

Elisabeth Nowak-Thaller

# Backwoods

A pictorial fantasy from  
Heine to Rammstein,  
from Trakl to Kreisky

«My medium is the exhibition!» Alois Mosbacher is not just a painter, but also an exhibition designer and curator. He has planned his LENTOS project from top to bottom, designing an architectural model that is complete with downsized paintings, drawings and objects, which are naturally to scale. He has also considered, painted and drawn the large gallery of the LENTOS Art Museum in Linz, which provides the presentation venue. Moreover, the exhibition, which under no circumstances is to be seen as a retrospective, will be characterised by all new, recently created pictures. Since the early 1980s, when he enjoyed success as one of the «New Wild Ones», Mosbacher has worked continually on the landscape complete with its (frequently extinct) inhabitants, the painterly effects such as the flow of colour and the rhythm of forms, as well as the terpsichory of the brush and the pencil. And if in 1997 at the MUMOK, chickens, swarms of bees and sunflowers took centre stage, or in another spatial artwork at the Künstlerhaus in Graz during 2010, «doggies and birdies» predominated, today as then, branches, wood piles, huts and detritus from the woods are omnipresent. All of these elements are part of familiar and reoccurring series such as chickens on an Atlas, which Mosbacher depicts with characteristic painterly brilliance. As Confucius was already aware, «Those that plant trees will win heaven» and Mosbacher's trees literally shoot up to the ceiling and burst through the glass firmament above the museum. An artistic, majestic forest comprised of tall, slim trees in charcoal, pencil and oil, freshly created and grouped in one of Austria's most beautiful exhibition galleries. The bark shimmers with a very delicate, silvery glaze and botanists can immediately classify the diverse trunks with their threatening knots, cracks and wounds. By contrast, as an art historian one is at something of a loss. However, here the work of the artist is not concerned with the definition of nature and its inhabitants, but rather the issues of colour, space and perspective that have concerned painters since time immemorial. In this case, the heart of the matter is formed by a homogenous colour flow with deliberately inserted highlights, soft pastel-like shades, nuances from light grey to deep black and the fine tuning of brown, green and pink tones with cool, endless, contrast-rich blue. Wherever one looks, there is interlacing, entanglement, enmeshment, quirkiness and gnarled surfaces, as snow-white, virginal canvases are covered with sweeping, abstract lines emanating from the personal drawing style that Mosbacher would appear to have in his blood. Can branches really bend to such a degree and do trees really possess so much character? The mood of painterly

beauty and coherence is repeatedly abruptly interrupted through sharp edges, faults and overlaps. Or by means of tiny, pictorial images that function like snapshots. These «cyberimpressions» as the artist calls them are evoked by the Internet and newspaper articles and constitute a painterly approach that is predestined to awaken the imagination of the viewer.

This painting seeks neither to praise nature, nor depict it in meticulous detail. It is not intended to make political statements, nor does it attempt to be current. Instead it endeavours to point to the refinements of line and colour with which the painter constructs his idiosyncratically irritating and fascinating tableaux. The works evoke recollections of trompe-l'oeil painting and build on the long traditions of the painted landscape. This is a free interaction with art history, which for Mosbacher is a matter of course.

For quite some time, artists have taken to regarding exhibition design as part of their creative activities, thus poaching in the professional preserves of curators and challenging their position. Ever more artists are operating simultaneously as curators, designers and exhibition architects, thereby determining the concept for their presentations. Mosbacher is also a painter who works in installative fashion, reacting directly with the room in which he is to exhibit with new pictures and self-created exhibition architecture.

