

ArtSeen

Hermann Nitsch: Bayreuth Stories

By Alfred Mac Adam



When I think about Hermann Nitsch (b. 1938), I automatically think about blood: real blood used as paint. Indeed, for decades, the artist has made use of blood, flesh, and even entrails in his work. The problem with real blood, however, is that once it is spilled or smeared on canvas, it stops being red and becomes—in the best case—ochre. So, ultimately, the only way to convey the idea of blood is to use paint, as we see in the acrylic artificial blood used throughout the superb show, curated by Denise Wendel-Poray, currently on view at Slag & RX Galleries. Whether real or acrylic, blood is Nitsch's preferred way to express the sublime, which the artist construes very much in Edmund Burke's sense, as a spectacle that astonishes us, freezes us mentally and physically, and infuses in us a touch of horror.

Nitsch, we must remember, comes to painting from performance. In the 1950s, he developed the *Orgien Mysterien Theater* (Orgies Mysteries Theater), vast performances or Actions (as he called them), and in the 1960s he was a key player in the provocative Viennese Actionism group. Echoing Antonin Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*, Nitsch's performance work incorporated the audience in outrageous sexual and scatological rituals, with religious and sacrificial overtones, that involved all five senses. But the communal aspect of performance could not satisfy Nitsch's existentialist leanings. In keeping with existentialism's emphasis on the individual, Nitsch had to come back to himself. Nitsch is born as a painter when he puts aside the communal and focuses his attention on the blank canvas. Collective sacrifice yields to self-sacrifice.

To create his art, Nitsch had to sacrifice some part of his communal self and the relationship between

PERES PROJECTS

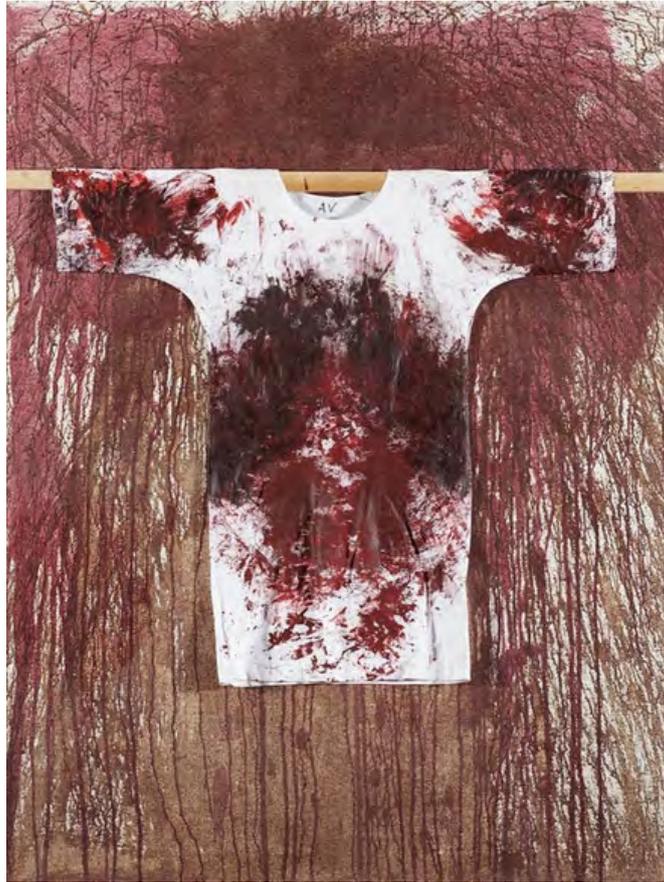
that identity and the world beyond the canvas. Both of these are necessarily relinquished in order to complete his metamorphosis into a painter. But it is made equally clear by the astonishing body of work that makes up this show that the 83-year-old artist has left nothing behind. While we experience the violence we usually associate with Nitsch, we also find a new harmony in his palette. He had to isolate himself in order to hone his artistic identity, Nitsch's fascination with performance—music, spectacle, dance—remains central as subject matter if not as concrete action.



The show's title, *Bayreuth Stories*, conjures up Bayreuth, the heartland of Wagnerian opera. Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung* is all about sacrifice and renunciation—themes that clearly appeal to Nitsch. But it is another Romantic composer, Robert Schumann, whose presence is felt most directly here. Several works incorporate the costume designs Nitsch created for his 2007 production of Schumann's *Szenen aus Goethes Faust* (*Scenes from Goethe's Faust*), a project that reaffirmed the importance of self-sacrifice by positioning Faust as the ultimate overreacher.

Untitled (2011), a 79 by 59-inch acrylic and blood on canvas, looks back to Nitsch's performance work of the 1960s. It incorporates a costume, which looks like a long T-shirt worn by a sacrificial victim, spattered with a red circle where the victim's heart might have been torn out. The entire, disconcerting piece shocks us because it is clearly the remnant of some violent event. If the 2011 piece takes us back to Nitsch's early career, *Untitled* (2019), another acrylic on canvas of the same dimensions, which also includes one of Nitsch's T-shirts at its center, moves his work in another direction. Here it is as if one of Schumann's characters were before us. The dead-center placement of the white costume constitutes a *trompe-l'oeil* conceit: are we standing opposite the figure or standing behind it? In other words, are we in the performance or merely spectators? Flanking the figure are swaths of melded orange and yellow, colors of illumination—many of the works included here favor these colors. Three small colored pencil on paper works also accompany Nitsch's paintings, the original costume designs for Schumann's opera. Their brilliant play of yellow, mauve, and orange express nothing but joy, not the violence of spilled blood.

PERES PROJECTS



The *pièce de résistance* of Bayreuth Stories is a huge 79 by 118-inch acrylic on canvas from 2019. The work is structured as a dialectical relationship between Nitsch's early, blood-soaked work and his later lyrical images. The left side of the painting features a dramatic passage in sanguinary red—the artist's past, neither gone nor forgotten—while, to the right, yellow and white predominate. Between, delicate pinks, greens, blues mediate between the extremes. This painting is a visual representation of the artist's late style, the *Sturm-und-Drang* of the 1960s, with its emphasis on sacrifice, moderated by a painterly contentment. This is Hermann Nitsch in full and at his very best.