

Eberhard Bosslet

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Bosslet's hard hat approach deeply humane

WHEN IT COMES to contemporary art, West - Berlin is today perhaps best-known for its hefty, expressionist painting, chock-full of sex, violence and rabbit-punch brushwork – a thriving practice, it seems, despite the decline of that sort of painting most everywhere else.

But that's only part of the story. Eberhard Bosslet, now showing at Mercer Union (333 Adelaide St. W., to April 23), comes from the other side of the tracks – out of the less flashy community of Berlin installation artists and non-expressionist painters who have been around for some time, but who have only recently been garnering notice for what they do. Bosslet's debut on an international stage took place last summer, when his large-scale, hard-hat work – involving appliances and equipment borrowed from the heavy building trades – was featured in the Documenta 8 group exhibition in West Germany. The current Mercer show marks one of Bosslet's first appearances outside Europe (he was shown recently at New York's John Gibson Gallery), and deserves to be looked at carefully for what it is, and for what it tells us about the status of world-directed art today.

This exhibit is a play of Bosslet's three practices, which are sculpture, painting and installation, each insisting on the notion of artist as homo faber – builder of meanings, as opposed to producer of beautiful knick-knacks or objets d'art. This venerable idea, which has had a vivid life in art from the Romantic era down to the time of Joseph Beuys, finds a plain, strong new expression in Bosslet's work, especially in the installations and paintings.

The central work here is a roomfilling installation crafted specifically for the Mercer space from iron molds used for pre-casting large concrete blocks, and from the extensible steel columns used to support the floors of multi-story buildings under construction. The immediate reference of this muscular way of working (which is Bosslet's usual mode) is to Russian Constructivist sculpture, and the beliefs of those avant-garde pioneers in a working man's art that would, in turn, inspire the building of a new world of revolutionary working people. But Bosslet's backward reference glances off Constructivism's utopian core, and leads the eye to rest finally on less dramatic historical sources – the load-bearing column from the Greeks to now, the bones and struts that support the skins of everything.

By means of such tactics, the artist invokes Constructivism in order to criticize its heady radicalism, and concludes with a view of the artist, not as wrecking ball, but as strong shoulder under rickety structures, and strong hand at work building homes and workplaces in the world such as it is. Similarly, his paintings, by their shape and size, recall the endlessly questing, progressive history of oil painting. But like the installation, these works in asphalt, aluminum paint and other non-art materials recall past artistic practice in order to criticize its progressivism, and insist on artmaking as public works. Bosslet's position on the role of the artist, at least as expressed in the works presented here, is ideologically conservative, but entirely honorable – especially in view of the desolation and destruction wreaked on the world in our century by various political utopianisms.

Though Bosslet's art surely elicits sympathy – especially nowadays, as structures of meaning totter everywhere around us – it also falls short of being entirely conincing. Bosslet likes the story of Atlas, upholder of the sky in Greek mythology, and has named a work after him. But Atlas got his job as a result, not of artistic commitment, but of divine punishment. Doesn't Bosslet's conservative idea similarly make the sculptor a prisoner of the status quo? And exactly what's wrong with all that tottering, shaking of foundations and so forth? We don't get answers here – only assertions that are as questionable as they are deeply humane.