



Evgeniy Antufiev, *Untitled*, 2015, wood, amber, fabric, dimensions variable.

hanging on the wall—a hand holding a huge chunk of amber—and an ornate pyramid standing on a plinth constructed out of display cases. The view was precise: Amber and wood, after all, were the main materials—and subjects—of an exhibition that felt like a memorial “protected,” as the artist put it, “in an absolute eternity.”

The main gallery was filled with more wooden sculptures of various sizes, from a form with many breasts, to a growling hound, to a man carved out of a raw tree trunk leaning against a corner. These were grouped with arrangements of smaller objects made from fabric, ceramic, bronze, brass, wax, and copper—including a clay figure emerging out of a bowl filled with marble chips, placed on a spinning wheel, and a small bronze vessel with a blue-eyed skeleton head. There were a few drawings on the wall, including one of a snake coiled around a pencil—a symbol

that contributed to the sense of having stepped into an archaic, autochthonous human history. (All the works are *Untitled*, 2015.) The installation felt at once like a museological presentation of an imagined prehistorical society (items included arrowheads and bowls filled with amber chips), an archaeological dig in a newly discovered site, and a temple. There was something primordial about these wooden sculptures, which were neither human nor animal, both otherworldly and familiar.

Amber and wood are materials connected to Russia in some way—woodcrafts are a major part of its folk culture, while amber, as Antufiev notes, was one of the first known polymers, coveted by the Babylonians, Romans, and Scythians, and one of the cheapest and most abundant materials in the Soviet Union. Bringing this vast narrative of consumption into the present was a video projection showing the sculptures being transported to the gallery, intercut with views of the work in the studio. In this historical overview, amber and wood are not only materials but also historical commodities that have remained in global circulation as both mediators and material witnesses. They are conduits through which nature and culture exist not so much in opposition as in eternal relation: a history without beginning or end.

—Stephanie Bailey

## SYDNEY

### Matthys Gerber

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART AUSTRALIA

Dutch-born Australian painter Matthys Gerber has been a fixture of the notoriously quarrelsome Sydney contemporary-art scene for roughly three decades. Consistently provocative and protean in terms of style and content, his work has been routinely dismissed by conservative commentators as cynical dilettantism or careerist one-upmanship. For Gerber's first major survey, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia senior curator Natasha Bullock countered this perception by framing

the artist's output as a meta-critique of painting in the Australian context, claiming that his work “has always carved a singular path through the ‘idea’ of painting.” The thirty-five works presented here as an evenly representative, if not comprehensive, jumble of distinct phases portrayed an artist constantly probing the limits and conditions of his own subjectivity and practice.

Gerber first gained attention in the mid- to late 1980s with large, kitschy figurative genre paintings that in the wake of postmodern revision were broadly construed as ironic affronts to Greenbergian connoisseurship, a charge vehemently, though implausibly, denied by the artist. Hostile pundits had a field day with such works as *L'Origine du Monde #1*, 1992, a lurid outsize rendering of a restaurant-decor waterfall, whose title summoned Courbet's supreme icon of artistic eroticism. *Yellow Peril*, 1990 (not exhibited here), a patently Orientalist depiction of a naked Asian woman, and *Black Painting (Evander Holyfield)*, 1990, a smoldering portrait of the champion boxer with heavyweight belt, likewise courted opprobrium from high cultural (and politically correct) quarters. A period of transition followed, during which Gerber seems to have drifted gradually toward abstraction. His mid-'90s cloud paintings, for instance, signaled an interest in amorphous form and, freed of cultural reference, foregrounded his virtuosic ability.

Yet there were earlier glimmers of the shift to abstraction. A 1993 collaboration with late Australian artist Adam Cullen (1965–2012) produced engaging monstrosities featuring swaths of sloppy smears, glitter-encrusted AbEx drips, and scrawled text that, along with solo experiments in allover biomorphic layering, as exemplified here by *Mata Hari*, 1994, paved the way for an examination of nonfigurative effects. Although his early abstractions may appear somewhat perverse or wilfully awkward—bearing a passing resemblance to the work of contemporary European painters such as Franz Ackermann and Albert Oehlen—there is a discernible progression around 2000 toward a more sincere embrace of the material and semiotic properties of painting, specifically as they relate to the local context. Included in the show were a sprinkling of works by, or paying tribute to, artists plying regional concerns—most interestingly, Dutch New Zealander Theo Schoon (1915–1985), and Aboriginal painter George Tjungurrayi.



Matthys Gerber, *Mata Hari*, 1994, oil on canvas, 59 7/8 × 59 7/8".

