ARTnews

Seeing Red: Hermann Nitsch on His Violent Paintings at Marc Straus

By Alex Greenberger
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In 1962, Hermann Nitsch crucified a slaughtered lamb in the name of art. Naturally, this led to a fair amount of controversy, which Nitsch is adept at generating. In the following four years, he was arrested in Austria, his home country, three times—once for a performance with Otto Muehl involving a dead sheep; another time, also with Muehl, that resulted in a 14-day sentence; and, finally, a last time, for a menstruation painting, that led him to leave Austria all together. After two years in New York, where he met Fluxus figures like Allan Kaprow and Charlotte Moorman, he moved to Germany, and, in 1971, he bought Prinzendorf Castle in Austria from the Catholic Church. Since 1978, he has lived there, using the Austrian castle to stage his Orgien Mysterien Theatre (The Theater of Orgies and Mysteries) performances, which continue to involve eviscerated animals, despite antagonism from animal-rights groups.

After that preamble, it feels strange to note that Nitsch's new show at Marc Straus, on New York's Lower East Side, is relatively tame. The show is a survey of three decades of painting, and every work in it unsubtly implies violence, with splashes of red or black acrylic that resemble splatters of blood.

When I met Nitsch, he was sitting a table at the far end of the gallery, under a rectangular, reddish painting that made it look as though blood were spraying from his head. At age 77, he is no longer the sprightly Viennese Actionist of yesteryear. Dressed in all black and wearing a long, white beard, he sat slightly slumped over, enthusiastically waxing philosophical about his work. You don't exactly imagine that this same man is going to disembowel cows or chickens any time soon, and yet, Nitsch said, he's planning a sixday play at his castle for two years from now.

Theater is important for Nitsch. His paintings are, in fact, the result of his productions, and he uses theater as a way of engaging all the senses. Even the way he talks is so stylized that it can sound like grandiose dialogue from an experimental play.

Asked about his performances, Nitsch said, in thickly accented English, “I know that the substance of color uses my senses. You know what that makes? A new kind of theater. That’s the first step on the canvas. Theater goes out into reality—I would say the cosmos, ultimately, out of the limits of the sky. And there, that’s my stage. Then I use meat, human life, human bodies. When I start, I try to use my senses to get a substance of the color.”

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So did that mean that his paintings, with their references to horrific acts of debauchery and graphic violence, were meant to quite literally shock people into their senses? Sort of. It was difficult to get an exact answer. Here is what Nitsch was willing to say: “I would say intensity is with spirit, and forms of violence like terrorism are without spirit. That’s an evolution of nature without spirit.”

Nitsch was more forthcoming about the role of spirituality in his works. Several paintings in the Straus show involve the use of stretched shirts. “I hate a wrong symbolism,” he said, “but this shirt is, let’s say, the shirt of Jesus Christ, the shirt of Mithras, the shirt of Dionysus.” He pointed to a shirt in one painting that was once white and had been smeared with black paint. “I wear this shirt when I paint it. Sometimes, I get a picture that is good and intense.”

Still, Nitsch knows that that shirt may mean many things to different people. “I never say it is that,” he said, referring to the Christ symbolism. “‘That is that.’ What, a shirt with black color?” Nitsch explains that he wants to approach something more universal, that he “sometimes see[s] the same in different religions.”

Does Nitsch practice any religion himself? “No, no,” Nitsch said. “It’s only phenomenological. I would say I have my own religion—a new religion of the creation of life, of the development of the cosmos.”

Creation and death, the two extremes of life, are Nitsch’s main interests, and he wants to bring us back in touch with them. It should come as no surprise that he has, in the past, mentioned liking religious art, like Matthias Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece, in which one of Christ’s wounds streams with blood and several people weep uncontrollably. What’s more surprising, however, is that he also said that Michelangelo, Claude Monet, Mark Rothko, and Kazuo Shiraga were influences on his paintings. All four of them have a lighter touch, even if they, like Nitsch, were interested in the possibilities of using paint to get at something visceral.

Shortly after this, Nitsch opened a recently released, 968-page catalogue of his work and showed me some of his early performances, which involved the artist slathering his penis with animal blood and guts. It is often hard to believe that a person like Nitsch could believe in the work of a softie like Monet, especially after he told me, “Nothing is new. Nothing is intense. Nothing is a provocation.”

I asked why that carnage was so important to him. Why bother exposing us to these horrors at all? “That,” he said, “is in us. It’s not the question of if you believe in that or not. It’s really in us.”