

Henning von Gierke

by Katya Tylevich

It's raining and Munich has become a tableau of figures dashing from cab to restaurant, across sidewalks and under awnings. But inside Heitsch Galerie the night before Henning von Gierke's opening we enter a sort of stillness. It somehow feels appropriate to see Gierke's works alone like this – the alternative might feel like being one of too many necks craned over a single book. Gierke does describe his paintings as stories, after all, as amorphous narratives in which no reading is ever 'out of order'.

Gierke has experiences with more conventional dramatic arcs: he's worked on the set, stage and costume design of over 30 opera productions and he's collaborated on seven films with Werner Herzog, working as set designer for *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*, *Nosferatu the Vampyre* and *Fitzcarraldo* ('somehow, nobody fails to mention my work with Herzog', Gierke tells me, a bit ironically).

Movement Vs Stillness: I came to Munich when I was 12. Since then, I have worked in many different countries – on films and theatre in Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro and elsewhere – but I have always returned to Munich, just as I have always returned to painting. In fact, every job I have ever had was because of painting. I ended up working on *Fitzcarraldo* because Herzog saw my paintings and wanted that kind of world in his film. I made seven films with him and several others with people who aren't as famous, then I switched to working on operas, because, in that setting, I felt I could allow my paintings to be three-dimensional. Altogether, I've worked on about 30 operas, but recently, I've decided to stop. I've made all the operas I'm interested in, for now, and besides you can't fully preserve a 'moving' painting on a disc – if an opera is even recorded, that is, whereas a painting on canvas is never over.

Silenced movies: I'm lucky that I worked on films like *Nosferatu* and *Fitzcarraldo*, which are still alive today. But I'm a member of the German Film Academy and, every year, I get a box of 130 films to judge. Of those, ten make it to the cinema. And, of those ten, most die quickly. They become old-fashioned. Even something

as good as Woody Allen's *Manhattan*: I told my children, you must see it! They yawned the whole way through.

Drama: I never wanted to be a writer, but I always wanted to be a storyteller. *Die Vertreibung Aus Dem Paradies*, for example, isn't a verbatim story of *Paradise Lost*, it's the story of growing up, leaving childhood, of two people carrying each other, of their having a child together, separating and uniting again. It all takes place in the landscapes that we live in, now. Visually, I wanted to tell this story in the style of someone like [Albrecht] Dürer, but with a modern understanding of bodies. I started one year ago by posting an ad at the Arts Academy, which said, 'Looking for Adam and Eve.' Of all the people who responded, I wanted to work only with the two you see in the pictures: they were newly in love at the time, and dared to touch each other in the studio without being ashamed. It was a very intense experience.

Models: I need to see a real person in front of me: to look into the face, the eyes, see the skin, the movement. Many of my paintings are 'landscapes of the face'. They become stories,

which you can read in any order and they still make sense.

My dream was always to be able to paint just as my eyes see. I dreamt that my paintings could look like photographs of my thoughts. I love the old masters. When I was small, I was fascinated by the hands and the colours of flesh in their paintings. Even so, I don't want to be a painter who's old fashioned. I want to be a painter of *now*.

I never studied painting. My parents wouldn't allow it. They wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer. So I studied by going to museums and by painting, painting, painting. The realization that, by doing this, I was actually a painter was quite shocking for me. I began with surreal works when I was young, because I was anxious and didn't dare to be realistic or open. Today, though, I have the feeling that I am able to paint anything. I'm secure about the stories I tell. And if, in a hundred years, my pictures are still alive, then I'll even be able to call them art.

For now, I just hope to live through my paintings, sell all of them and move on to the next ones, because there is nothing uglier than a personal cupboard full of endless paintings that are never seen.

www.heitschgalerie.de



Facescape, 2008, oil on canvas, 110 x 120 cm



Fall from Eden / Silence, 2012, oil on canvas, 180 x 120 cm

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be able to call them art



Still with Crobs, Lust and Bream, 2010, oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm



Seven sisters, 2007, oil on canvas, 110 x 140 cm