

NEW POWER, NEW PICTURES

DRESDEN AND LEIPZIG

Johannes Schmidt



YOUNG GERMAN ART has been a new 'catch phrase for 2004, and the recent art fair season made it absolutely clear: German painting is attracting international attention. It all started in the mid '90s, when Neo Rauch and Eberhard Havekost prepared the ground for today's painting, their names invoking contemporary art's two most important locations: Dresden and Leipzig. Why here? What does contemporary painting in these two East German cities have in common, and what are the differences?

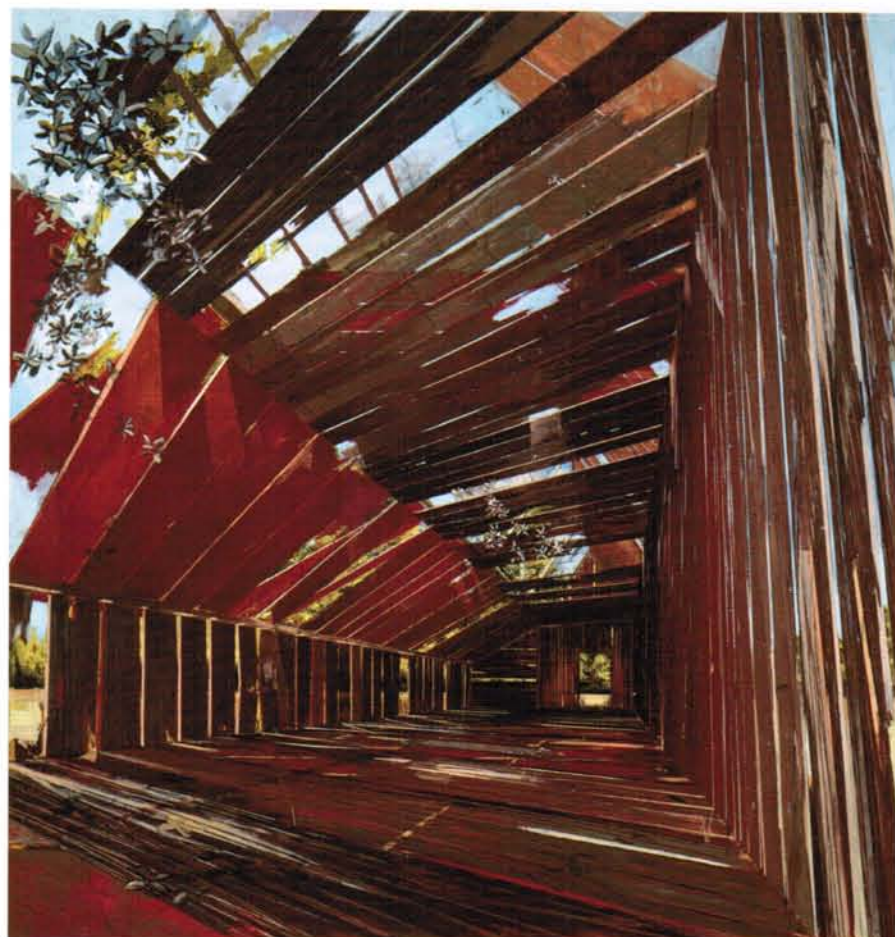
"Money is made in Leipzig and spent in Dresden." Around 1900 that saying summed up Leipzig, the busy trading city, and Dresden, the elegant, tradition-steeped Saxon residence. Dresden has a rich cultural history and occupies an extraordinary place in fine art. The Elbe Valley was the cradle of Caspar David Friedrich's romantic landscape painting, Brücke Expressionism, and Otto Dix's mordant realism. The young Gerhard Richter studied at the Dresdner Kunstakademie, where Kokoschka and Dix taught between the wars.

