

„The pictures find their way to me and have to go through me. And then they land on the canvas.“

NEO RAUCH

00:13 I grew up in the provinces, in Aschersleben. For me, viewed from there, Leipzig was always a place I yearned for. For me, it was synonymous with the great, wide world – the international trade fair city – worldly and, yes, by East German standards, cosmopolitan and open to the world

And then I came to Leipzig and, indeed, paradise opened up for me. It was a contrast unimaginably more extreme than everything I had experienced before.

- How did you get to know the gallery back then?

01:01 I first got to know Judy Lybke, who operated an enterprise that called itself Galerie EIGEN + ART but that was located in a back courtyard on Fritz-Austel-Straße. It was not officially allowed to call itself a gallery, because the gallery label was permitted solely to the institutions that were part of the state art trade. And then, in 1993, he approached me again, and that really came at a moment when I had the feeling that I had now found myself for the first time. And then I had my first exhibition with him, which was a complete failure commercially, because what all the collectors were focused on was video, photo, and installation art; painting had been declared dead once again, to the end of days. Everyone was absolutely sure of that.

- What is your cooperation with the Galerie EIGEN + ART like today?

02:22 I couldn't work together with a gallerist with whom I didn't also develop friendly relations. It has to be something that goes beyond pure business, so that we're tied to each other for better or worse. There has to be a deep mutual affection and a high degree of trust, otherwise it doesn't work.

- What led to your first exhibition in a museum, in 1997 in the MdbK (Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig)?

02:54 That was quite some time ago... I won the art prize of the Leipziger Volkszeitung (Leipzig people's newspaper) and I know that the jury had vehement internal fights and that I finally barely emerged as the one who was to receive the prize. The exhibition still took place in the former Imperial Court of Justice, which was temporarily called the Georgi Dimitroff Museum. And it was under conditions in no way comparable to today's appearance in a museum. Back then I had to do some wrangling with the Museum Director, Guratzsch, because he already wanted to stage a retrospective. And in my opinion, I'm still just beginning, so why should I provide a retrospective? I really wanted to present myself in the way I felt at the moment, at the stage of development I believed I had reached, documented in this exhibition. But he said, no, people should see how you reached this stage, what stations there were. Well, that's how it came that a few very early works ended up at the exhibition, works that were terribly embarrassing to me at the time. But today I see it all with much greater equanimity.

- Your solo exhibition in 2006 in the Wolfsburg Art Museum can be regarded as a kind of retrospective – what did this exhibition mean to you?

04:48 Wolfsburg was indeed an outstanding presentation. Already because of the possibilities this institution offers in itself. Its flexible interior architecture, the movable walls, makes it possible to create spaces that serve an exhibition's every need. And so, for instance, they created for me a roundabout in which I could show my big Tondi. It was simply architecturally congenial, and the support from the museum director of that time and from his curator left nothing to be desired. And I really had the feeling that this was now a good look at my possibilities.

- In 2007, you were the first living German artist to have a solo exhibition in the MET (Metropolitan Museum of Art) in New York, USA. How did you experience that?

05:53 It was pretty crazy to see these huge flags with my name on them at the portico of the Metropolitan Museum. That was really something that will probably never happen again in this life. The public acted properly. They noticed the pictures and, as far as I know, they mostly liked them. It's quite an uplifting feeling to be allowed to exhibit in this institution, no question about it.

- How did you deal with the special spatial situation in the MET?

06:34 The spaces were characterized by low ceilings, of course. They were transitional or adjoining rooms. And I was able to deal with the form by using stretched horizontal formats, spanning the very low space in this way. Normally one might turn down an offer that consisted of such spaces, but in the MET, I would exhibit even in the broom closet. And of course that led to a series of pictures that are still among the best I have ever painted. This constraint of horizontal stretching, of course, is something that also steers one's pictorially shaping energy in specific directions, and so there are no complicated spaces. There are demanding spaces, but no impossible spaces.

- In 2018, you had a comprehensive solo exhibition titled “Dromos” in the Museum de Fundatie in Zwolle in the Netherlands. What was your experience working together with the museum and its Director, Ralph Keuning?