In the catalogue for Harald Szeemann's documenta 5 in 1972, Daniel Buren already stated that: «A growing number tend to treat shows, not as exhibitions of artworks, but rather as presentations of themselves as artworks.»<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Mosbacher surprises us with a complete artwork for which submergence in a parallel world represents the magic formula. «The installation as a methodological approach enables the painter to construct a bridge between pictorial and actual reality, and thus expand the levels of imagery. The employment of electronic media quickly became a natural concomitant for Mosbacher, but not for calculated reasons of method in the spirit of media art, which should once again replace painting.»<sup>2</sup> Photography and the Internet serve the artist as an important source of research for topics and motifs from which series or larger-scale projects emanate. Mosbacher employs narrative painting, but paints pictures that are entirely open to the associations of the viewer. «In the final analysis there is no longer any history or stories in painting. [...] Matters such as composition, style, bravura, casualness, carelessness and precision, or

all the elements that constitute painting, are subject to repeated redefinition and generate the manner in which I work at present, which is extremely nervous. Everything is simultaneous and pushes me on. I research [...].»<sup>3</sup>

In his spacious studio in what was once a tavern in a Lower Austrian wine-growing village, the artist is planning the exhibition in Linz and using painting as a field of research. Apart from office furniture, a sofa and armchair, a small mobile table with exhausted paint tubes, the LENTOS model stands in the middle of the room. In addition, old and new drawings lie in the room, which is illuminated brightly by daylight. A stack of paintings in various sizes, differing techniques and both narrow, vertical and massive lateral formats partly invades the room and catches the eye. A mutt has collided with a branch and has a bleeding nose (or was it the cactus in the other picture?). Otherwise, chopped and stacked wood and trunks combine to create a stunning panorama. Months before the opening, the leading paintings in the LENTOS exhibition, consisting of newly created, major works on huge canvases that frequently comprise several sections, have been finished and positioned carefully. Here, in his studio within this countryside «hortus conclusus», the artist immerses himself in his «lexical painting - the idea that I can use and paint everything.»<sup>4</sup> He beams himself through the Internet jungle, consumes literature, reads several books simultaneously and paints numerous pictures at the same time. Paintings like film stills are created, which are based on picture sequences that have no real logic, but represent an archive that is constantly updated and enlarged. The viewers themselves then always determine the outcome of the story.

#### Level 1

Warning! Think again, as first impressions deceive!

The story, which basically isn't one, does not provide an answer. Things are painted that occur in the woods including mysterious games, huts, garbage dumps and dead deer. The fallow deer on the display has a nervous appearance and peruses the irritated museum visitors. As if in a video game, the viewers are deliberately lured into the trap. Mosbacher plays with the visitors on the large LENTOS stage. Can one fail to see the wood for the trees? Some parts of the pictures would actually appear to be arranged at random. Indeed, even the organisation of the small, current images, which are partly concealed be-

hind the large forest, possesses a certain arbitrariness. Déjà-vu? Already seen? Obama, Merkel, Berlusconi, Putin in cowboy outfit, or a mufti. A disaster, an accident, the rescue of a donkey from a well. Tiny snapshots run like filmstrips. Daily life and world events, thrown in as newflashes with a restlessly casual and frequently deliberately slipshod style, fly past us either en passant or with great deliberation. Mosbacher reads the «Bild-Zeitung», where he unearths his motifs. He employs a diversity of photographic originals and determines the composition of his subsequent pictures on his computer. During a conversation, the artist murmured, «No complicated painting!» In fact the pictures even function as variables, as it is possible to arrange the tree images in differing combinations. Mosbacher's trees change their genus back and forth, up and down and to the right and left. Pine stems emerge from birch bark, hiatuses, painterly faults and «disconnections» are desired equally along with contentual irritations. «I do not feel at home in Mosbacher's pictures.»<sup>5</sup> And they render me none the wiser. I wander around because attention is demanded. The undergrowth crackles, one seems to have a notion of what lies behind the piles stacked by human hand. Foreboding starts to spread.

Level 2

«There is a stubble field on which a black rain falls.

There is a tree, which brown, stands lonely here.

There is a hissing wind, which haunts deserted huts –

How sad this evening.

[...]

Returning home

Shepherds found the sweet body

Decayed in the bramble bush.

