

Richard Oelze (1900–1980) Paintings & Drawings from the 1950s & 1960s

THROUGH MAY 12, 2007

Ubu Gallery is pleased to present **Richard Oelze: Paintings & Drawings from the 1950s & 1960s**, an exhibition of more than 40 works by a one-time Bauhaus student whose early contact with the works of Dalí, Ernst and Magritte made him one of the few German artists with direct contacts to and affinities with the Paris Surrealists. Oelze's works capture his belief that the making of art was an act akin to clairvoyance; that the artist was like a blind man, incapable of seeing reality, but capable of prophesy; and that history would certainly confirm these prophecies, which were invariably of a sinister nature.

Oelze evidenced an early artistic talent and, following brief military service in World War I, attended the School of Applied Arts in Magdeburg, Germany, where he had been born into an ascetic, middle-class family in 1900. Between 1921 and 1925, Oelze was a student at the Bauhaus in Weimar, where he studied with Walter Gropius, Johannes Itten, Oskar Schlemmer and, most probably, with Paul Klee. Around 1930, Oelze was exposed to Surrealism and this determined a course for his own work from which he did not waver for the remaining 50 years of his life.

Chronology

1900–1921 Richard Oelze was born on June 29, 1900 in Magdeburg, Germany, the youngest of three brothers. His father was a civil servant and his mother was a housewife. In 1954, his companion, Ellida Schargo von Alten, recounted: "There were no books in his family, neither would they write letters. No toys or children's books." But Oelze showed a precocious talent for drawing. By 1914, he was an apprentice in a lithographic workshop from which he graduated in 1918. Subsequently, he was drafted into the German army and served during the last months of World War I. After the war, Oelze attended the School of Applied Arts in Magdeburg until 1921.

1921–1925 Thereafter, he left Magdeburg and enrolled in the Bauhaus in Weimar. He participated in the "Vorkurs" (preliminary course) taught by Johannes Itten and worked in the metal and wall decoration workshops. At the Bauhaus, he designed furniture and a portable house. Oelze also involved himself with the Bauhaus stage led by Lothar Schreyer and later by Oskar Schlemmer and developed an interest in photography. While at the Bauhaus, he is reputed to have attended Paul Klee's private painting class and later considered Walter Gropius, the noted architect and founder of the Bauhaus, and Itten as his most important influences. He developed friendships there with Paul Citroen, Andor Weininger and Ise Bienert, among others.

1925–1929 After the Bauhaus was forced to shutter under the pressure of right wing groups in 1925, Oelze went to Dresden where he spent the "most fruitful years of his life." Through Ise

Bienert, the daughter of the important Dresden art collector, Ida Bienert, he dove into the Dresden art and intellectual scene. There he met the influential art critic, Will Grohmann, who bought one of his drawings. He also became interested in Otto Dix, who had just been appointed a professor at the Academy. During this time, Oelze made frequent visits to Berlin, where Itten taught and where he met Walter Peterhans and Hans Richter, with whom he may have worked on film and photography experiments. He continued his studies for a few months at the Bauhaus in Dessau, where it had reopened. He married Norma Pflugstert, but they divorced in 1936. They had one son who died in World War II.

1929–1933 Oelze lived on the Monte Verità in Ascona, Switzerland for two years where many other artists spent time, including Schlemmer, Moholy-Nagy and Marcel Breuer. He probably had his first contacts with Surrealism in this 19th Century artist's colony devoted to the reformation of life. He returned to Germany in 1930 and not much is known about this period of his life, but it is known that he spent time in the Romanisches Café in Berlin and may have seen a Salvador Dalí painting while there which continued to resonate with him. After a short sojourn in Mainz where he met Willi Baumeister, he left Germany in 1933 for Paris. Relocation was made possible by the acquisition of one of his drawings by the collector Philipp Reemtsma, who paid 500 Marks for it.

1933–1936 By chance in Paris, Oelze met the art critic, Mathilde Visser, whom he had known previously from Berlin.

Positioned somewhere between German Romanticism and French Surrealism, Oelze's art is filled with dark and turbulent imaginary landscapes, populated by grottoes and inhabited by a humanity altered by some only hinted at cataclysm. Oelze's works from the 1950s and 1960s are further informed by his second tour of military service in World War II and their visionary depictions are rich in warnings, but offer no alternatives for what Oelze presents as an imminent future.

Oelze was represented in most of the important Surrealist exhibitions from the 1930s into the 1960s, including "Fantastic Art, Dada & Surrealism" at MoMA in New York in 1936, as well as significant international exhibitions such as Documenta II (1959) and Documenta III (1964). Alfred Barr, the director of MoMA and the organizer of "Fantastic Art, Dada & Surrealism," purchased Oelze's most famous work, *Expectation* (1935–36), for MoMA in April 1940 from the noted dealer, Julien Levy, who had acquired it directly from Oelze probably in 1936.

She introduced him to many artists and writers, including René Crevel, Max Ernst, Tristan Tzara, Leonor Fini and Victor Brauner. He also met André Breton and Dalí. His neighbor was the Bauhaus student, Henri Nouveau. Oelze also had contact with Julien Levy, Thea Sternheim and the Dalí collector, Edward James. Subsequently, he lived with Mina Loy who based her novel, *Insel*, on her relationship with him. During this time, he was invited to participate in the "Salon des Surindépendents" and a year later he exhibited at the "Exposition Minotaure" in Brussels (1934). Thereafter, he started to gain international acclaim through participation in the "International Surrealist Exhibition" at the New Burlington Galleries in London (1936), "Fantastic Art, Dada & Surrealism" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1936) and in the "Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme" at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris (1938). Alfred Barr, the director of MoMA and the organizer of "Fantastic Art, Dada & Surrealism," bought two works of Oelze's for MoMA, including his most famous painting "Expectation," which Julien Levy had purchased directly from Oelze probably in 1936. Oelze also took part in the landmark 1942 exhibition, "First Papers of Surrealism," which was initiated by French Surrealist artists during their wartime exile in New York.

1936–1945 Oelze left Paris in 1936 to return to Ascona and then went to Positano in Italy. He moved to the artist's colony Worpsswede near Bremen in 1939, where Paula Modersohn-Becker and Heinrich Vogeler had lived and worked

years before. In 1940, he was drafted into the army and served as ground support for the Luftwaffe and as a map draughtsman during World War II.

1945–1962 Oelze returned to Worpsswede after being released from an American POW camp. He married his second wife, Hedwig Rohde, in 1951, but she soon left him and returned to Berlin. During this period, he lived in poverty. While he was able to renew some contacts (with Itten, Ernst and Grohman, for example), there were no clients for his paintings. His first solo exhibition took place in 1950 in Köln. In 1954, he met Ellida Schargo von Alten, who became his lifelong companion and lasting support. During this time, Konrad Klapheck, Friedensreich Hundertwasser and Christian d'Orgeix, among others, visited him and Siegfried Poppe became Oelze's primary collector. Oelze exhibited at Documenta II (1959) and Documenta III (1964) in Kassel. He had numerous other important exhibitions in the 1960s, including those at the Karl-Ernst-Osthaus Museum in Hagen in 1961, a Kestner-Gesellschaft retrospective in Hannover in 1964 (which was curated by Wieland Schmied) and at the Venice Biennale in 1968. Oelze was elected a member of the Academy in Berlin in 1965 and received a number of other prizes and recognitions.

1962–1980 Oelze had moved to the Weserbergland and lived in almost complete isolation, but his work was included in numerous exhibitions throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Too weak to paint in his last years and too nervous to venture out of his house, he died one month shy of 80 on May 27, 1980 in Posteholz.