Leipzig's cultural interests, on the other hand, were traditionally centered on the written word. At the outset of the 20th century, the art academy there was entirely geared to book design and production. It was not until the GDR years, under the direction of artists like Werner Tübke and Bernhard Heisig, that painting started to play a significant part at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst. Here the atmosphere depended almost entirely on charismatic teaching, unlike Dresden, which was governed more by a sense of powerful cultural tradition. The concept of the 'Leipzig school' established itself in GDR art criticism, while Dresden painting was seldom seen as a uniform whole.

The West German academies, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, condemned both schools as 'conservative' in their views and teaching methods. At the time, the Leipzig college was concentrating on media art, while the Dresden academy was essentially a painting school, and perfectly comfortable with the stigma of conservatism. "They forgot to tell the students that painting is dead," was the comment made by Gerd Harry Lybke, founder of the gallery Eigen + Art, which now represents some of the Leipzig newcomers.

When Eberhard Havekost left the Dresden academy in 1996, his painting was not spotlighted as some obscure one-off phenomenon, but as one aspect of a very varied painting scene. Former students of the Dresden academy were joining the Gebrüder Lehmann gallery circle in particular, including painters Thomas Scheibitz and Frank Nitsche — both of

MATTHIAS WEISCHER, *Zimmer*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 140 x 170 cm. Courtesy of Eigen + Art, Berlin/Leipzig.



whom have enjoyed much success in the years since.

At this time, Neo Rauch was making his way in a world "hostile to painting." He had studied under Professor Arno Rink, who started working at the Leipzig college as early as 1972 and taught most of the artists who later established Leipzig's reputation as a center of new painting. And their shared relationship with the painter/professor, who was assisted by Rauch until 1998, also helped determine this new generation's group spirit.

They are linked by a collegial accord in both their presentation and their communicative approach to work. This cooperation and mutual influence shows up not only in the pictures but also in joint activities like the Liga Gallery, which they founded in Berlin in 2002. It provided 11 Leipzig artists — including Tilo Baumgärtel, Martin Kobe, Jörg Lozek, Christoph Ruckhäberle, Julia Schmidt, David Schnell, and Matthias Weischer — with an effective launch pad into the center of the art business.

But what did they have that made their work attract so much attention? A closer look shows that the 'new Leipzig school,' alongside painters who were already well known like Baumgärtel, Weischer, or Eitel, worked on a broadly personal basis. Their shift towards representational work may indeed have emerged from Socialist Realism, something that is often suggested in relation to Neo Rauch's work. But from the point of view of the Liga artists, most of whom grew up in West Germany, the photographic course offered at the Leipzig college played a much more important role. The painters constantly had to defend their medium and their point of view in the light of modern technologies, but doing so also trained their eyes to look at figures and landscapes. This, combined with their solid grounding in craftsmanship, largely free of unduly theoretical discourse, forms the basis of contemporary Leipzig painting. This art of the 'old school' was an alternative to smooth, depersonalized media art, and it was precisely the right thing to offer at a moment when a return of the handmade coincided with a renewed interest in artworks that reflect an artist's personality.

Most of the Leipzig painters' choice of subjects, their narrative approaches, and the thought behind their pictures derived from their experience of Neo Rauch's pictorial world. Found material from advertising, comics, absurd old textbooks, or lifestyle magazines, placed in set-piece landscapes peopled with autistic figures involved in various activities — this was the visual input that shaped the new Leipzig painting.

In David Schnell's earlier work, landscape still provided a setting for the comic characters that were to be seen hurrying through it. Schnell now says, "There came a point at which I didn't need figures anymore." His current works are pure landscapes, dealing with the juxtaposition of nature and traces of human activity. Grids of lines create vertiginous perspec-



From left: THORALF KNOBLOCH, *Herberge*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 110 x 160 cm. Courtesy of Gebr. Lehmann Gallery, Dresden; ECKEHARD FUCHS, *Fahnenwache*, 2003. Oil on canvas, 80 x 60 cm. Courtesy of Baer Gallery, Dresden. Opposite from top: DAVID SCHNELL, *Scheune*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 250 x 240 cm. Courtesy of Eigen + Art, Berlin/Leipzig; SOPHIA SCHAMA, *Dschungel 3*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 300 x 300 cm. Courtesy of Spielhaus Morrison Gallery, Berlin.

tives, and charcoal under-drawing, some of it left visible, creates an individual material aesthetic. Paolo Uccello's and Anselm Kiefer's pictures seem closer in spirit than Neo Rauch's.