[...]»

Georg Trakl, De profundis

A makeshift bridge warns us to move on in haste, change our viewpoint, climb higher and leave the usual museum pathway. Will we experience the desired pause in the expanses of space? Another torn deer in the branchwood, perhaps the friendly dog is snappy, the garbage stinks and to whom did the ball that hangs from a branch belong? Where are the outlaws hiding? Are homeless people living in this refuges? Or perhaps Heinrich Heine's wise for-

est spirits, «The mandrake men with short legs and long beards», who gave instruction in little acts of magic, the reading of the stars and signs, and how to bewitch a woodpecker with a whistle, as well as showing the fortunate few amongst us where treasures are buried?»<sup>6</sup>

Monet already advised his colleagues to leave their dark and dusty studios and paint amongst the greenery. In Giverny, he laid out his famous garden with water lilies and the Japanese bridge, which has become a tourist attraction. He painted his impressions of nature with great discipline and captured the light on the lilies and reflections in the water as they altered during the course of the day. In Giverny, the Parisian created a green paradise with great passion. The garden as the laboratory of the painter and an inspiring microcosmos for the artist.

Level 3

Gone

«Oh, lovely day! The trees would lean  
Vaulting aloft to form a green  
Triumphal arch – I marched around  
Feeling a conqueror, garland-crowned!»

Heinrich Heine, Forest Solitude

What the water lily garden was for Monet, is the forest for Mosbacher. In Sarah Estermann's foreword to instant edition #5, the artist refers to it as, «A highly complex matter.» Trees time and again, repeatedly the loneliness of the woods. Trakl breaks the neck of his horse in the forest, which is also the venue for some of the Grimm's most famous fairy tales. «The Wonderful Musician» plays while wandering through the woods alone and bored. He tricks the wolf, the fox and the hare, but is rescued by a woodcutter thanks to his magical fiddle playing. Hänsel und Gretel, two social cases, get lost in the forest and Red Riding Hood, everybody's darling, meets the big bad wolf under a nut hedge near three oaks. The forest becomes a place of survival, where people can hide, finally prove themselves, discover one another and mature. Both in fairy stories and Mosbacher's work, the trees and anxiety merge. Overcoming angst, which can extend to the fear of death, creates the genuine forest heroes and heroines.

#### Level 4

«In the woods there are the robbers, halli, hallo, the robbers.»

This song intones out of loudspeakers and a pretty girl and her mother-in-law are dispatched into the forest. The scurrilous text adaptation by the German singer Heino is based on an ancient folksong and it would appear that not even Robin Hood's merry men are what they once were. Those looking for a robber today are unlikely to find one in a forest, but rather in metro stations or other means of public transport. Once upon a time, settlers and outlaws inhabited the forests, not to forget Robin, the noblest of them all and an honest man of noble birth driven into illegality through fate and evil conspiracy. In Sherwood Forest, Robin Hood invented «wealth tax», robbing the rich and protecting the poor. He was the do-gooder, who was fated to always be an unrequited lover. For the forest must also be the home of tragedy.<sup>7</sup> The Robin Hoods in our climes, the poachers, mostly died in the woods having been shot in the back, as the stealing of game was seen as a serious crime by the ruling classes. At least in the German-language «Heimatfilms» this offence was always punished by death.

Robber tales, forest fairy stories and Mosbacher paintings always have least two sides. The miserable living conditions of the rural population meant that instead of achieving maturity and catharsis, law-abiding young men were turned into criminals who were forced to poach in order not to starve. Since 1998, a museum has been open in St. Pankraz in Upper Austria that is dedicated to the poachers of the alpine region. Matthias Klostermayr, the Bavarian «Hiasl» (18th century), and Georg Jennerwein, the «Girgl von Schliers» (19th century), were already legends in their own lifetimes. And as recently as 1948, an upstanding huntsman shot Leonhard Hörmannsdorfer, aka «Hartl», while he was poaching in the woods. Indeed, as a rule, poachers were not treated with kid gloves. The Bavarian «Hiasl» was publicly stangled, broken by a wheel, beheaded and quartered in Dillingen, while in 1877 «Girgl» was betrayed and shot from behind by a friend.<sup>8</sup> Finally, in 2013 the wealthy arsonist and spree killer, Alois Huber, «the Annaberg poacher» from Melk in Lower Austria first died by his own hand after murdering several policemen and a prolonged siege of his house. «Waidmanns (Un)heil». Good (bad) hunting. Mosbacher's luck. Accordingly, the ballads about poachers continue to nourish images and stories to this day.

