

NEW GUARD: Painter Matthias Weischer in his studio. The 32-year-old artist is a leading figure in the "New Leipzig School."





EASTERN EXPOSURE

Within the world of art connoisseurs, critics and collectors, all eyes are on a group of painters living and working in the eastern German city of Leipzig – a place in which a long tradition of rigorous instruction and a solid work ethic has created a community devoted to art. One of its new shooting stars, artist Matthias Weischer, lays it on thick every day with a dose of diligence and discipline.

AUTHOR: Kimberly Bradley | **PHOTO:** Andrea Stappert



CREATIVE PROCESS (UPPER LEFT): Weischer's Leipzig studio in its many shades. A recent work in progress hangs on the front wall.
COLOUR-BOX (UPPER RIGHT): A multitiered painter's workstation. **SOLID FOUNDATION (LOWER LEFT):** Early layers of paint on small-format canvasses.
SPATIAL RELATIONS (LOWER RIGHT): A collection of preliminary sketches for future works.





FINISHED PRODUCTS (ABOVE AND PREVIOUS PAGE): *Spielhalle* (2004), above, and *Gelbe Lampe* (2004), previous page, are typical Weischer works, both featuring surrealist elements and furniture placed within spare unpeopled interiors. "If you look at Matthias's paintings upside down, you see how refined these interior spaces are," says professor Sighard Gille.

The studio is a study in colour and what seems like chaos. Splats and blobs of paint dot the floor; well-used tubes of oil paints, squeezed from the middle, are piled onto a multitiered cart. A row of small canvasses hugs the radiators; much larger canvasses lean against a wall. Dominating the scene is a painting showing a surreal interior, splashed with colourful graphic shapes and a shadow of a human figure – a piece that Leipzig-based painter Matthias Weischer is currently working on.

The space's busy feel dispels any romantic notions of what it might mean to be an artist – afternoons sketching strangers in cafés, nights drinking wine with friends, random strokes of divine inspiration. For Weischer, art is *work*. He has a schedule not unlike an employee in a factory, though his is self-imposed. "You have to work on things to get results," he says of a creative regimen in which he paints (or sketches, or draws) from 9am to 5pm or beyond. "Ideas come through the activity. They come, lead you further and inspire you, and then new ideas come. My work philosophy is to keep going, even if it hurts," he says. The 32-year-old is a major player in what

has been dubbed by the art press and art-world aficionados as the "New Leipzig School" of painters – a designation that now has as much clout as the 1990s hype over the Young British Artists (YBAs), including Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin. This young generation of mostly West German, mostly male artists came east in the mid-1990s to study under professors Arno Rink, Sighard Gille and blue-chip painting sensation Neo Rauch at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst (Academy for Visual Arts) in Leipzig. The members of the group – which also includes David Schnell, Tim Eitel and Tilo Baumgärtel – paint figurative canvasses and are presently enjoying a status as the Next Big Thing.

This is something, by the way, that not everyone in the small formerly industrial Saxon city seems to fully understand or even believe. Such focused attention hasn't been paid to any group of German painters since the "Junge Wilde" movement – which included now well-established artists Jörg Immendorff and Sigmar Polke – in the early 1980s. Back then the art public's lust for figurative painting was dubbed *Hunger nach Bildern* (hunger for pictures). 1

The new infatuation with traditional painting could be a backlash against multimedia art or photography. It may be sociological, reflecting a widespread, collective search for true authorship in an increasingly anonymous world. And with this group, as Leipzig gallerist Gerd Harry Lybke puts it, it could be about quality.

The newcomers have occasionally been criticised for their similar styles – impersonal fantastic landscapes or interiors often in odd muted colors that exude what could be described as eastern German “cool.” But the connoisseur would beg to differ. Weischer’s work carries a personal signature marked by unpopulated spaces that seem as if someone is either about to enter or has just abandoned them. It’s a little like Pop-Art, but possesses a kind of inorganic sensuality. Often filled with surreal elements (like the oddly colourful *Spielhalle*, previous page, which looks like a pinball machine with no buttons) and stark spatial perspectives, the canvasses also differ from his colleagues’ smooth surface work in that Weischer applies paint in thick layers that ooze over the edges of the canvas. “Every painting is a process. I start with a vague idea, and then I try to play around. I keep painting,” says Weischer, whose collectors include Hollywood mogul Michael Ovitz and Miami-based übercollectors Steve and Mera Rubell, who are showing some of the painter’s work in a major US exhibition of their collection this summer. His inspirations are “the everyday objects around me,” other painters and interior design: a vintage English-language volume on traditional furniture styles is perched atop a precariously stacked pile of art books behind a musty couch.