As if to underscore an affinity with Aboriginal art, a Tjungurrayi painting from the MCA's collection was hung next to Gerber's 2002 psychedelic, posterized portrait of the indigenous artist. What's more, of the many abstract works in the show—more than half the exhibition—some sample directly from Aboriginal painting. Following the example of Schoon, who drew, contentiously, upon Maori iconography, here Gerber stepped gently into territory that few white Australians would dare venture into for fear of being accused of symbolically repeating colonialist gestures. *Dot Painting*, 2014, for example, subjects pumped-up Papunya-style dots from Western Desert Aboriginal art to a hard edge Rorschach-style pictorial mirroring (a favored device of Gerber's), blending what is generally thought to be divergent traditions and registers, a situation further problematized by the nod to Freudian psychology. Indeed, if there are common traits across the stylistic variance of Gerber's production, it's the artist's tendency to lead with his chin on sensitive cultural issues and the palpable presence of a sexualized subtext.

Despite whatever causal evolution Gerber's work may have undergone over the years, the show's eccentric, achronological presentation effectively obscured any narrative of artistic development. Taking a very active hand in the installation, Gerber eschewed wall labels and scrambled his timeline with a dynamic, scattershot hang—a work in itself—that incorporated a freestanding, raw-ply gallery-within-a-gallery; placed many works on an uncommonly low sight line; and vaulted others to the ceiling. This exploded view was intensely contradictory, yet somehow harmonious, sending one's eye ricocheting around the room and forcing productive comparisons among seemingly irreconcilable genres and techniques. The preponderance of gaudy, even salacious, effects would seem to be the binding medium here, and, as such, Gerber's oeuvre, justly celebrated in this institutional anointment, comes off as a rapturous indulgence in the love of painting (of the libidinous kind) and a relentless challenge to good taste and representational correctness.

—Kit Messham-Muir

## SÃO PAULO

### Tadeusz Kantor

SESC CONSOLAÇÃO

Both a visual artist and a theater director, Tadeusz Kantor was perhaps the most prominent and controversial figure of the twentieth-century Polish avant-garde. The exhibition in São Paulo was part of the International Year of Tadeusz Kantor that was announced by UNESCO to mark the hundredth anniversary of his birth.

Kantor visited the city just once, in 1967, on the occasion of the São Paulo Bienal. But he received a prize there and subsequently became a major reference for the theorists and practitioners of Brazilian contemporary theater, including Antunes Filho, who runs the Center for Theater Research based at SESC Consolação, part of a private nonprofit chain providing education, health, and leisure services across Brazil since the 1940s. Kantor's unique blend of local and universal elements makes his work as inspirational today, twenty-five years after his death, as it was in 1967. Kantor was one of the few artists who managed to frequently travel back and forth through the Iron Curtain, and his work benefited from developments in postwar Paris, as can be seen from the traces left on his work by art informel, Nouveau Réalisme, and Happenings.

The show addressed Kantor's multiplicity using the metaphor of the machine. It was a recurring motif in the exhibition's narrations, architectures, and title: "Tadeusz Kantor Machine: theater + happenings + performances + paintings + other modes of production." Jarosław

Suchan, one of the three curators (along with Ricardo Muniz Fernandes and the late Sebastião Millaré), emphasized that *Maszyna aneantyzacyjna* (The Annihilation Machine), 1963, displayed at the very entrance of the show, is the key to the meaning of the display and the dynamics of Kantor's work. This machine—a mechanism hidden behind a black cloth that now and then folds and unfolds four stacks of wooden chairs—was first used in the spectacle *Wariat i zakonnica* (The Madman and the Nun), based on the play by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz and produced by Kantor's company Cricot 2 in 1963. The device produced intervals of noise, drowning out the actors' lines and stirring up the action. At SESC, the machine worked as a reminder of the lively, process-based character of Kantor's oeuvre, in which subsequent phases rather than creating an additive whole question and transform what has been previously done.

Juxtaposing documentation of Kantor's Happenings with props and artworks, the exhibition showed how his art, regardless of the medium, always started with the human being. There were many subtle reminders



of this humanism across the exhibition. For instance, in the room presenting the "emballage," or "wrapping," works he started making in 1962, borrowing from the Nouveau Réalisme practice of incorporating found objects on canvas, the curators decided to present footage from *Grand Emballage*, 1968, an action performed by Kantor with his wife, Maria Stangret, captured on camera for Dietrich Mahlow's documentary film *Kantor ist da* (Kantor Is There), 1969. The performance took place at the Nuremberg, Germany, parade ground where the Nazis used to hold their propaganda rallies. Standing in the middle of the field, Kantor meticulously wraps Stangret in toilet paper as he walks around her in circles. Elsewhere, the drawing series "Chłopiec z gazetami" (The Boy with Newspapers), 1968, depicting a half-naked boy partly buried in a pile of paper, was faced with the abstract cardboard, string, and cloth collages from the "Okolice zera" (Near Zero) series, ca. 1967. The confrontation between the depicted body with the nonfigurative work displayed on the opposite wall was a reminder that humanism is also present in Kantor's abstract art. It was through subtle juxtapositions of this kind and the fascinating metaphor of the machine that the exhibition unveiled the dynamic and multifarious narrations characterizing Kantor's practice and challenged the routine of linear thinking about an artist's life.

—Sylvia Serafinowicz

View of "Tadeusz Kantor," 2015. Photo: Inês Correa.