

Stelzmann's paintings carry echoes of Cold War

Vibrant, strange Berlin

DOUGLAS BRITT, Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle Published 5:30 am, Friday, June 27, 2008



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Volker Stelzmann's *The Wood Posts*, 2007.

During the Cold War, Volker Stelzmann spent decades grappling with a dilemma all too familiar to East German artists.

On the eastern side of the Berlin Wall, his paintings' social and religious undercurrents could rub **Communist Party** functionaries the wrong way. On the western side, his traditional figurative style was seen as old-fashioned, and being from the East made him politically suspect.

These days, his work can be found in the collections of every major German museum, and his reputation is spreading to the United States. *Experimental Arrangements*, a survey of his work, is on view at **Rudolph Projects/ArtScan Gallery** through July 12.

"He's technically brilliant — the way he handles the pigment, the way he models out of nothing," says **Helga Kessler Aurisch**, associate curator of European art at the **Museum of Fine Arts**, Houston. "He's a great, great painter."

Because Stelzmann spent the first half of his career as an artist and professor in Leipzig, he's also considered a forerunner of the "**New Leipzig School**," of which **Neo Rauch** is the most famous exemplar.

"(Stelzmann) is a firsthand witness of the cultural development in Germany before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall," says **Peter Farer**, a member of the **Houston-Leipzig Sister City Association**, which is co-sponsoring the exhibit. "Without him, there would be no young generation of Leipzig artists."

Born in Dresden in 1940, Stelzmann moved to Leipzig with his family in 1948 and studied at the Hochschule für Grafik

und Buchkunst during the 1960s. Shortly after earning his diploma, he joined the [Association of Fine Artists](#).

Membership wasn't so much an honor as a requirement.

"Even if you were just a painter, you had to join the professional association, which was controlled by the party," says [Volker Eisele](#), codirector of Rudolph Projects/ArtScan Gallery. "Otherwise, you couldn't paint, you couldn't exhibit, you could do nothing."

Then there was the issue of subject matter.

"There were some themes that just had to be in there; otherwise, you didn't have a chance," Eisele says. "The army, for instance, had to be in there. It just had to be. (Work) was heavily censored."

Artists became adept at using symbols to veil social criticisms. They also benefited from a somewhat more relaxed climate than had prevailed in the 1950s, when one of Stelzmann's teachers used to lock the door before showing his students books with reproductions of works by [Vincent Van Gogh](#) and [Paul Gauguin](#).

"As time went on, (party functionaries) became much looser in their criteria, and much more aesthetic qualities prevailed" over a rigid insistence on socialist realism, Eisele says.

Stelzmann navigated the system well enough to get hired as a research assistant at his old school in 1973, landing a teaching position in 1975 and a professorship in 1982. He was awarded the East German national prize for art and literature in 1983.

In 1986, a retrospective of Stelzmann's work, along with a catalog raisonné, was presented in West Berlin. Stelzmann traveled there for the opening and did not return to Leipzig. He has lived in Berlin since.

Stelzmann's defection came just three years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, but he found that East Germans were regarded as "intruders" in the West German art market, says [Peter Fernfert](#), director of Die Galerie in Frankfurt, which has represented Stelzmann since 1999.

Aurisch says a 1993 Berlin exhibition of art made in the former German Democratic Republic caused "an absolute scandal."

"Everybody was upset about everything about these artists from the East, because they thought they were communists and socialists and whatnot," she says.

By 2003, when another survey was mounted, East German artists "were recognized for what they are aesthetically, and it became one of the most popular exhibitions in the united Berlin," Aurisch says.

Stelzmann has also benefited from a renewed acceptance of figurative painting, Eisele says.

The paintings in Experimental Arrangements highlight Stelzmann's interest in the compositions — and sometimes, the religious themes — of Italian Mannerists such as Pontormo and [Rosso Fiorentino](#).

Eisele, translating for Stelzmann, who does not speak English, says Stelzmann is not a church goer but believes an artist has to "have a religious feeling somewhere; otherwise, it's not possible to do this kind of art."

Another strong affinity is for the "New Objectivity" of Weimar-era German post-Expressionist painters like Otto Dix, whose street scenes, like Stelzmann's, are charged with social commentary.

"Many of his paintings are very grim, in a way, but they do share that cabaret feeling of Berlin in the 1920s," says Aurisch. "There's something to Berlin that I think is still there. It's strange — very vibrant, but a little macabre in some ways."

"We don't get to see this sort of thing every day, and most American museums are quite poor in German art," she says.

"It's really cool to have something a little different."

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