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Bruno Gironcoli

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"SHY AT WORK" is an unlikely title for a Bruno Gironcoli retrospective. The Austrian artist is best known for his large-scale sculptures of the 1980s and '90s—iron, aluminum, wood, and plastic giants that seem anything but reticent, not only because of their size but also because of their adamant surfaces, which are typically achieved via a slathering of bronze, gold, or silver powder paint on the models, which are then cast in metal. Their bodies consist of animistic figurations, assemblages of dehumanized forms that leave no space for the beholder to identify with them. Gironcoli's consistent refusal to aesthetically integrate his sculptures—several of which are on permanent display in public spaces—into their environments gives the works an air of being irrefutably misplaced. The artist rejects public sculpture's telos of representation and, with it, art's modern social role. The humanoid figures are less representations of viewers than of their alienation. Gironcoli's larger-than-life visions of machinic bodies that both evoke and exceed anthropomorphism defy pious notions of the inherent dignity of the human form. The groupings of these works increasingly resemble the procession of a deviant civilization, and it is the beholder who starts to feel misplaced.

Curated by Manuela Ammer, "Shy at Work" at MUMOK traces the origins of Gironcoli's sculptural antihumanism

to the beginning of his career, comprehensively surveying his early, much lesser known works on paper. Some 140 of these, dating as far back as 1960, are on view, as are examples of the more installation-like projects that Gironcoli developed in the '70s: *Schube* (Shoes) and *Große Messingfigur* (Large Brass Figure), both 1970–71. It is Ammer's recasting of Gironcoli's oeuvre as a relentless aesthetic investigation into the impossibility of humanism that ultimately divests the late sculptural work of its overweening monumentality. The later, large-scale works that Ammer chose to include at the end of the roughly chronological exhibition come to appear less dominant than devastated, like sculptural sketches for biomechanical organisms that cannot survive in our midst. They are constrained to remain unreal, atemporal.

"Shy at Work" seems to suggest that the later work's dehumanized animism ultimately originates in Gironcoli's failing to establish an affirmative account of humanity. In the exhibition's opening gallery, a group of drawings and three small sculptures from the '60s all share the title *Kopf* (Head). But while in the drawings the artist seems to be aiming for naturalism, the sculptures deviate decisively from it. Two of them are coated with the same metal powder paint as many of their successors, and in their simplified, abstract shapes, they are caught somewhere between organic and mechanical form. Their only remotely figurative, or at least somewhat anthropomorphic, aspect is their positioning on the wall: These roughly forty-inch-tall elongated bodies look down on us. The powder paint also comes into play in the drawings, many of which share the same foundational composition: More often than not, they are bisected by a horizontal line. But these lines hardly ever indicate a horizon. Some scenes appear to be set outside, but most are interiors, and none ever opens up toward a possible exit. The humanity Gironcoli depicts within them is bandaged, chained, electrified, sexed, mechanized, and, above all, confined—no one ever makes it out of the room. And as

the plane of the floor is always raked, like a stage, the scenes become all the more claustrophobic. In many of the drawings, something or someone is positioned on the farthest edge of this steepened ground, crawling, kneeling, trying to balance, dropping. Inhabited by dogs copulating on the picture plane, and shoes, combs, and miscellaneous appendages circulating as if waiting for further instructions, the pictures are dominated by the machinic forms that often command the spaces. All the while, their actual function remains as unclear as the works are uncanny.

In not a few of these drawings, swastikas lurk behind curtains, coffins, animals, or painterly splashes of color. In their endless cycles of repetition, mechanization, notation, and serialization, Gironcoli's works on paper confront

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us with the unlivable realism of a perverted humanity. Gradually, it becomes clear that the later sculptures aren't refusals of representation—they are attempts to deal with its failures. The documents of a fifty-year-long aesthetic investigation of the animated forms that populated Austrian postwar society, Gironcoli's works on paper emit a sense of urgency, distress, and despair that today seems all too appropriate to the zeitgeist. Revealing his renowned sculptures as just one manifestation of a tireless aesthetic investment in the (im)possibilities of (European) humanism after fascism—an investment that never falls into nihilism, nor succumbs to the temptations of representational aestheticization—"Shy at Work" is highly contemporary, a fact as depressing as it is startling. □

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Left: View of "Bruno Gironcoli: Shy at Work," 2018. From left: *Untitled*, 1987; *Untitled*, 1969; *Untitled*, 1987; *Untitled*, 1988. Photo: Stephan Wyckoff. Below: Bruno Gironcoli, *Entwurf zur Veränderung von Säule mit Totenkopf* (Design for Modifying Column with Skull), 1971, metal powder paint, india ink, and gouache on paper, 24 3/4 x 35". Right: View of "Bruno Gironcoli: Shy at Work," 2018. From left: *Untitled*, 1964; *Figur, auf einem Punkt stehend* (*Stimmungsmacher*) (*Figure Standing on a Single Spot* [*Mood Maker*]), ca. 1965–69; *Objekt*, 1965; *Kopf* (*Head*), 1964–65. Photo: Stephan Wyckoff.

