

# ART BRUT ACTIVIST

Collector and curator Hannah Rieger talks about “Flying High” and *art brut*

NUALA ERNEST



Hannah Rieger at “Flying High: Women Artists of Art Brut”, April 2019, next to Perihan Arpacilar, *Untitled*, 2018, ink on paper, 27.6 x 39.4 in. / 70 x 100 cm, courtesy: Atelier Goldstein, photo: Edward M. Gómez

Earlier in 2019, “Flying High: Women Artists of Art Brut” broke ground as the first exhibition of works by female *art brut* artists on a grand scale, showing more than 300 diverse, high-quality artworks spanning 140 years by 93 international artists. It was curated by Ingrid Brugger, director of the Bank Austria Kunstforum Wien, where the exhibition was held, and Hannah Rieger, an *art brut* collector and former manager of a banking group, who was featured in *Raw Vision 89* (2016).

Rieger and Brugger were already acquaintances, and Rieger felt that “this female topic was in the air”, so she pursued it with Brugger at every opportunity. Proposing such an exhibition also felt at times like an uphill struggle, with some people saying it would be discriminatory against male artists to show only works by female artists. But, as Rieger insists, “*Art brut* is not equal to contemporary art, and, within that discrimination, female *art brut* artists are outsiders.”

Rieger now collects works by mainly female artists, and she notes how few such works were collected by Prinzhorn and Dubuffet, compared with those of male artists, at least partly because they were selected by

mainly male psychiatrists. Rieger also explains that “Flying High” was inspired by the Prinzhorn Collection’s exhibition catalogue *Irre ist Weiblich: Künstlerische Interventionen von Frauen in der Psychiatrie um 1900* (Madness is Female: Artistic Interventions of Women in Psychiatry Around 1900, B Brand-Claussen and V Michely, 2004). She says, “This book was the role model for the whole exhibition. I was amazed that there had never been a large exhibition of only female *art brut* artists. Like in all other areas of society, women are not seen but are neglected and forgotten. I think now is the time to show the potential of women, not only in the field of *art brut*.” Rieger believes that it is time for more research to be carried out about female *art brut* artists, and that answers should be sought for such questions as: Who supports women artists? Who selects women? Who finds women? Who thinks women have the same artistic power as men?

For Rieger, holding the exhibition in a contemporary-art venue in central Vienna was significant. She says, “As an *art brut* activist, it is



Madame Favre, *Untitled*, 1860, pencil on paper, 7.6 x 9.3 in. / 19.4 x 23.7 cm, Henry Boxer Gallery



Else Blankenhorn, *Untitled (Fantastic Landscape)*, before 1921, opaque colours on paper, 7.1 x 9.0 in. / 18 x 22.8 cm, photo: Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg

important to me to see an end to the stigmatising of *art brut* and to fight for its equal status in contemporary art. So, it is important to have an exhibition like this in a contemporary context. I have an obsession with *art brut*, which is why I call myself an *art brut* activist. I mean that I want to make a contribution, so that more people can see it." Rieger walks the walk – quite literally, for she regularly leads guided tours of the Gugging art centre's museum and gallery near Vienna, and she gave daily tours of "Flying High", too.

The oldest works in "Flying High" were mediumistic drawings by Madame Favre, about whom little is known. They were made in 1860, then discovered in the 1970s in a private collection of such works. In her drawings, the sexes of her figures are unclear, and this ambiguity is intriguing. Recently, the exhibiting of works by mediumistic artists has become popular. This began with the Swedish artist, Hilma Af Klint ("Painting the Unseen", the Serpentine Gallery, London, 2016), then Georgiana Houghton ("Spirit Drawings", the Courtauld Institute of Art, and "Encounters with the Spirit World", College of Psychic Studies, both London, 2016). Af Klint's works have since been shown in other countries, too, attracting a record-setting audience at New York's Solomon R

Guggenheim Museum. This trend has continued through 2019, with exhibitions of works by the Swiss healer and visionary Emma Kunz (London), Madge Gill (London), assorted artists in the exhibition "Alma: Mediums and Visionaries" (Mallorca) and others. Rieger wondered why this kind of artist has gained popularity. She says, "Somehow it matches the zeitgeist. In the past, women weren't allowed to go to universities. But they were allowed to be creative or to be artists." Later, when Spiritualism gained popularity, these artists related to it and, in it, found an outlet. Rieger says, "For example, Madge Gill didn't want her works to be sold because she said, 'They do not belong to me.'" Were these women to whom education was denied also silencing their own creative agency and not taking credit for their own work? Moreover, were these women seen (and did they see themselves) as supernaturally powerful by claiming to be in contact with the spiritual realm?

