

KARL A. MEYER

Swiss Institute, New York

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November 9 - December 25, 1988

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Swiss Institute is extremely pleased to show the work of Karl A. Meyer in the exhibition "Karl A. Meyer, Not Vital."

Meyer came to New York as a very young artist. Ever since, the Swiss community has followed with great interest the development in his work. Therefore, the exhibition "Karl A. Meyer, Not Vital" is a particularly happy event.

It is equally pleasing that the Swiss Society of New York has supported this exhibition. Their generosity is most encouraging; on behalf of the artists and the Institute, I express to them my deepest gratitude.

I am also grateful to Kirschgarten Druckerei AG. for their generosity and cooperation in producing this catalogue.

Finally, I would like to thank Karl A. Meyer for having devoted countless hours of his time to this project. Without his enthusiasm and energy this exhibition could not have been realized.

Z.W.



Head of an Idol, 1988
Lead and acrylic on wood
19 1/4 x 13 1/2
Collection of the artist

THE POWER OF THE UNKNOWN

Karl Meyer frequently entitles his works *Head of an Idol*. Indeed, some of them do represent primitive, masklike images, while others only allude to them. Meyer's rough, gestural strokes exhibit a fantastic amount of energy. Yet, unexpectedly, they are neither aggressive nor violent; nor should they be examined within a Neo-Expressionist context. Meyer's works inspire the viewer to contemplate, to reflect and to relate his art to other references, even to other feelings. Although these works contain images, they function on another level than a purely representational one.

Meyer is endowed with a Northern sensibility. He was born in Basel, Switzerland, near the borders of Germany and France. German, however, is the spoken language in Basel, and the city historically has been more oriented to German culture.

Meyer's parents, acknowledging his sensibilities, had the foresight to send him to the Rudolf Steiner School. This was the perfect environment for Meyer to pursue his interests. He was fascinated by nature—particularly geology and biology—and spent countless hours observing stones, crystals, and plant life. He also was exposed to wood-working, sculpting and metalworking. Interested in body movement, he enjoyed taking part in the school's dance program.

Meyer's home was a truly warm, nurturing environment, and was through the family that he was introduced to art. Driven by the unusual and unknown, he was reluctant to

submit to a tailored life and to make a career in the family's well-established printing company. He wanted to explore life on his own. Unwillingly, he continued his education in business and then in law, but at the same time he attended art classes at the Basel School for Applied Art. In 1980, at the age of twenty-two, Meyer made up his mind to become an artist and left Basel for New York.

In New York, he encountered the challenge he was looking for. Gone were the protection of his family, gone were the structured Swiss life and gone were the weight of the long years of schooling. Meyer was finally able to live freely and anonymously.

Paradoxically, the works Meyer produced in New York show little influence of the city life. New York for him was a vehicle only for breaking free of his binds, not for providing subjects matter for his work. Instead of looking to the immediate and to the outside world, Meyer began to contemplate the past and investigate through his memory those impressions that had dramatically marked him.

The past into which Meyer looked was neither his own nor that of European civilization, from which he had stemmed. It was a remote past, a world where awesome and intense feelings engender drama and myth.

Meyer had always been intrigued by geology and topography, especially in the ways they generate unusual and powerful effects. While living in Europe, he had visited and was impressed by the petrography in Val Ca-

monica, Italy. In the United States, he traveled extensively throughout the West, there he came upon the most extraordinary topographies. The fantastic rock formations, the rich colors of the soil and the grandiose and mysterious scenery moved him enormously. So did the ruins of Native American dwellings, such as Mesa Verde. The latter appeared even cruder and more astonishing than the petrography in Val Camonica. In these western landscapes, Meyer found the dramatic coexistence between the powerful and the primitive, between the stunning and the remoteness and between the unusual and the elemental, which generate a sublime effect. This was going to influence his work from then on.

Although Meyer admits that he shares some of the Abstract Expressionists' sensibilities, he does not consider himself as one of their followers. He believes his work is much closer to Turner's, because the sublime effect he strives to evoke comes from his own imagination of a theme, an event or an experience.

Meyer draws his subject matters from the primitive cultures. These images function on several levels. On the one hand, they allow him to achieve the strange, the unfamiliar and the sublime; on the other hand they enable Meyer to express his feelings about the importance of myth—a phenomenon which he considers to be completely lacking in our time. Meyer translates these without being polemical or critical of society. He only points out its deficiency in our time and wants us to become aware of it. Meyer's message is melancholic.

