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Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch
Blut und Pigmente
Curated by Samuel Gross

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This show at Galerie Mezzanin Geneva presents works by two historic Austrian artists counting among the most important in the Viennese Actionism (a movement that yelled its hatred of both the establishment and the social norms since the early Sixties). Everyone has in mind images of performances that were at the heart of these artists who furrowed the gaping wounds left by the War in the utterly conservative Austrian society. Yet, if there is a field in which art must absolutely mark its refusal of a bourgeois destiny, it is that of painting. Thus, Otto Muehl (1925–2013) and Hermann Nitsch (1938) outrageously trifled (and still do) with the absorbing plasticity of this medium.

The paintings and silkscreens of Otto Muehl gathered for this exhibition are filled with a provocative energy. The late sixties media covered crowned heads provided the very images for his playful loathing. From these sources, he derived the two 1967 charges, one of Shah Reza Pahlavi and his wife and one of Prince Charles. The clashing flat colours evoke the posters that then flourished the streets aiming at an irreverent uprising against common social values. Moved by an urge to change our social uses, even the most “basic” ones, Otto Muehl will invent a communautarian structure, that will even have a Genevese avatar. In a quest for the foundation of our being, Otto Muehl has produced an informal painting envisaged as a primal scream. The two nudes that complete this group of works confront us with our innermost feelings of a necessary sexual differentiation who, too often serve as a shelter for our fears.

Similarly Hermann Nitsch's very academical odalisk, painted when he was 18 years old shows to what extent painting served to convey an image of a contained sensuality, protecting the codes of the proprieties and of morality. In mixing his pigments with blood, thus destroying the most tedious vertical connections between painter and model, did Hermann Nitsch since the sixties mock our terrors and ghosts. Painting explodes before eventually becoming a relic. Movements freeze in a vain yet theatrical and deafened energy. The sound of our inability to turn the world from its doom echoes beyond his large paintings or performances.

I hope that this exhibition, consciously presenting fragments of two major Post-War European works, will offer all an opportunity to connect with other approaches to painting, beyond geographical and historical boundaries, allowing one to be moved by these paintings' outrageous force.

Samuel Gross