

Marcus Behmer

1879-1958

24 July – 2 September 2008
opening reception on Thursday, 24 July, 7-9 pm

Fascinated by the book art of Charles Ricketts and directly influenced by Aubrey Beardsley's revolution in the field of illustration, Marcus Behmer starts out at the turn of the 19th century as an autodidact. He soon liberates himself from Art Nouveau and, parallel to Expressionism that was just emerging and to the new impulses from the Wiener Werkstätte in Vienna, develops his own inimitable formal idiom. In his native Weimar he catches the eye of the legendary Harry Graf Kessler. Behmer draws, writes and designs books (for Kessler's Cranach Press, but above all for the publisher Insel) developing a style of engraving that was both absolutely precise and astonishingly personal. He achieves a degree of fame in the bibliophile circles that keep abreast of the beginnings of Modernism. At the start of his career everything seems possible for Behmer, he makes early comic books, creates a language of ornament all of his own, and produces writings and pictures of astonishing comic imaginativeness and sexual frankness. But as early as the twenties Behmer suffers from the crisis in the field of the art book, and consequently from his unwavering dedication to the small format. While his book illustrations for Oscar Wilde's "La Sainte Courtisane", Hermann Bang's "Exzentrische Novellen" (Eccentric Novellas) and above all Phillip Otto Runge's "Von dem Fischer und syner Fru" (Of the Fisherman and his Wife) are highly regarded internationally, his visibly freer graphic works continue to disappear into a cultural black hole which swallows up almost all Modernist illustrators. He is still sufficiently visible however to come up on the National Socialists' radar, and in 1937 they imprisoned Behmer, who was living openly as a homosexual, for two years.

After the war too Behmer lived the (often enough impoverished) Bohemian life in literary and artistic circles. In spite of numerous exhibitions in highly regarded galleries and institutions such as the Vienna Secession in 1900, the Städel Museum in Frankfurt in 1956, the Berlin Galleries Rose in 1950 and Rudolf Springer in 1951, Marcus Behmer, who lived in Berlin-Charlottenburg until his death in 1958, remained largely unknown, not only because of the small format of his work and the figure he cut as an artist, but also because what he was interested in was something entirely different, namely precision in his own signature, and almost stubborn stylistic fixation poised between irony and elegance. The exhibition in the Galerie Daniel Buchholz consists of drawings, rare and in part reworked graphics and illustrations, as well as books devised by Behmer, typescripts, manuscripts and letters, largely from private collections, but also loans from Berlinische Galerie, Berlin; Klingspohr Museum, Offenbach; Antiquariat Markus Haucke, Berlin; Collection Sternweiler/Schwules Museum, Berlin; Städelsches Kunstinstitut/Graphic Collection, Frankfurt/M.

Oliver Tepel