People and dogs roaming around in the forest are dangerous per se and possibly aggressive. Therefore, are we not looking for indications of misdeeds in many of the pictures? Mosbacher's deer stare fixedly at the artist with the film camera. They do not know if a gamekeeper or a hunter is looking to immortalise them in a museum, for had this been in the wild they would already have been predestined to decorate the menus of gourmet restaurants. Those that search for a pastoral idyll in Mosbacher's work will be disappointed. Pictures that initially appear poetic and delicate are slowly infiltrated by unfinished, uncomfortable and unidentifiable elements. Mosbacher lends, «Irreality to powerful reality [...], which is placed under inverted commas.»<sup>9</sup> The artist's forest becomes a place for overcoming fear, an unsafe location where environmental sinners and the builders of illegal structures lacking planning permission carry out their nefarious deeds and young people hold conspiratorial gatherings or paintball sessions. Some of the pictures commence as a harmless introduction into the world of horror films and video games. In fact, since 2008 Mosbacher has been naming his series after computer game instructions: Bring Dynamism Into Play, Look for a Partner, Fetch Help...

In *Until Dawn*, a video game production that was published in 2013, eight teenagers enter the forest and die. The players assume the role of the teenagers, who had actually gone into the foggy woods around Mt. Washington to celebrate and chill-out. The plot then thickens as it must. The romantic weekend in the woods becomes a horror scenario. As opposed to Mosbacher's picture sequences, such films follow an identical pattern of half-naked, half-dead and stone dead. The blood-soaked climax in the forest is unavoidable. Indeed, the successful American film *The Blair Witch Project* produced in 1998, which thematised the threat in the depths of the woods, is very much in the tradition of the Brothers Grimm. However, while Grimm's heroes undergo a maturation process, in line with the prevailing zeitgeist phenomenon, the film ends in suitably gruesome fashion. All the students, who have ventured into the woods in the cause of research become victims of the imaginary witch from Blair and teeter on the edge of a psychological collapse.

Mosbacher calls his «players», who for preference are seen from the back, walkers, investigators and shooters. The artist has painterly sympathy and fashionable names such as Larp (live action role playing), Alb or Falle ready for the «Hiasls» and «Loisls», the misfits with their refuse tips and illegal buildings. He regards his game characters as a painterly problem and trigger. His private



mythology appears to be paradoxical, poetic and ecological, while pure painting rules in his «domesticated» forests with their hideaways and chaotic interiors. As if in a trance, timeless and lost in a reverie, the artist returns to his self-analytical pictures. Unsettling and simultaneously seductive, «He paints things as they are»<sup>10</sup>, which is very much the case in his titular work *Furnishing the Wilderness*. A bed, a cooking pot, an old fax machine, a kitsch standard lamp and a nesting box lie in the undergrowth. Above and below, bound, stockpiled and stacked branches with a pair of blue trainers in front. In the large format (working) drawing *Aftermath 1* from 2009, an inquisitive sheep stands on the bed. The everyday would seem to be enlarged or reduced in scale, the proportions irritate and play an important role in the overall concept. What is illustrated appears far removed, but nonetheless familiar and certainly unfinished. A hiding-place for people or animals, but not a Wendy or a tree house. However, unreservedly splendid painting. Has the sheep secretly crept out of the painting? Will it sneak its way through the large gallery? Has it concealed itself behind the trees, or under the Monet-like makeshift bridge, to lie in wait for the visitors to the museum? Pictures without people/animals are disturbing. There are relicts throughout the forest, but no trace of the inhabitants. The world in the forest is far from healthy.

