

## CLEGG & GUTTMANN

*Still life, portrait, landscape, library*

Opening: Friday, March 7, 2025, 5 – 8 pm

Exhibition: March 7 – April 17, 2025

### PRESS RELEASE

Michael Clegg (born 1957 in Dublin) and Yair Martin Guttman (born 1957 in Jerusalem) moved to New York together to study in 1978 and have been working as an artist duo since 1980. Their practice includes large-scale photographic works, including portraits, landscapes, and still lifes as well as sculptural and installation pieces and projects that engage with the institution of the library. The exhibition *Still life, portrait, landscape, library* at Nagel Draxler Kabinett presents key works from Clegg & Guttman's body of work, encapsulating four decades of history, with works spanning from 1984 to 2019.

The centerpiece of the exhibition, *DDR Children Library, Pritzwalk* (2015/2019), stems from Clegg & Guttman's interest in the library as an institution, a theme they have explored in various ways. Through their initiative *The Open Public Library*, which they began in the early 1990s, the artists installed accessible bookcases in different neighborhoods in Graz, Austria. Each bookcase contained books donated by the community, as the artists went door to door to collect them. While this project fostered social networks through participation and provided a representation of the neighborhood, *DDR Children Library, Pritzwalk* offers a visual and conceptual exploration of the library as both a repository of knowledge and a space for collective memory. The work originated from an interactive library created for *Die Sieben Künste von Pritzwalk*, a project for Neuen Auftraggeber curated by Gerrit Gohlke with Clegg & Guttman in 2014. The library, which included children's books published in the GDR and collected from the inhabitants of Pritzwalk, was a communal effort to engage with this part of the GDR's history. The ideological character of the literature from this period is reflected in the library, which became a historical testimony. As such, *DDR Children Library, Pritzwalk* can be read as an emotionally charged portrait of a society that no longer exists.

Their earliest work in the exhibition, *BascoBasco* (1984), considers the still life as one of the main genres of 17<sup>th</sup>-century painting. Often containing religious and allegorical symbolism relating to the objects depicted, the still life occupied the lowest rung in the hierarchy of genres. Clegg & Guttman's still life presented in the exhibition depicts coins, two bottles of Tabasco sauce, and dried purple string beans – humorously referencing popular arrangements in Dutch and Flemish still lifes, which often featured carefully composed objects like coins, musical instruments, and exotic fruits or vegetables starting to spoil, highlighting the fleeting nature of life and the transient quality of sensory pleasures.

What particularly captures attention, however, are the bright beams of light shining on the piano's surface. This interplay between dark and light zones is referred to as *chiaroscuro*, a contrast between shadows and areas of pure light associated with Baroque painting and artists like

Rembrandt, Velázquez, and Caravaggio<sup>1</sup>. This technique also characterizes Clegg & Guttman's oeuvre and can be seen as the red thread running through the exhibition. While the beams of light in *BascoBasco* are the most direct, the same chiaroscuro effect can be recognized in their other photographic work but is an especially defining aspect of their visual language in their portraits.

While the still life considers human perception of objects and consumption, Clegg & Guttman's portraits engage with a discourse of power. In commissioned works, the artists question how forms of power are represented and portrayed, exploring themes of prestige and self-presentation – codes that have been observed in portraiture for centuries. Their portraits, both personal as well as group portraits, allude to 17<sup>th</sup>-century painting, which, although inextricably anchored in the socio-political fabric of its time, shows how conventions surrounding posture, spatial hierarchy, and emblems like clothing, artworks, and furniture have remained stable. Clegg & Guttman have established a clear methodology, delivering direct portraits in which the sitter or sitters at times look away or lock their gaze with the camera lens and, ultimately, with the observer – manifesting a kind of interrogation of the spectator. In *Portrait of a Photography Enthusiast* (2003), the subject looks at us, pulling us into the realm of representation and confronting us with the notion of presence that his representation evokes.

In contrast to the more “dramatic” and theatrical portraits, Clegg & Guttman's landscapes depict anonymous places where nothing seems to happen or catch our attention – places that simply exist, or “nonplaces”.<sup>2</sup> The landscapes in their work show highways, mountain views, clouds floating over desolate fields, and high-voltage pylons carrying power lines. These landscapes often depict industrial elements coexisting with nature, symbolizing the complexity of the intersection between nature and industry.

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Clegg & Guttman have been showing internationally since 1980. The artists have taken part in Documenta, the Whitney Biennial and the Venice Biennial; they have had single shows at Kunstmuseum Basel, the Vienna Secession, the Israel Museum, the CAPC Bordeaux and Kunstverein Stuttgart, Kunschthl Esch in Luxembourg, BLMK Brandenburgisches Landesmuseum für modern Kunst, amongst others. Clegg & Guttman's work is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney, and the Guggenheim museums in New York. In Europe their artworks are in the collections of the Centre Pompidou (Beaubourg), the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, the national collection at the Kunstmuseum Bonn, and the mumok in Vienna. The artists were awarded the Staatsbibliothek Berlin Max Herrmann prize for their Open Public Libraries.

Text: Josephine Van de Walle

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<sup>1</sup> Guttman, M. in Clegg & Guttman (2022). *Rejected* [Exhibition catalogue]. Exhibited at Kunschthl Esch 22.10.2022 - 15.01.202

<sup>2</sup> Interview Clegg & Guttman by Erik van der Heeg and Jan Åman in Clegg & Guttman (1989). *Corporate Landscapes*, Kunstverein Bremerhaven.