert and Uwe Tobias so engaging.

Organized by Sarah Suzuki, The Sue and Eugene Mercy, Jr., Assistant Curator, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books.

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Above left:

Gert Tobias and Uwe Tobias. Untitled. 2007. Mixed media on paper, 11 13/16 x 8 1/4" (30 x 21 cm). Courtesy Galerie Michael Janssen, Berlin/Cologne

Above right:

Gert Tobias and Uwe Tobias. Untitled (figure). 2005. Woodcut, 78 3/4 x 64 15/16" (200 x 164.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Fund for the Twenty-First Century