Jörg Lozek, who studied under Sieghard Gille but was in contact with Rink's pupils because of where he lived and worked, had a studio one floor above Schnell in the same old factory in northern Leipzig. Figures, especially children, still play a central role in Lozek's work today. The people in his paintings don't wear the uniforms of GDR youth organizations anymore, but they are still to be found in nostalgically furnished, bizarrely decrepit rooms, dressed in the style of the 1950s, with hairstyles to match. Lozek's pictures are very 'Leipzig' in the sense that their realism helps viewers to understand and read their stories, while their expectations are nevertheless deliberately confounded. Lozek likes to immerse himself in representational light, shade, and a variety of material surfaces. The damp walls and peeling wallpaper in his interiors are sometimes produced today by pouring oil and paint onto horizontal canvases. This controlled yet random technique strengthens the pictures' impact, and here too, narrative (in the spirit of Neo Rauch's surreal nostalgia) gradually fades into the background, to be replaced by its own independent position. The artistic handwriting develops in different directions — Tilo Baumgärtel creates similar scenes but alienates them with a palette of wrong colors and shifted scale, while Tom Fabritius takes television images out of context and 'washes' them using gentle brushstrokes and his own Aquacryl technique.

Tom Eitel has ventured furthest in the direction of realistic reproductions of traditional themes (figures in rooms or land-

scapes). His pictures do not need to play with fragmentation. Eitel self-confidently commits himself to a modern version of art for art's sake and cites Arno Rink's dictum that "content [is] a private matter." He fabricates elegant paintings that concentrate entirely on color contrasts and atmospheric values. The motifs could come from here and now, but they completely avoid narrative conflicts. Photography does not provide him with the motif itself, only with details of his 'pictorial furniture,' as in classical sketches. His landscapes in particular incline towards the elegiac and romantic, which is no rarity in Leipzig painting. Works by Schnell, as well as Isabelle Dutoit's and Suzanne Kühn's fairy-tale scenarios, also favor this basic mood.

In contrast, Matthias Weischer's unpeopled interiors seem oppressively cool and strange. He arranges precisely reproduced objects almost structurally in the picture space, his thick paint application creating motifs with an unreal sense of rigidity. Martin Kobe's paintings are also defined by a structural aesthetic. Kobe comes from Dresden. He studied in Leipzig but sees himself as an outsider, as far as current Leipzig painting is concerned. His subject is the impossibility of uniting real two-dimensional space and spatial illusion. His work on canvas shows a superficial interest in three-dimensional and architectural structures, organizing grid-like invented spaces with fluid sweeps of color. They suggest a three-dimensional quality, but without any uniform vanishing-point. The structures reveal areas created with a free painterly approach at points where the structures break up. Despite their abstract appearance, his works clearly come from the Leipzig context, particularly because of their collage-style structure.