In "Flying High", there were also works on view by a mediumistic Austrian artist, Gertrude Honzatko-Mediz (1893–1975). The daughter of the Austrian Symbolist artists Emilie Mediz-Pelikan and Karl Mediz, Honzatko-Mediz's claimed to have been guided by the spirit of her deceased mother (whose works were being shown at the Belvedere Palace museum, Vienna, at the same





Gertrude Honzatko-Mediz, *Untitled*, 1917, mixed media on paper, 14.7 x 11.1 in. / 37.3 x 28.3 cm, Hannah Rieger Collection  
All photos credited to Hannah Rieger Collection © DETAILSINN Fotowerkstatt

time as “Flying High”). Rieger told me, “Her mother passed away when Honzatko-Mediz was 15, and she grew up with her grandparents about an hour from Vienna. So, Gertrude got into contact with her mother’s spirit – and if you look at the mother’s pieces alongside hers, the heads are very similar.”

Rieger puts the trend for mediumistic art into a present-day context, noting, “The Spiritualist movement was a historical one. With *art brut*, the understanding is greater now. We might talk about Anna Zemánková or Guo Fengyi, visionaries who produced their art in a trance-like state. You could say that they are in the field of mediumistic artists, which broadens our understanding of this area.”

About *art brut*, Rieger observes that, “since the 2013 Venice Biennale, *art brut* has become an important subject within the contemporary-art market. Now we have to ask ourselves why the art from the boundaries comes to the centre of awareness.” For Rieger, *art brut* serves as a key to understanding modern society, because art mirrors society. She noted, “When an attitude like that of *art brut* enters public art awareness, this suggests something about the state of our society. For example, if you think about globalisation and *art brut*, *art brut* reflects inner worlds, and the artists want to bring their inner mythologies into the world. These

personal obsessions and visions come out and influence mainstream art and cultural trends, then are streamlined by the zeitgeist and what is being taught. Nowadays, many contemporary artists say, ‘We have to forget everything we learned at university and bring into the world what is inside.’”

Rieger notes that *art brut* uses “basic forms, and archaic symbols.” She cites, for example, *Krokodil Laila auf*, a drawing by Laila Bachtiar (b 1971). Its dragon-like crocodile may be seen, she says, as “an archaic symbol for a large power, which also describes her anxieties.” Rieger adds, “And she is without weapons on this archetypal animal. Other *art brut* artists depict archetypal and archaic animals, such as Julia Krause-Harder’s dinosaurs. It’s interesting that socially isolated women often produce large figures, like Judith Scott’s large textile figures. Or Mary T. Smith, who lived in Mississippi and had hearing difficulties, and influenced and inspired Jean-Michel Basquiat. Could it be a desire to be seen and observed, to take up space?”

It is apparent that, whatever Rieger might do next, her passion for *art brut* will never end. Explaining how she feels about this genre, she says, “It touches the soul, and this is the difference. Because it reflects this inner world and is not coloured by mainstream art or culture. Sometimes I think *art brut* is in me, and I am *art brut* as





Laila Bachtiar, *Krokodil Laila auf*, 2001, pencil and coloured pencil on paper, 39.4 x 27.6 in. / 100 x 70 cm, Hannah Rieger Collection



Julia Krause-Harder, *Nonotyrannus*, 2013, cotton wool stuffed latex foil, hangers, cable ties, armrest bars and perforated tape, 102.4 x 63 x 39.4 in. / 260 x 160 x 100 cm, Atelier Goldstein

right: Mary T. Smith, *Untitled*, circa 1980, acrylic on metal, 14.7 x 55.1 in. / 38 x 140 cm, Hannah Rieger Collection



well, living in *art brut*."

Since her long-term goal has been realised with "Flying High", as well as a show of works from her collection at Art et Marges, in Brussels ("Les Femmes dans l'Art Brut?" ["Women in Art Brut?"], 2018–19), Rieger is now taking a break from *art brut*. However, her focus will remain on art. Her granduncle, Heinrich Rieger, was murdered by the Nazis, and his large art collection, which included works by Egon Schiele, was dispersed. As the last member of her family who can speak German, Rieger feels a sense of responsibility as the only person capable of doing the necessary research to locate any of the artworks and, hopefully, exhibit them. Rieger says that if it were not for her granduncle's interest in art, she would never have started collecting *art brut*. Bringing together the past and the future, she says, "I think my *art brut* project now leads me to this other art project, and there remains work for me to do."

Nuala Ernest is features editor at *Raw Vision* and editor at the National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health within the Royal College of Psychiatrists, London.