Thick layers of oil mean time is often spent waiting for paint to dry, which could be one explanation for the canvasses hanging or leaning around the studio in various stages of completion. “I paint about 20 paintings a year,” Weischer sighs. Last year was busy: not only did Weischer gain a fame he claims to have never expected, he also had to produce works for collectors and for shows mounted last year and this. “Before an exhibition opening, you put yourself under pressure,” he says. “I reached some limits. You can’t even think, and things get mechanical.” Weischer is now taking time to retreat from the limelight and develop his work: in the new painting, a shadow of a figure has crept into one of his formerly unpeopled interiors. “At the school we had a work rhythm and were used to the fact that there was always something to do,” he says. “I try to hold on to the ethics of my studies.”

THE PROFESSOR

Founded in 1764, Leipzig’s Academy of Visual Arts has a history of discipline, traditional methods and, since the painting department was established in 1961, painters who teach other painters. “What’s typical for Leipzig is basic craftsmanship,” says professor Sighard Gille, under whom Weischer was a master student from 2001 until

2003. “Also a figurative approach. The artists have to draw a lot. They have to be precise. That’s typically Leipzig.”

A Leipzig native who studied painting at the academy with professor and eastern German painter Bernhard Heisig, Gille produced some of the more subversive art of the GDR era and now stands a year from retirement from the academy. His own work will continue: Gille has consistently exhibited and sold his art, even taking several years off from teaching in the 1980s to paint a 714-square-metre work on the foyer ceiling of the Leipzig Gewandhaus (Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel was about 464 m²) before returning to the school, and then full professorship

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Matthias Weischer

in 1992. “I wouldn’t dare to have students if I didn’t work myself,” he says, surrounded by paintings he’s produced over the years in an airy modern studio in Leipzig’s city centre. Gille and fellow professor Arno Rink have often been given credit for producing the art world’s current crop of superstars, but Gille sees the issue pragmatically. “Painting has been declared dead again and again. [What’s going on now] is really the *Zeitgeist*. We have a climate in which people want to see pictures.” Yes, figurative painting, once out and unsexy, is in again. Applications to the academy have increased, yet the professors accepted fewer students this year to the painting programme than in years past. “The basic studies are very strict,” Gille says. “There’s colour work, perspective, technique, nude drawings. I try to support each student, try to be the motor so they keep the drive to work and stick with it.”

In the academy’s satellite studios in an outlying area of the city, the busy atmosphere is immediately obvious – as is the almost fatherly relationship Gille cultivates with the young painters in his charge. Students experiment in large studios as Gille moves like a wise sage through the spaces checking work, consulting with his lively studio director, Martina Munse, and pausing to discuss students’ queries. In the hallway is a large portrait of Gille in a static frontal pose – a birthday gift from his present class. And on the door to one of the studios is a photograph of one of his classes from a few years ago. In it Gille stands to the right of a younger Weischer.

“Matthias runs on his own,” Gille says. “There are always a couple of students who have that inner drive to work. That makes it fun to be a professor.” He offers technical praise for his former student. “If you look at his paintings upside down, you see how refined these interior spaces are. He represents incredibly complex spatial unities (...) 1



THE PROFESSOR (ABOVE LEFT): Sighard Gille, professor at the Academy of Visual Arts in Leipzig, surrounded by his own work at his studio. **THE CLASS (UPPER RIGHT):** A decorated door in the academy's satellite studios shows a photograph featuring a painting class. Weischer sits to the right of Gille at the bottom. **THE VENUE (BELOW):** Galerie Eigen + Art's new exhibition space in Leipzig's cotton mill.





PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE (UPPER LEFT): Through gallery Eigen + Art, native Leipziger Gerd Harry ("Judy") Lybke has brought a select group of contemporary artists, among them Weischer, to the international art market. **MAJOR SCALE (UPPER RIGHT):** The high ceilings of the main exhibition space of Eigen + Art's new location in Leipzig. Shown is artist Birgit Brenner with her installation work. **ART TALKS (BELOW):** Weischer discusses his work with the author.



and he works with the paint as a material,” he says, grinning as he points to the dense mass of colour on one of his own older works, then stating that this is perhaps what differentiates Weischer from his colleagues.