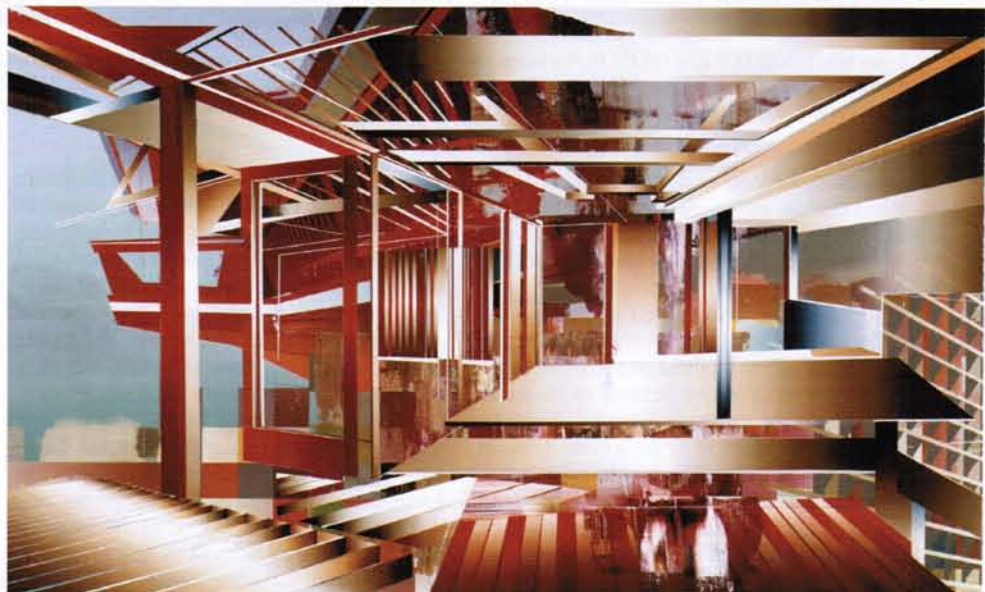
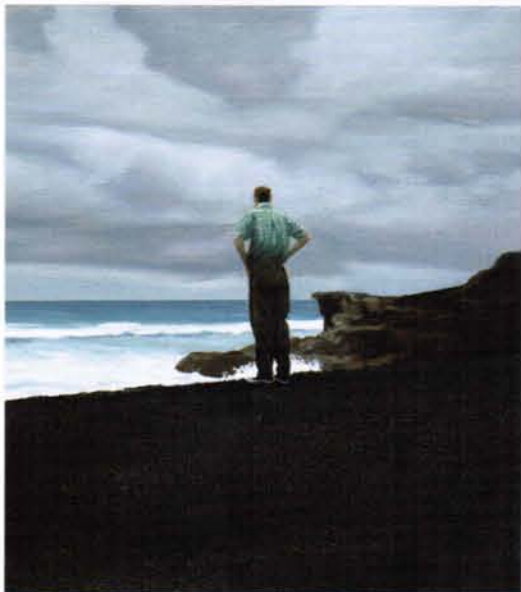
The situation in Dresden is far less homo-

geneous. It does not make sense to speak of a 'Dresden School' of painting in formal terms, and it is difficult to sum them up comprehensively. Many of the young Dresden painters come from Prof. Ralf Kerbach's specialist class, but their work shares few formal features. Emancipation from earlier influences plays scarcely any part.

This is clear as soon as one looks at the former Havekost/Nitsche/Scheibitz triumvirate. Eberhard Havekost's painting addressed media-influenced pictorial worlds from the outset, but Thomas Scheibitz's interests have tended towards analytical abstraction, while Frank Nitsche generated a system of pictorial formulas based on distorted technical structures. Trying to find common features in the new Dresden painting means turning away from content and form to look at image-creation and non-pictorial reference strategies.

One of the special aspects of Dresden painting seems to lie in an analytical orientation; pictorial narratives and a return to personal mythologies are in the minority. The history of Dresden art is rich in artistic works that lie outside the great historical and discursive categories. One of the focal points here is a creative investigation of the links between world models and the private sphere — media-inflected worlds playing the same role for Eberhard Havekost as cybernetics did for A.R. Penck.

An examination of virtual pictorial language is similarly central to Olaf Holzappel's work. His paintings emerge in relation to installations and sculpture, and derive from a complex intellectual edifice of personal and philosophical systems analysis. They set the infinite possibilities of color nuance against the computer's 256 colors, giving material quality to the



'immaterial' forms and surfaces of digital images. His experience of city structure, polytheistic Hindu hypotheses, and reflections about music composition all affect his pictorial oeuvre.