Throughout his career, Meyer has consistently created woodcuts, a tedious and time-consuming process that may be compared to primitive man's act of carving. Meyer finds the warm color and the rich texture of wood a more suitable medium for expression than materials such as glass or plastic, which he finds too cold.

In 1986, Meyer began to paint on lead sheets. Because lead reacts with different chemicals, these surfaces can have interesting textures. Meyer usually exposes the lead sheets to rain or to some brand of soft drink. This causes the lead to oxidize slowly and random patterns to appear. The process might take a few days or even longer. He then removes the solution, dries the surface, and paints on it with acrylic. The color he uses most frequently is blue-turquoise, maybe as a reference to turquoise, a stone that Native Americans frequently utilized in their art. The works Meyer executes by this process are necessarily more abstract, but Meyer considers all his artistic processes to stem from the same experience and to be equally important. To emphasize this point, he sometimes creates a diptych by placing an incised wood panel and a painted lead panel side by side, as in *Untitled* (1988).

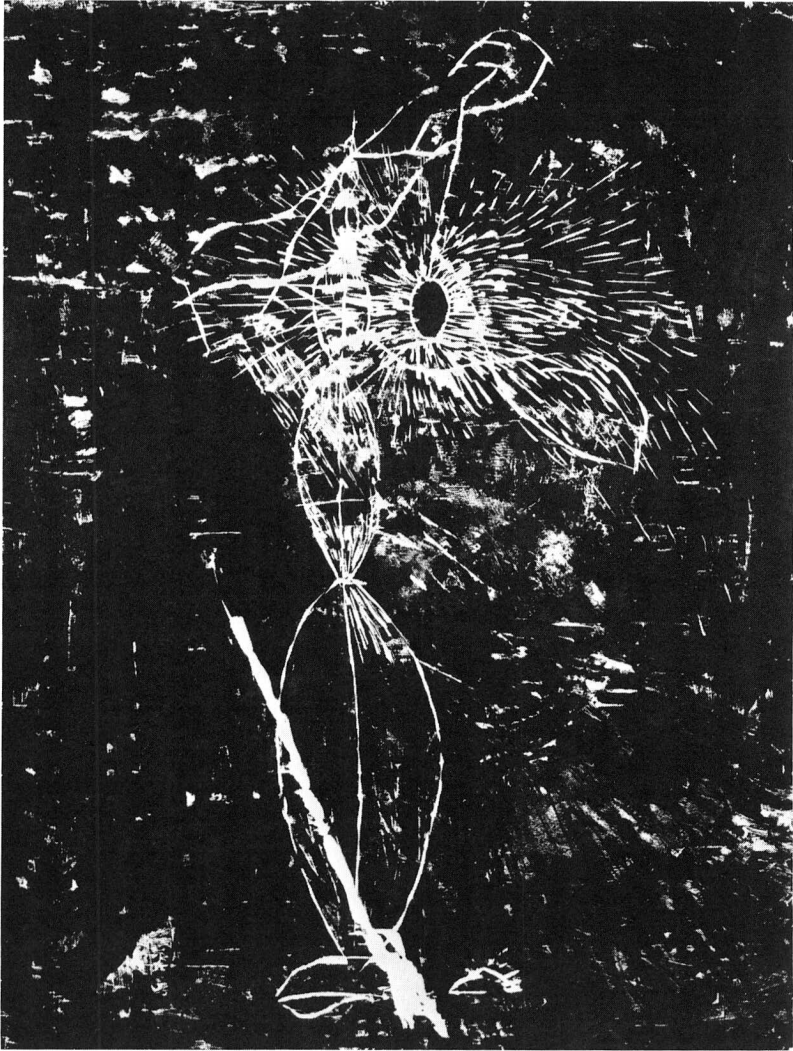
The reductive images and rough gestural motions in Meyer's work belie the elaborate thoughts and universe of imaginations behind it. Meyer's concern is a poetic sublime generated by the power of the unknown, and, he wants his audience to become attentive to it too.