07:55 Zwolle was in fact a retrospective. It went much more clearly back into the depths of time, and I went into this undertaking with substantially increased self-confidence about my early phase of work. Of course, I was also lucky to have an especially congenial museum director there who was very sympathetic to me. Ralph Keuning is really someone who is on fire for figurative painting and especially for mine, and it is simply very nice to fill a building with someone who loves the things he arranges there. It was a lovely experience.

- What did your 2019 solo exhibition in Florence's Palazzo Patti mean to you, and what challenges did it pose?

08:49 Until I was there and saw the pictures hanging, I didn't believe it would really happen. I regarded it as a fantastic dream, a very unreal scenario, that I would ex-

hibit there. Well, then I arrived and, what do you know, the pictures were hanging or were in the process of being hung – of being hung, mind you – and it actually did happen. In that building, I felt like a worm curling up in the dust at the feet of the great masters. The whole time, I was asking myself, why me? Ultimately, of course, the rooms were also a challenge. They don't actually correspond with the usual requirements of a museum that one is meanwhile accustomed to. One thinks immediately of huge, high-ceilinged White Cubes and so forth, but that's not the case there; it's a suite of rooms primarily serving the purposes of living there, and in part the walls have frescoes that have to be treated with great caution. The institution's head restorer was constantly buzzing around us.

- How did the aforementioned exhibitions (Leipzig, Wolfsburg, New York, and Florence) lastingly influence you or your works?

10:29 Oh, I can't really say. What makes an impression or exerts an influence, after all? What has a shaping influence on my work? Is it exhibitions I've undertaken, or those I've seen? Of course, it is always a very instructive moment when you can walk past your own pictures in a kind of parade formation. When you see the pictures in places other than the familiar ones, then they say much more, they are actually in their natural habitat, where they belong, namely on walls not your own. That's where they actually have to prove themselves. And if that is successful, then it contributes tremendously to your self-confidence and is very instructive. Because then I know where any bottlenecks have to be eliminated or where it doesn't yet function very well and where the strengths are that hadn't yet revealed themselves to me in my studio – but also the weaknesses. It's always wonderful to be able to experience this swarm of my children in a completely different order. That means that one's own exhibitions can be encouraging and instructive, but on the other hand, of course, the exhibitions I see of other people's work also inspire me.

- When did you decide to become a professional artist?

12:41 When I was studying, it was actually already clear to me that I would earn my living as a painter, although I had no idea how the commercial aspect should function. When I was going through and experiencing my studies, financial considerations played as good as no role at all, and everything that would come later lay in the hazy blue future. One couldn't plan at all, and we didn't. So, this aspect of wanting to or having to insert yourself into market mechanisms played no role at all. We placed our destinies in the hand of chance, of the uncertain, and of the unpredictable.

- How do you create a work?

13:57 I develop everything on the canvas in front of me, in a mute dialog between this surface and me. And that is always a new challenge and a big adventure, and each time the fear of failure accompanies me, the fear that, behind this fog bank that I see myself in front of, maybe there might be nothing more, that I will poke around in it and find nothing. But so far, I have always found something. After all, I'm a conceptual artist – my concept is not to have a concept, but to surrender myself completely to inspiration.

- What does the word “painting” mean to you?

14:47 Painting is the supreme discipline of art. Architecture is the mother of art, and painting is the supreme discipline that nestles in the mother’s lap. Because it belongs on the walls and at the same time it is also the medium that is as unlimited as can be at all imagined, even though it has limits of touching simplicity, namely a rectangle, a surface limited by four right angles. That means, it plays out within limits determined in space, and this beautiful agreement to accept these limits releases an enormous amount of freedom. You can do whatever you want; you just have to do it well. You have to follow an inner voice and you shouldn’t bore yourself or others.

- What future do you see for painting?

16:08 Well, it will always exist. It has been around for almost 40,000 years, and against the background of 40,000 years of humanity painting, you can’t really see it any other way. And in 40,000 more years, if we still exist – about which there are reasonable doubts – it too will still exist.

- How do you see your future?

16:37 My future in 40,000 years? I’m afraid that even the last and most recent of my pictures will have been lost.