Music often plays the same part in Dresden painting as photography does in Leipzig, as can be seen, in a strange way, in the work of Martin Eder. Eder dabbles in music himself, and his paintings repeatedly contrast the thrash chic of fanzine typographies or (in their titles) rock 'n' roll slogans against the smoothness of his pictorial creations, whose reference point, in terms of content, seems to be Jeff Koons's sculptures. Like Holzapfel and most of the former Dresden students, Eder left the city shortly after graduating, drawn by Berlin's superior infrastructure. In Leipzig, Berlin has less of a pull. There, Neo Rauch has shown how to succeed outside the main centers. People like the fact that there is no great art circus there.

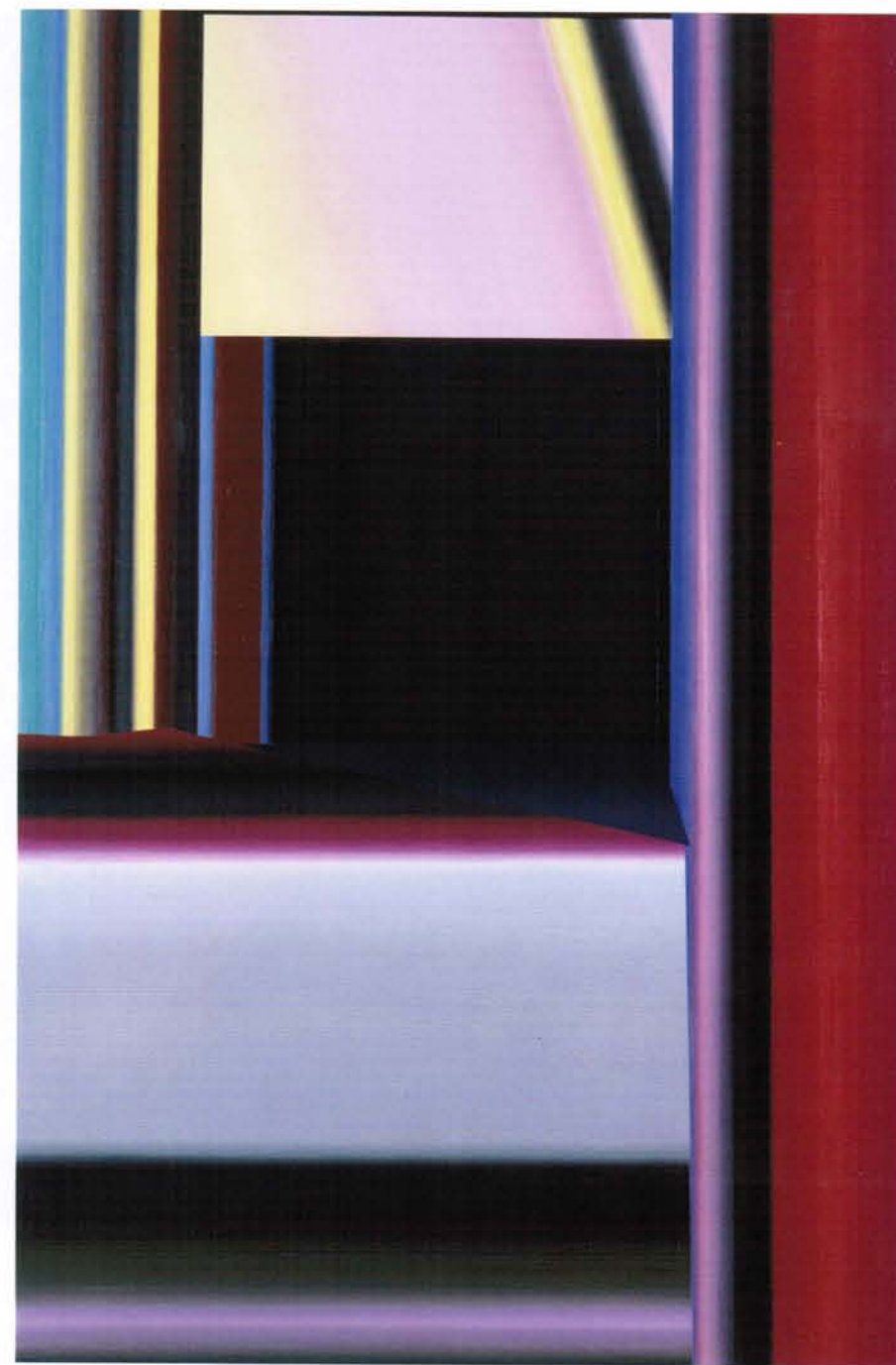
Sophia Schama is another Dresden artist based in the capital. She used to produce groups of works that were complete in themselves, but her more recent paintings — technoid tubes, animal portraits, and 'grass pictures' — seem to provide a conceptual thread. Vegetation attacks crumbling architecture, nature reconquering the artificial world.

