



**MICHAEL SAILSTORFER**  
Every Piece is a New Problem

Michael Sailstorfer grew up amidst myth, sky and trees as the son of a stone sculptor in a small Bavarian farming village, population 4000. In the time since he has passed both memories and fables of these woodlands – as a pastoral haven, frightful realm of darkness, and the essence of homeland – through turbulent, if no less endearing treatment. With infectious curiosity and calculated abandon, his practice recalls youthful experimentation – making and unmaking the architecture of his upbringing with every new venture. Upon this winding path there is a constant, unrelenting faith in the artistic potential of the commonplace to transcend the tidy captions of current understanding. Rather than the pursuit of destination or conclusion, he instigates absurdity and incongruity as a matter of course. Through a coy grin Sailstorfer authors artwork "less from the head than the stomach," striving for sculptures that can live unencumbered by explanation, theory or standing logic. He would likely protest the very writing of this essay, aside every other attempt to translate his work into language. And yet there is method in this mayhem, and a history to be found within Sailstorfer's trail of irreverence, enigma and iconoclasm.

"Maybe," he explained during a recent interview, "you can compare what I am doing to writing a song. You take what surrounds you and bothers you and put it in a song... [it] sounds *super romantic* but that's what makes me do things" (my italics). In these words and practice, Sailstorfer evokes the historical *Sturm und Drang* ("Storm and Drive") movement that prized the extreme, subjective exercise of emotion over contemporary models of logic, reason and decorum. Active from the late 1760s to the early 1780s, this tempestuous philosophy was associated with art (especially literature and music) that would shock the audience with unabashed, often confrontational *feeling*. These hysterical displays often reflected natural occurrences, and in turn, storms served as both model and muse for pronounced human drama. Such activity became a precursor to the later, larger movement of 19th century German Romanticism which passionately bestowed importance upon beauty, humor and wit. It did so as a reaction against the industrial revolution, seeking to counteract rampant urban growth and mechanization with a renewed valuation of nature, medieval history and the handmade essence of art. This work celebrated the irrational and embraced the



Above: Michael Sailstorfer, *Clouds*, 2010. Opposite: Michael Sailstorfer, *Schlagzeug*, 2003.



exotic, unfamiliar and faraway: encouraging the flight of human imagination to improvise and escape. Without need for product or evident purpose, Romanticism validated emotion as an authentic wellspring of artmaking – opening the gates for untamed forces (human, animal and the environment) to play.

As most revolutions go, *Sturm und Drang* eventually fell victim to its internal eccentricity and was torn apart by conflicting artistic pursuits. Sailstorfer is not an orthodox child of Romanticism – he subscribes to no singular doctrine – but there is insight to be found in the way he references and reformulates these precedents much like he sculpts his raw materials. Sailstorfer is a 21st century romantic, sung through the antithetical lyrics of industry and the machine. Whether cannibalizing picturesque wood cabins (*3 ster mit ausblick* – “3 sters with a view,” 2002), mimicking comets with catapulted lampposts (*sternschnuppe* – “Shooting Star,” 2002) or painting wide sections of German forest in black (*Schwarzwald* – “Black Forest,” 2010), his work is as stormy, aggressive and exuberant as it is systematic, methodical and mechanized. Like an industrialization of the absurd he executes playful curiosities with impressive technical precision – authoring conundrums that loop, linger and question. Sacrificing function to emotion, he creates

objects, installations and actions that curator Bruce Haines calls, “engrossingly dysfunctional sculptures, their previous utilitarianism transformed into follies of uselessness, charm and wit.” Free of duty and responsibility, Sailstorfer’s unbound objects become agents of uncanny “stories,” which, writer Barbara Casavecchia observes, “incline towards the melodramatic.”

And while he stages these extravagant curiosities through streamlined mechanics, this work willfully embraces the wider sensory spectrum – materializing elements of sound, smell and touch that are regularly prohibited from the gallery space. As a case in point, *versuchsreaktor* (“test reactor,” 2008) embeds the typical singer’s microphone into a block of concrete to amplify the unseen vibrations of the building, and the footsteps of every approaching visitor. Marrying what he calls “hard and soft” architectures, Sailstorfer’s contradictory black *Wolken* (“Clouds,” 2010) echo these sentiments – infusing the gallery with the scent of rubber as an ominous, if “cartoony” storm hangs above our heads. Melancholic beauty abounds as the artist habitually dances between the weight of fear and the flight of fancy; industry and nature; life and death. Spanning and simultaneously muddying all of these traditionally divisive poles, the upended trees in Sailstorfer’s surreal *Forst* (“Forest,” 2010) serve as crescendo to his renovated vision of Romanticism, and the German woodlands where it began. Standing before it like the intrepid voyager of a Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) painting, we must re-map our steps through a swirling evocation where the intersecting paths of myth, landscape and the machine are woven into a telling, if no less maddening tangle. None retain their previous integrity or autonomy, and none leave stable or unscathed. Instead, Sailstorfer orchestrates painfully beautiful paradoxes where different meanings, emotions and senses can, and do co-exist.

– SM 2014

**CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER****MICHAEL SAILSTORFER**

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Curated by Steven Matijcio

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**Michael Sailstorfer** was born in 1979 in Vilsbiburg, Germany, and currently lives in Berlin. He studied at the Academy of Fine Art in Munich and Goldsmiths College in London, and has been part of residencies in Los Angeles (Villa Aurora) and the Office for Contemporary Art Norway in Oslo. In 2004 he showed at the Sydney Biennial and at Manifesta 5 in San Sebastian, following up with exhibitions at Artists Space, New York (2005) and Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin (2006). Other solo shows have taken place in Austria, Belgium, Dubai, France, Italy and Switzerland. Sailstorfer is represented by the Johann König Gallery in Berlin, Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin in Paris, Galeria Fortes Vilaça in São Paulo, Zero Galleria in Milan, and Galerie Thaddeus Ropac in Salzburg.

Cover: Michael Sailstorfer, *3 ster mit ausblick*, 2002. Photo by Siegfried Wameser.  
Image courtesy of the Artist, Johann König Gallery, Berlin and Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin.