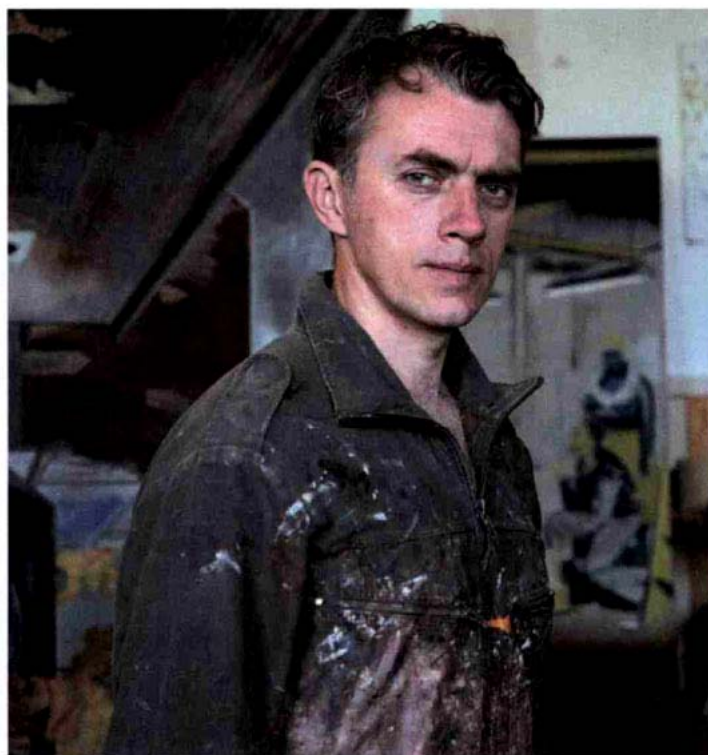


FEVER DREAM—A GUIDED TOUR THROUGH
NEO RAUCH'S SURREALIST,
TEUTONIC TABLEAUX

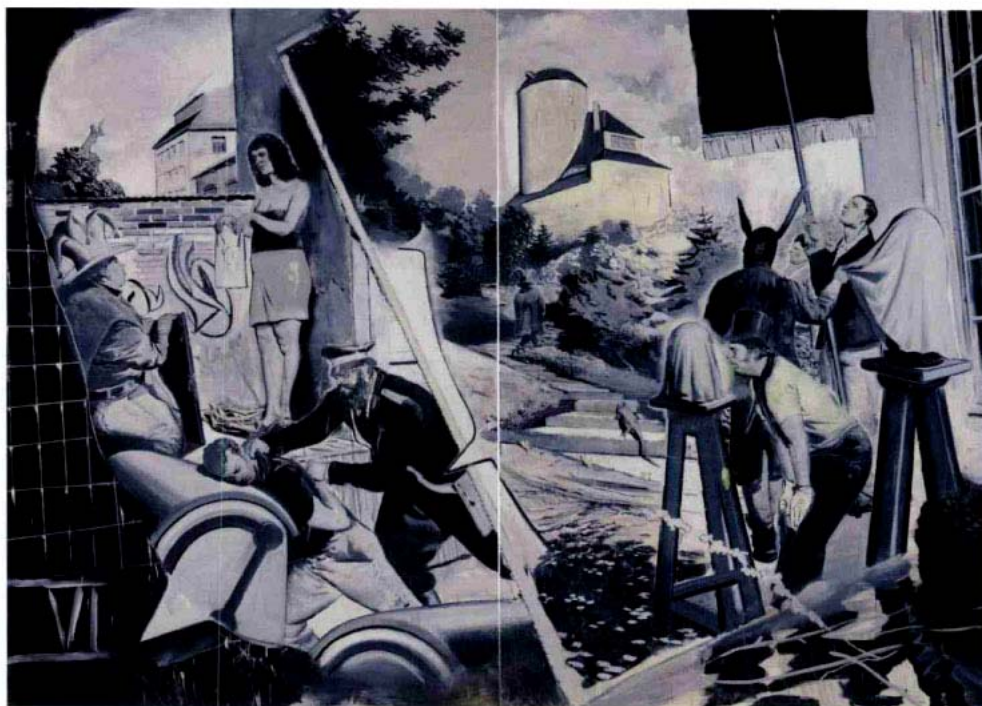
TEXT: MICHAEL SLENSKE



"You have to imagine,

that the process of my painting is like a game of chess which I play against myself", German painter Neo Rauch has said of his epic, post-modern canvases which contain "elements of Balthus, Vermeer, Donald Judd, Donald Duck, agitprop, and cheap advertising garbage" and employ industrial workers, peasants, soldiers, and besieged painters as players in a super-color-saturated pageant of epic surrealist proportions. This month Taschen releases a 40 pound, 476 page map for exploring that pageantry, Neo Rauch—with what editor Hans Werner Holzwarth calls "parallel histories" in the form of critical and candid essays by German journalist Wolfgang Büscher, Goethe-Institut art history professor Harald Kunde, and Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Gary Tinterow—that helps to vivisection the various layers of the New Leipzig School painter's intricate methods and inimitable style.





We start with a very personal portrait

in the beginning," says Holzwarth, who's also designed tomes on Jeff Koons and Christopher Wool, about the essay by Büscher on eating steaks with the artist and exploring the rustic setting of Rauch's studio practice in a former Leipzig cotton mill. "In this case, it's really a feeling of the neighborhood, the land, the city, the buildings; we really get a feeling he's related to the space where he's living."

Born in April of 1960—with both of his parents dying in a tragic rail accident a month later—Rauch was raised by grandparents and enrolled in Leipzig's Academy of Visual Arts shortly after completing his military service. While Rauch says his early work suffered "mood swings from abstraction to figuration" that aped the more academic bent favored by his Old Leipzig School mentors, Rauch's self-dubbed "incubation period" (1981-1992) allowed him to crack his signature style, which arrived in a shamanistic dream that must have been a wild 20-car pile-up of Pop Art references, advertising symbolism, his own place in art history, and the bitter reality of the working man under East German socialism.

"It's kind of an alter reality, like a play where you have extras wearing Biedermeier dresses or whatever from the 19th century," says Holzwarth. "But the whole theme is a stage of our present time. You have an idea of a narration, but it's always fading out."

What began in 1993 with the tondo, or circular paintings that relied heavily on stark color contrasts, ironic 50's era ad wordplay, and emotive graphic comic characters (for example, *Ama* and *Plazenta*), has evolved into a rich tapestry that reached its first apogee with the dozen novelistic works in his landmark 2007 solo show, *Para*, created specifically for the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Rauch toured the year prior with Gary Tinterow, drawing inspiration from Warhol and Lucian Freud paintings, as well as the Costume Institute's 2006 *AngloMania* exhibition on the evolution of British fashion from the mid-Seventies.



According to Tinterow,

for Rauch, the show marked "a new direction, in which figurative and narrative art are emphasized over landscape and decoration, and a new dark palette and mood predominate." This is especially true in the show's titular painting (*Para*), and in the years since his palette (and graphic/narrative abilities) have evolved into a more tonal suite of red and green works like last year's *Übertage* or the neon-hued odyssey *Die Kontrolle* on the cover.

"For me, it all just fits so well together, even if I'm looking at an abstract from 1995, I really have the feeling it's current," says Holzwarth. "What you're seeing in this book, the text will give you a background, but you really have to look at the paintings." And there are ample opportunities to study Rauch's intersecting narratives in depth via various *Playboy*-esque fold-outs.

Timed to celebrate Rauch's 50th birthday, the book obviously can't function as a complete history, and there are no testimonials from the various artists' work he's influenced in that time. But just last summer, the Irish born, graffiti-inspired oil painter Conor Harrington—you might call his style neo-Rauchian—told me, "Neo Rauch is probably one of my favorite painters." If you study the works, it's easy to see why.

"It's about questioning the world, the drama, and society," he says. "This is what you get from his paintings, and in the book you can read this in a dialogue like reading a huge novel. It's a little bit like reading *War and Peace*, but here you have the whole story." By that token, Rauch's *Anna Karenina* can't be too far over the horizon ■ *Neo Rauch*, editor Hans Werner Holzwarth; authors, Wolfgang Büscher, Harald Kunde and Gary Tinterow. All images © VG Bild-Kunst, 2010, courtesy Galerie EIGEN + ART Leipzig/Berlin and David Zwirner, New York Taschen taschen.com