#### Level 5

Avoid standing under the ball.

One has barely crossed the bridge, which in its simplicity is reminiscent of a military Bailey bridge, when the outlook and insights change. Higher viewpoints create fresh perspectives. Mosbacher has solved the problematic design of the LENTOS gallery by means of a sizeable portion of tension. The width and scale of the room is recognisable and the space, which is illuminated with daylight, triggers an emotional «Wow!» At the very back, after the painted forest full of trees, one discovers a massive branch. A find, a natural masterpiece surmounted by a red basketball, which has become entangled in the branches. Gravity would seem to have been suspended. Who threw the ball into the museum? Is that permitted within its hallowed halls? A visit to the museum could be dangerous. A ball, which can be played with joyfully, can also cause damage. Want to bet that it won't fall? The branch is real and dried, but could nonetheless break. Timber is more yielding than woodenheads.

#### Level 6

«The woods suggest listening.»

Hermann Hesse

In Mosbacher's case, one has to be ready for an exploration of a diversity of formats in unusual hangings. Huge, combined canvases in restrained colours are presented, not at respectable distances or in rows, but rather as objects that float to and fro, suspended from the light-flooded ceiling. Other works stand out in contrast to the wall and appear to invade the hall and disrupt its space. While still more slim tree trunks, several sections of which have been joined, lean nonchalantly at something of an angle, as if the installation team had left their work half-done and forgotten to attach the arboreal pictures to the wall. An old furniture cabinet secured by imaginary screw clamps, tips surrealistically out of the frame of its own picture. And in the middle, as if by accident, the visitor discovers branches with a variety of skins and barks that repeatedly approach one another. Mosbacher has thought out and planned all the views and nothing in the spatial planning has been left to chance. The stroll through the LENTOS forest is dreamlike with a before, an inbetween, an after and an above.

#### Level 7

«All knowledge, the totality of all questions and all answers is contained in the dog.»

Franz Kafka

The tracks of a dog, which is forbidden to enter the museum forest, lead us to a retrieving, possibly abandoned, quadruped that does not appear to be particularly wild. Instead it proudly presents us with its stick in a trusting, goggle-eyed manner. Nonetheless, like another favourite Mosbacher motif, the beehive, the dog causes a sense of unease. Hunters are permitted to shoot a stray without warning, while wasps' and hornets' nests, as well as beehives, are removed professionally by the fire services. Mosbacher has been concerned with beehives since 1984 and started to portray dogs in 2000. His mongrels are often far removed from any pedigree, but possess personality. They pose skilfully like models on the catwalk, as in the Beam me up, Scotty show from 2012, which was held in the Galerie Altnöder in Salzburg.

Here the dogs were surrounded by some of the grand masters of art history with works by Cranach, Holbein, Dürer, Altdorfer, van Eyck and Rubens in the background. They sit quietly and still in front of knights, death and the devil, the lovable four-legged friends with that devotional, puppy-like charm. The dogs defend, fetch and obediently obey commands without barking or slobbering. They look straight at the museum visitors and win their affection. They are ironic and amusing personalities for whom nothing human is unusual. Mosbacher likes to «stroll through art history»<sup>11</sup> and his dogs, sheep, song birds and other feathered creatures such as geese and hens, capture the canvases and take the hearts of the public by storm. There are the innocents and the goofs, the brave and the cowardly, the comedians, the noble and the wild, the immodest and the modest. This is a single topic with a wealth of variations; the animals furnishing the artist with a pretext for brilliant painting. However, he certainly does not wish to be classified as a master of dog and animal painting.<sup>12</sup> In fact the animals serve as «keyword providers» and are actually «artistic vehicles for access to the picture.»<sup>13</sup>

