

**Docent “Close-Up on Art” Study Paper – Max Neumann’s “Untitled”
by: Paul Zak**



Artist: Max Neumann.
German, born 1949, living

Owned by PSAM,
gift of Mandy and Cliff Einstein

Medium: Oil on Linen

Work completed
1986, Germany (Berlin)

Max Neumann was born in Saarbruck, Germany in 1949. He studied art in Karlsruhe and later at the University of Fine Arts in Berlin. He is widely exhibited.

Artistic influences:

This work of Contemporary Art echoes themes of German Expressionism and Neo-Expressionism. It suggests Expressionist themes of anxiety about humanity's relationship with the world, as well as feelings of loss and inauthenticity. The subject matter arises from within the artist, portraying his psychological and emotional experience of the world around him. Neo-Expressionist artists depict their subjects in “an almost raw and brutish manner” (the Art Story). Some German Neo-Expressionists used their work to examine Germany's troubled past, often portraying the world in all of its harshness.

Neumann's work often suggests raw emotion combined with symbolic vision. It is often pessimistic in tone, reflecting alienation borne of human suffering. His vision is based broadly on his experience as a German in the 20th to 21st centuries, which brought to light the “brute that slumbered within.” (Tasset). Alienation is a significant theme of this work.

“Untitled”

This is a dark, menacing, and mysterious work. The canvas is primarily black and off-white, with a hint of red, which appears to be blood flowing from a severed tail. A stark lamp (?) and stool/table contribute to the bleakness of the piece. The black mass, a rat-like figure, appears to hold a white wing (?) which it crumples in its claw. When I

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first saw this work, I was repelled and intrigued at the same time. I chose it because I wanted to know more about the work and the visceral reaction I had to it.

In much of his work, Neumann invites the viewer to participate, “fill in the gaps and construct imaginary narratives.” (Bruce Silverstein, www.brucesilverstein.com). Thus, he encourages speculation and imaginative viewing.

Often, as mentioned above, his works deal with alienation as a result of inner disconnection and the overwhelming historical events which have occurred in recent memory. His “central motif is time: waiting, the quotidian, non-communication, the pessimistic alienation to which a history of great suffering has reduced the human image.” (Tasset). Such alienation occurs both from within and from without.

Alienation from within. “Untitled” may suggest the deep urges, passions, and anxieties lurking in the human unconscious, which are symbolized by the black rat-like figure which predominates. This conjures the “monster under the bed,” a symbol of foreboding, whose presence within the psyche portends threat, danger, and fear. But in this dystopian view, the collective unconscious, also in play, has imploded, leaving only silence and rootlessness, suggested by the 2 solitary figures surrounded by blackness (more on this later).

Alienation from without. Neumann conjures up threatening and malevolent aspects of the historical and contemporary world in which he lives. Born in 1949, his generation was close to the horrors of World War II and lived with the collective shame and guilt the German people experienced in its aftermath. He also experienced a divided Germany, with the Communist threat of invasion ever-present.

The legacy of this is a humanity which feels threatened and is alienated from itself and the world it inhabits. Humanity exists in alienated isolation, represented by the two solitary figures mentioned earlier. They do not touch, and one of them, with a claw-like foot, is perhaps becoming non-human. They are non-substantial shadows, engulfed in blackness. The patch of red (blood?) alludes to the violence and disruption which are omnipresent in this alienated and fractured world.

In the final analysis, the viewer is left with more questions than answers. How do I relate to the darker places within myself? How does the world’s darkness affect me? Am I an ineffectual pawn in some vast malevolent universe? What do I make of all this vis a vis my place in the world and human community? Is any transformation/salvation really possible?

This is a meditative piece. Rich exploration and reflection is Neumann’s invitation.

Sources:

- Art Story, www.theartstory.org
- Artsy, online resource for art collecting and education. www.artsy.net
- Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York. www.brucesilverstein.com
- Grace Glueck, “Art: German Painters from Postwar Period,” NY Times, October 7, 1983.
- Jean-Marie Tasset, “Max Neumann’s double 1”, www.maxneumann.com.
- Wikipedia. “Contemporary Art.”