

Norbert Prangenberg: The Last Works

GARTH GREENAN GALLERY FEBRUARY 27–APRIL 5, 2014

BY BEN LA ROCCO APRIL 2, 2014

Norbert Prangenberg: The Last Works is on display at Garth Greenan Gallery in Chelsea. There are a lot of firsts in this exhibition of last works. It's the first series of sculptures Prangenberg made in America: at a residency at Rutgers's Mason Gross School of the Arts. It's Garth Greenan's first exhibition of Prangenberg's work. In fact for Greenan—a gallerist known for his commitment to a preceding generation's toughest, most overlooked American artists—it's his first major exhibition of a European. It's Prangenberg's first posthumous exhibition in New York—he died in 2012 at the age of 63—and it's the first exhibition of his sculpture in America since 1986.

But it's the second time I've seen his work in recent years. In 2010 he exhibited his paintings at the Betty Cuninghams Gallery. That was my introduction to Prangenberg's work. As a result, I have difficulty conceiving of Prangenberg, who was primarily a sculptor, other than through his painting.

Perhaps that is not wholly improper. This series of small sculptures at Garth Greenan often seems preoccupied with painting. To crudely reduce them, they are portrait heads in fired clay. But Prangenberg is constantly making use of the flattened portions of their surfaces to integrate tiny paintings into the busts.

One finds tiny landscapes, portrait heads, a stag, what looks like fragments of architecture, byzantine patterning, abstractions, and other bits of imagery painted into the glazes, creating a miniature exhibition of painting within the sculpture exhibition. Prangenberg selectively glazes for the purpose of examining the language of painting, exploring its boundaries.

These tiny vignettes also shift the scale of the portrait heads themselves, turning them into architecture, which then turns the tiny paintings into murals: Prangenberg rejoices in shifting scales and temporal frames of reference. I see everything from Modernism to ancient ruins in the sculptures. Their collision of classic modes and media melds portraiture with landscape.

"Landschaft" (2012), pictured here, is an example of this. The format is consistent with the rest of the sculptures in the show: a rectangular, flattened base with a primary form emerging upward from it. In many of the sculptures, this form takes on the likeness of a head. In this sculpture, Prangenberg dances away from that, pushing the form instead toward what I read as a personalized reconstruction of an ancient structure. The crude exterior—rolled lengths of clay mimicking logs—lies half open, unfinished or destroyed. On what serves as a floor within, a tiny glaze painting of a sensuous but stylized landscape is at once anomalous and perfectly fit to the enclosure.

In 2010, John Yau, Prangenberg's foremost chronicler in the United States, interviewed the artist in these pages. Prangenberg explained his tendency to insert smaller images within larger ones as a solution to the problem of subject matter: just paint a painting inside a painting or make a painting within a sculpture. Prangenberg made it clear then that this was not about quotation, but the free, imaginative play of imagery, allowing one image to enclose and foster another: a kind of symbiosis.

Once a life has reached its close and its circumstances are known, if only in part, it is perhaps impossible to avoid looking at its creations in terms of the stage of the life's development at which they were crafted. History is endlessly alluring this way. It is clear that while working on these sculptures, Prangenberg knew he wouldn't get much more time on this earth. But the principle feeling in Prangenberg's late work is not of an end. On the contrary, these seem like small beginnings. I do not get the impression of an artist grappling with life's finitude.

Instead, I see a deeply felt and focused exploration of two media and their possible interconnectedness, perhaps more explicitly in these works than in his preceding ceramics. I experience a workmanlike love of materials themselves: the messy malleability of clay and the inexhaustible expressiveness of pigmented color. Most formidably, I see the joy of exploration, an essential component of every Prangenberg, painting or sculpture, that I have ever encountered.



Landschaft (2012)