#### Level 8

«A hollow tree, once split by thunder. Of forgotten time.  
Nevertheless, still green its branches. »

Georg Heym, The Forest

Sturm is the name of a painting that shows burst trunks and new shoots adjacent to and behind an untouched birch. This simple work offers a great many associations. «Onwards, onwards to destruction. We must live until we die. Humans don't belong in the sky.»<sup>14</sup> And people certainly have no business in the wilderness. The LENTOS as a wildland park with ambushes and underbrush in the backwoods. Once again, I am stuck in a story. In a cul-de-sac. Therefore, back to the pictures! Mosbacher's nature is simply a subterfuge for painting. He seeks to avoid content charged with meaning. Lines, patterns and rhythms spread perfectly across the surface of the image, an invitation for forms to dance, the binding of the wildness of the charcoal and pencil strokes with white cord, the abstraction of images. In reality, the real issue is the fineness of the line, dynamic brushstrokes, the harmonisation of colour nuances, the richness of tone-in-tone painting, the avoidance of excessive professional representationalism and precision, painterly fragility and a free interplay of forms and colours.

«People do not belong in the wilderness,  
that is against nature.

People belong in a flat on a sofa.»

Band Kreisky, from the album Blick auf die Alpen, March 2014

ESCAPE! GAME OVER! Enter the exhibition!

- <sup>1</sup> <http://www.hfg-karlsruhe.de/vorlesungsverzeichnis/ws-20132014>, seminar Prof. Anja Dorn, «My Medium is the Exhibition!» Artists as exhibition designers and curators, March 17, 2014.
- <sup>2</sup> Günther Holler-Schuster, "Beam me up, Scotty", travels through art history with Alois Mosbacher, [www.galerie-altnoeder.com](http://www.galerie-altnoeder.com), private viewing July/August 2012.
- <sup>3</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, A Conversation with Alois Mosbacher, in: Günther Holler-Schuster (Ed.), «outside fiction. Alois Mosbacher», cat. Neue Galerie Graz, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010, p. 138 f.
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p. 142.
- <sup>5</sup> Konrad Tobler, Die Hütte. Vorsicht. Nur zu! Les règles du jeu – Bilderregeln, in: Günther Holler-Schuster (Ed.), «outside fiction. Alois Mosbacher», cat. Neue Galerie Graz, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010, p. 128.
- <sup>6</sup> Heinrich Heine, from: «Waldeinsamkeit».
- <sup>7</sup> Gernot Wüschner and Bastian Obermayer, Bayerische Staatsforsten, [http://www.baysf.de/de/home/unternehmen\\_wald/aktuelles/detailansicht/browse/1/article/245/im-wald-da-sind-die-raeuber.html](http://www.baysf.de/de/home/unternehmen_wald/aktuelles/detailansicht/browse/1/article/245/im-wald-da-sind-die-raeuber.html), March 17, 2014.
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.wilderermuseum.at/sonderausstellungen/2008>, March 17, 2014.
- <sup>9</sup> Maia Damianovic, Einer starken Realität Irrealität verleihen, in: «Alois Mosbacher ...die Blume, die Leiter...», cat. Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna 1997, p. 27.
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p. 28.
- <sup>11</sup> Reinhard Kriechbaum, Äußerln gehen durch die Kunstgeschichte, in: DrehPunktKultur, Die Salzburger Kulturzeitung im Internet, exhibition Alois Mosbacher, Galerie Altnöder, Salzburg, August 1, 2012.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> Stephan Maier, sitz Malerei, sitz!, in: artmagazine.cc, online Kunstzeitung, article about the exhibition «Alois Mosbacher – Beam me up, Scotty», Galerie Altnöder, Salzburg, 20.7.2012-15.9.2012.
- <sup>14</sup> Song text Dalai Lama, Lyrics Rammstein, 2004, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9aeoQ-Hs3Y>, March 21, 2014.