

Art in America

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Norbert Prangenberg

GARTH GREENAN

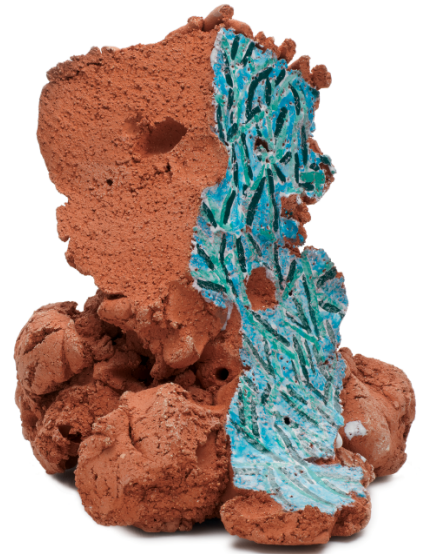
BY SARAH SCHMERLER

With more than 30 exhibitions to his credit, including four museum retrospectives, Norbert Prangenberg, who died at age 62 in June 2012, was seldom exhibited outside of his native Germany and Europe. Over a three-decade-long career, he engaged with diverse mediums and materials (oil paint, watercolor, clay, woodcut, linocut) and earned himself the reputation of being an artist's artist. Betty Cunningham Gallery mounted an exhibition of Prangenberg's paintings in 2009, but a jam-packed and utterly engaging show at Garth Greenan marked the first time since 1986 that Prangenberg's sculptural works had been shown in New York. The artist created all 20 terra-cottas during a six-week residency at a ceramics studio at New Jersey's Rutgers University, in 2012, when he was fighting liver cancer (he died two months afterward). Despite their diminutive size (few exceed 13 inches in height or width), the pieces are each a fully realized tabletop drama.

Prangenberg practiced the sort of abstraction that manages to make references to specific forms and emotions even as its amorphous, globby charm encourages the imagination to go wild. Without a glance at a checklist, viewers might easily suss out whether a work is a *Kopf* (head) or a *Landschaft* (landscape), the only two categories on offer here. Yet Prangenberg challenges our definitions of both. One *Kopf* with a braided cord wound around its neck rests on a flat, textured tray—a geological outcropping on a plain. Orange and yellow glazes dribble down from the crown like anointing oil, mixing and puddling in tiny pools, and rendering the object at once a personage and a ritual site. Prangenberg's touch and presence is everywhere in evidence in his ceramics, in thumbprints and pinches, in rolled coils and gouged-out solids. Another *Kopf* has a face of sorts, with a few vague features. Go around the back and you see that the clay has caught perfect impressions of both the artist's hands, evidence that he grabbed this lone being from the front and squeezed, whether in an act of tenderness or frustration one cannot say.

The fact that Prangenberg left so much of his surface area raw and unglazed makes his craggy, porous *Landschafts* especially evocative as bleak vistas in which ancient tragedy seems about to be enacted. Glazes are sparingly and deliberately applied, forcing the viewer to play peek-a-boo at odd angles to descry the works' allusions. One *Landschaft* with a rare representational vignette presents a deer limned in pale moss-green glaze (think domestic wallpaper) facing a whitewashed swath (more wallpaper?) peppered with abstract black lozenge patterns. The two motifs face off in perpetuity, though their off-kilter alignment prevents viewers from seeing them both at once. A single blue eye stares out of another *Landschaft*, transforming this severe massive form into a kind of sphinx gazing out onto the undulating sands of history. This landscape could easily be mistaken for a head, but that is partly its appeal. We are enigmas, Prangenberg seems to be saying, even to ourselves.

Imagine clay in a biblical sense, and you will get a feel for Prangenberg's protean, relentless talent. Clay can be made to do anything when placed in the right hands; its basis, dust, was after all the material from which Adam was created, and to which all men must ultimately return. Prangenberg knew well that these would be his last works, and he didn't waste a precious moment breathing life into them.



Kopf (2012)