

Body Work

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The contemplation of one's own body has left a lingering impression on avant-garde movements, also in Austria. Working toward the boundaries of one's own body and the body's interior is something we find at the beginning of the previous century in Richard Gerstl and Egon Schiele and, at the end, in Maria Lassnig, to name only a few famous examples. Conversely, the experimental mavericks of Viennese Actionism—spearheaded by Günter Brus, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, and VALIE EXPORT—also consistently probed the art of self-examination and thus created a link with performance art. Introspection is inherent in both traditions, serving to recognize both one's inner self and one's boundaries to exterior worlds.

Ingrid Gaier subsumes some of her work groups under the term “Body Work.” Associations with dance or performance might come easily—but while Gaier does graze these disciplines in some of her works, “Body Work” goes much further.

To me, two of the most impressive works in this group are *Radius* from 1998 and *multiple identities* from 2011/2012. In them one finds painstaking investigations of the interior, the story's core, as well as a scanning of the outer shell, an experience of the surface. In *radius* Gaier circles all physical states imaginable. From sewn-out, drawn and defined skin coats to images of a battle between white and red blood cells, the fragility of Being is kept in suspension.

In *multiple identities* Gaier inscribes something like primordial garments with her own ever-changing biography. In terms of their color schemes, these clothing items are reminiscent of Bulgarian shepherd coats or skins. The protective cloak infiltrates the interior. The often intimate, Munchhausen-like biographies percolate through the protective shell, through the bodily contours, into the outer world.

It is this introspection, this looking-beneath-one's-skin, that lets me place Gaier in the vicinity of Lassnig and the Austrian tradition of self-examination. The media she chooses to realize her works is something else entirely, however.

Gaier uses analog techniques to create the illusion of a digital sequence, whose sensibilities and technicities recall Hans Bischoffshausen or Erwin Thorn. And like them, she enjoys the tactile challenge.

Her direct, matter-of-fact approach to unconventional visual means can only be found to such an analytical degree in the British Arts and Crafts movement at the beginning of the twentieth century and, much more intensely, in the American Pattern and Decoration movement of the 1970s and '80s. From it grew a more easygoing handling of the qualities of so-called industrial arts, and everyday objects. Frequently, Gaier's works are not really colorful, but the way she combines housewifely skills typically held in low esteem, such as embroidery and sewing, with photography, painting, and performance to produce large sculptural installations creates the kind of kinship with Pattern and Decoration that I also see in Kiki Kogelnik's output. These two artists share an unapologetic knack for borrowing all manner of techniques—a mixture of social criticism, (literally) scratching the surface. With their “hangings” and their garments, both intervene in our social body.