Ziba de Weck

Head of an Idol, 1988
oil on paper
54 x 42
Collection of the artist



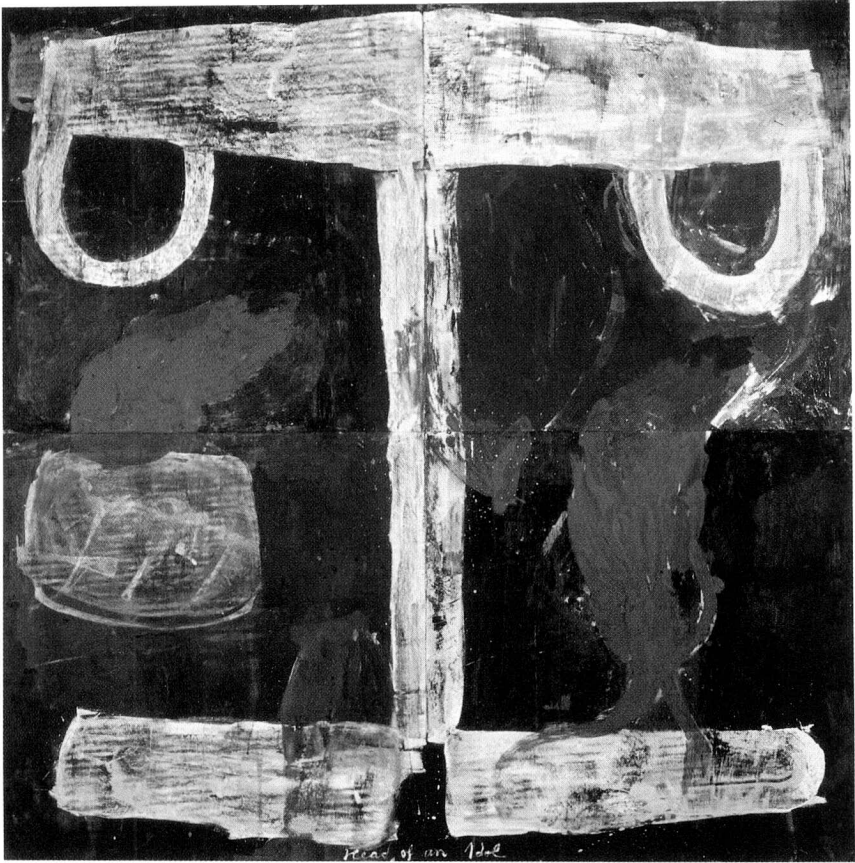
Untitled, 1988
Woodcut on paper
61½ × 47
Collection of the artist



Untitled, 1988
Woodcut on paper
61½ × 47
Collection of the artist



Head of an Idol, 1988
Oil and liquid graphite on wood
96 x 96
Collection of the artist



Untitled, 1988
Diptych: one panel
lead and acrylic on wood,
one panel oil on incised wood
48 × 77
Collection of the artist



KARL A. MEYER

Born 1958, Basel, Switzerland

ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS

1987 Galerie Littmann, Basel
Kunstmuseum Kartause Ittingen, Switzerland

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1984 "Large Works" Barbara Braathen Gallery, New York
1985 "Gallery Artists and Friends" Rosa Esman Gallery, New York
"East Village Functional" Rosa Esman Gallery, New York
1986 "Eclectic" Rosa Esman Gallery, New York
"Happy Happy" Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York
1987 "Karl A. Meyer/Suzanne Bocanegra" L. Rastovski Gallery, New York
"Art Against Aids" Rosa Esman Gallery and Barbara Braathen Gallery, New York
1988 "Karl A. Meyer, Not Vital" Swiss Institute, New York

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches;
height precedes width.

Untitled, 1988

Diptych: one panel lead and acrylic on wood,
one panel oil on incised wood

48 × 77

Collection of the artist

Head of an Idol, 1988

Lead and acrylic on wood

19¹/₄ × 13¹/₂

Collection of the artist

Head of an Idol, 1988

Oil and liquid graphite on wood

96 × 96

Collection of the artist

Untitled, 1988

Woodcut on paper

61¹/₂ × 47

Collection of the artist

Untitled, 1988

Woodcut on paper

61¹/₂ × 47

Collection of the artist

Untitled, 1988

Oil on paper

54 × 42

Collection of the artist

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35 West 67th Street
New York, New York, 10023

Director: Ziba de Weck
Assistant: Ariane Braillard

Gallery Hours:
Monday–Friday 2:00–8:00 pm
Saturday–Sunday 2:00–6:00 pm

Gallery talks:
will be organized by appointment

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35 West 67th Street
New York, New York, 10023
Design: Remo Poletti
Photographic credit: Peter M. Fine

Printed by Kirschgarten Druckerei AG., Basel/Switzerland
Paper: text, SK3 135 GM2 Kunstdruck Papier matt
cover, SK/CM 10 240 gm², blau

Type face: text, Times Roman 10/12 pt.
captions, checklist, biography, 8/9 pt.
cover, Helvetica

Typesetting by Strong Silent Type, New York