From Heisig, Gille and Rink to Rauch and the new generation: the academy’s painterly chain continues. Rauch will take on Rink’s position when he retires this year, surely carrying on the tight student-teacher relationship that is so unusual in modern art instruction. Perhaps the passion gets passed on as well. “Heisig said he’d jump out the window if he couldn’t paint,” says Gille, who confesses his own inner drive to put brush to canvas. “There’s this necessity, this passion to paint,” says Weischer, who again and again seems to prefer discussing the work rather than his many successes, like his recent trip to Los Angeles to meet British star painter David Hockney, his mentor in the Rolex Mentorship program.

THE FERRYMAN

In a huge space within the 59,000-square-metre complex that was once Leipzig’s *Baumwollspinnerei* (cotton mill), a small group is busily yet calmly preparing for the inaugural exhibition in Galerie Eigen + Art’s new location. The gallery, which also has a space in Berlin, arguably put Leipzig art on the global map, and this spatial expansion will allow founder Gerd Harry (“Judy”) Lybke to mount exhibitions much larger than those possible in the old Leipzig gallery, which was as small and intimate as its Berlin venue. Perhaps the new space’s vastness will match the attention and sales he and his artists have garnered since Rauch’s spectacular breakthrough on the international market in the late 1990s (a work was recently estimated to sell for 200,000 Euros). But despite the new gallery’s size, the mood inside is cosy and familiar.

Lybke represents Rauch, Weischer and the other painting wunderkinder, as well as several international artists. And lately this brood has been blessed with his Midas touch (in the past year Weischer’s works have risen in value to as much as 36,000 Euros). A born Leipziger, former crane worker and, as Weischer describes, “local patriot”, Lybke watched the artistic and personal development of Weischer’s generation for five to seven years before adding them to the roster. “I’m interested in sustained relationships with my artists,” he says with an impish grin, adding, without a touch of arrogance, that he is “different from all gallerists worldwide.” While he cuts the form of an art dealer – always dressed smartly in a vested three-piece suit – his immediate familiarity, jovial tone and candor run counter to the often snooty stances of most ambitious gallerists. “I’m honest, I’m transparent. My artists know where all of their work is; even my employees have been there for 15 years,” he says.

Lybke’s ties to art and its education run deep: for most of the 1980s he worked as a model for the academy’s painting classes (“You get to know everyone when you’re run-

ning around naked”) and he ran an illegal gallery under the GDR. “In the Leipzig school the ethos was that the studio was the centre of the world and you’re there to work. In other schools they had geniuses, not teachers,” Lybke says.

Those who have continued to work under this ethos have, according to both Gille and Lybke, benefitted. Weischer and his colleagues represent “what Germany can be in the future: a mixture of east and west,” Lybke says. “West is the basis, and east is the future.” Weischer, who comes from Elte, near Münster, began studying in 1995 when most of the country was heading the other direction. “[These painters] were very anticyclical; they painted when everyone else was picking up a camera,” says Lybke, who along with most players in the Leipzig art world realises that the hype will end at some point. But he remains confident, that the best will survive and “write art history.”

“[Leipzig teaches that] art is work. And that it’s fun. And that it’s the centre of the world.”

Gerd Harry Lybke

Weischer had no doubts about joining Eigen + Art. For Lybke the young painter is a long-term investment. “I am a gallerist. I am a motor. I am a ferryman. I bring people from one bank to the other,” he says, softening his voice and speaking quickly. “I ask them in advance if they want to really go; if they have too much or too little luggage for the boat or if they want to go over the river this way or that.” Lybke mentions the discussion he had with Weischer about taking things easier this year; he speaks of artistic development, the two solo shows Weischer will have with Eigen + Art and New York’s Marianne Boesky Gallery in 2006, and his own philosophy of accompanying an artist on his or her path. “If you’re clear about your goal, you know who you are,” Lybke says. “You reach the other side, but you realise that you’re where you were before because you’re with yourself. That’s my job.”

As for Weischer, the studio – in all its colours, chaos, experimentation and admittedly often solitary production – remains his life’s focus. The art and work will continue whether or not collectors keep buying, his prices keep climbing, journalists keep calling or the world keeps looking at an eastern German city that forgot to notice that figurative painting had gone out of vogue. “I try not to take the whole thing too seriously,” the artist says. “I know the times will change. I concentrate on my work, and I think my work is right for me in my life. Over the next year, I want to just paint.” 2