

MY ART IS AN ENDLESS RIBBON.

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHANIE PFLAUM,
EXHIBITION AT MIKE WEISS GALLERY NEW YORK 2005

BY KARIN HANTA , AUSTRIAN CULTURE FORUM

From December to January, Austrian artist Stephanie Pflaum will exhibit her work at the Mike Weiss Gallery in New York. Bored by the exchangeability of two-dimensional canvases, the Attersee student turned to room installations. In her art, she tries to express entire thought processes. Her installations wind through the room in multiple layers, varying in density and color. A tour of her exhibitions has been compared to a ride on a lightning-speed ghost train. As viewers pass images replete with comic details, they may break out in laughter. The fun is intended: the images are created by a daring artist who is sure of her artistic vocabulary and theory.

KH: Stephanie Pflaum, can you tell us a little bit about how you became an artist? Did you grow up in an artistic environment?

Stephanie Pflaum: My parents were quite interested in art. From a very early age on, I was able to familiarize myself with Austrian artists and their work. Since I always made high demands on myself and my environment, I was sure about one thing: I would never be an artist. But after trying different educational paths and jobs, this attitude changed and I tried to apply my high standards to my artistic work. But I knew one thing: if I wanted to be an artist, I either had to do it with all my heart or not at all.

KH: You were a student of Christian Ludwig Attersee. What did you learn from him?

SP: Christian Ludwig Attersee respected all of his students, regardless of the artistic direction they chose. He always supported us in following our own path by allowing us to participate in exhibitions and competitions and get to know real life. He urged us to define our positions and state what we wanted, but especially what we did not want. In the final analysis, the student decided whether he or she wanted to learn something from him. I consider Christian Ludwig Attersee a good friend, somebody who accompanies me on my artistic path. I have to say that I did not participate in the classroom situation in a conventional way. As space was limited and I couldn't concentrate with so many people around me, I worked at home. So I was only a marginal figure at the Academy.

KH: You first started out as a painter and then turned to installation art. How did this happen?

SP: For many years, I just painted and painted, every day for 15 hours and more. At one point I realized how little elbow room the two-dimensional canvas gave me. From the very beginning, multi-dimensionality was very important to me, i.e. the many dimensions that determine our whole life, the spiritual and the emotional in conjunction with the sensual. I am interested in the interaction between different dimensions. I look at manipulation, fusion, boundaries, and needs. Painting was not enough for me to express all these concerns. It turned into a routine and I was bored. The work I do now gives me the elbow room I need. Room installations are just a logical consequence of painting. I respond to the fact that no dimension can exist on its own with the three-dimensionality and multi-layeredness of my work. My work is not supposed to exist on its own. Like a movie, it needs a before and an after. It winds through different spaces like an endless ribbon.

KH: Your installations are strongly determined by the exhibition space. How do you plan your exhibition if you are thousands of miles away from the gallery?

SP: My work is indeed determined by the exhibition space. I travel to the different galleries, take pictures and exact measurements and then create a 1:25 model. At the same time, I also make many sketches and try out different things.

KH: Would you like your audience's viewing habits to change?

SP: Viewing habits will change by themselves if an artist consistently follows his or her path. It is just a question of time.

KH: In your work, you like to use loud plush materials. What importance do textiles have for you?

SP: I like all kinds of materials I can get my hands on. If the work requires it, I will use loud plush. Textiles, objects, and colors are all equally important to me. They enrich my artistic vocabulary.

KH: Could you speak about the symbols you use – crosses, openings that look both like mouths and vaginas?

SP: I use many symbols. For me, symbols and objects are the same. It is as if I were using another word for the same thing. I always engage with things in my environment.

KH: Your work reminds me of Louise Bourgeois. Do you feel an affinity towards her?

SP: She is a wonderful artist. I hope that one day I will be able to look back on as consistent a body of work as hers.

KH: You are still taking courses in art history and philosophy at university. What do you get out of your academic pursuits?

SP: I can hardly express in words how important my studies are to me. I think I keep on taking courses so that I can concentrate better. I observe and investigate different thought processes and actions. I try to stay abreast of things and not become complacent. My academic pursuits also make me see issues in a broader context, which can be very fruitful for my work, but which at times makes me also think whether I should give up art altogether.

KH: Which philosophers and artists have inspired you most in your own art?

SP: I cannot possibly mention a single philosopher or artist. I am fascinated and influenced by many thought processes, views and actions from various centuries, but I do not attempt to directly include or process philosophical quotes or other artists' solutions in my work.

I am certainly interested in understanding how different eras are connected, why and under what conditions people thought, acted and worked and how they arrived at solutions.

KH: In 2003, you received the Austrian Women's Art Prize. Do you think that women still have a harder time in the Austrian art market? Does feminism also inform your work?

SP: I don't think that women have a harder time. It is difficult for anybody, man or woman, to survive in the art market. You have to have a lot of courage and strength to be able to bear the pressure.

Feminism is a very charged and difficult concept. I am a woman and I convey this in my work.

KH: How would you describe the young Austrian art scene? Do artists collaborate?

SP: There are several Austrian artists who I hold in very high esteem. I don't know so much about collaboration – I am not looking for it.

KH: What will you show in New York?

SP: I will be showing 43 works. I hope I can finish them in time. Cross your fingers that they arrive safely and will be placed right!

KH: Thank you for the interview!