Theo Böttger, who worked with Olaf Holzapfel for a time, has moved away from his earlier conceptual approach, which depended on visual sampling and the fragmentation of pictorial information through speed. His new theme is portraiture as social analysis, showing real people in large-format watercolors, often from the dismal world of small East German towns, isolated and helpless against low-horizon landscapes.

Figures are also central to the work of Eckehard Fuchs, whose painting developed in the classical manner, from pencil sketches. Fuchs' pictorial world flourishes at the interface between contorted human interactions in the everyday world of big cities and an imagination permeated with nightmares, sex, and threats that the painter controls formally through the expressive exaggerations of Gothic sculpture and the caricatured excesses of Hogarth's engravings.

Thoralf Knobloch's work also contains narrative elements. He was once Eberhard Havekost's studio neighbor, and, like him, Knobloch paints from his own photographs. He is interested in quiet, unspectacular details from the everyday visual world. The cheerfully relaxed and individual romanticism of his pictures results from the works' close link to his personal experience and from his patient, tenacious working methods. The atmosphere he creates — empty hotel rooms, dilapidated shacks, and abandoned beach items — is reminiscent of Edward Hopper. Like Hopper, Knobloch is looking for alien elements in the everyday world.

This list of concepts and themes could be continued with Berthold Bock or Martin Borowski, whose work moves from



OLAF HOLZAPFEL, *Appartement*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 200 x 140 cm. Courtesy of Gebr. Lehmann Gallery, Dresden. Opposite, clockwise: MARTIN EDER, *Phantasie der Erwachsenen*, 2003. Installation at Brandenburger Kunstverein, Potsdam. Courtesy of Eigen + Art, Belin/Leipzig. Photo: Uwe Walter; JÖRG LOZEK, *Der Schreiber*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 260 x 200 cm. Courtesy of Rhodes & Mann, London; MARTIN KOBE, *Untitled*, 2004. Acrylic on canvas, 85 x 145 cm. Courtesy of Liga Gallery, Berlin; THEO BÖTTGER, *Falk*, 2004. Watercolor on paper, 190 x 155 cm; FRANK NITSCHKE, *OBE-10-2004*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 180 x 280 cm. Courtesy of Gebr. Lehmann Gallery, Dresden; TIM EITEL, *Küste*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 cm. Courtesy of Eigen + Art, Belin/Leipzig.

abstraction towards pictorial narrative. All the artists share a healthy skepticism about the digital world and trust in the power of creating pictures.

Identifying these complex artistic approaches, anchored in the painterly tradition as well as in everyday reality, unmasks the lame 'young German art' label as a mere sales argument with little value as an aid to

understanding. It should be possible to avoid the universal criticism that almost inevitably follows communal marketing, given that there are so many highly individual works of art, all of them entirely unsuited to assessment as a single entity.

(Translated from German by Michael Robinson)
Johannes Schmidt is a curator and critic based in Dresden.