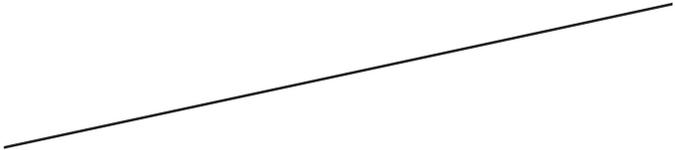


KUNSTMUSEUM THUN



ERNST RAMSEIER: KOPFLANDSCHAFTEN (HEADSCAPES) 6.3. – 16.5.2021

ENGLISH

INTRODUCTION

A paint box with high-quality paints that the artist found in his father's attic as a young man was the spark that ignited his artistic career. The almost fateful discovery led to a preoccupation with art that would ultimately lead to recognition and success. The name Ernst Ramseier is probably known to many today. His mosaics and stained glass windows adorn a number of churches, public squares, entryways and stairways. Most of them can be found here in our region, but the artist also worked on projects beyond the canton and even outside Switzerland. The Kunstmuseum Thun is dedicating a large-scale retrospective to the recently deceased artist, picking up the thread of the last solo show of Ramseier's work in 1993 to provide a chronological survey of his forty-year career. On view alongside selected woodcuts from the museum's own collection are expressive oil paintings from the artist's estate, some of them never before seen in public. Graphic works such as New Year's cards as well as poetry round off this in-depth insight into Ramseier's diverse oeuvre.

BIOGRAPHY

Ernst Ramseier (1936–2020) was a painter, graphic artist, wood engraver and poet. Born in Langnau im Emmental, he already developed a consuming interest in painting and literature while still at school. Despite his career goal of becoming an architectural draughtsman, however, he began a commercial apprenticeship in a notary's office in Spiez. In his spare time he painted, focusing mainly on motifs from his surroundings: the landscape, the busy streets of Thun, and views of the castle hill. The young painter liked to give away his work to relatives, friends and well-known figures. His growing enthusiasm and passion for art eventually prompted Ramseier to abandon his apprenticeship and embark on an artistic career. An autodidact, he learned his craft by studying the artworks at museums and galleries, taking advice from fellow artists, and drawing inspiration from his travels. His wife, Trudi, with whom he moved to Krattigen shortly after they wed in 1956, encouraged him in his painting. He also received support in particular from the Thun circle of artists including Roman Tschabold, Etienne Clare, Knud Jacobsen, Paul Gmünder, Hans Ittig, Willi Waber, Fritz Bütikofer and Emil von Gunten, who joined forces to open Thun's first art gallery, the Galerie Aarequai, in 1958. Ramseier exhibited there for the first time in 1961. Numerous public and private commissions would follow.

Ramseier received two grants for his artistic work (from the Kiefer Hablitzel Foundation in 1965 and from the Louise Aeschlimann and Margareta Corti Foundation in 1973) and participated in shows at venues including the Galerie in der Kramgasse in Bern (1973), the Galerie Aarequai in Thun (1961, 1971, 1974, 1978), the Manoir de la Ville de

Martigny (1978), the Galerie Art + Vision in Bern (2001), and in both a solo (1993) and a group exhibition (2017) at the Kunstmuseum Thun.

The artist died in Krattigen in February 2020.

REPRESENTING A SUBJECTIVE WORLD OF EXPERIENCE

Ernst Ramseier's works have a poetic air, telling of his experiences and evoking myriad associations. This is a mode of depiction that compels the viewer to reflect. The artist masterfully captures on canvas and paper his own personal life world. His striking pictorial language is reduced, matter-of-fact and observant, and yet at the same time conveys to the viewer a remarkable profundity, suggesting a hidden message that is more palpable than directly visible. His poetry, which the artist released in small, self-published volumes, often illustrated with a few woodcuts, may likewise seem laconic, stark and even simplistic at first. And yet it soon becomes apparent that his concise descriptions of moments in time are charged with emotions and connotations that open up a whole world to the reader.

"Whatever you read or look at by him grants you an encounter with the man Ernst Ramseier and all he holds dear."¹

The numerous New Year's cards [1] the artist meticulously crafted reveal much about his nature. By upholding the tradition of sending annual New Year's greetings, he not only remained true to his old habit of giving away pictures;

OVERVIEW





Ernst Ramseier in his studio in Krattigen while making a printing block, July 1993.
© Christian Helmle

Ramseier also used the cards to express his appreciation to people who were important to him.

WOODCUTS

Ramseier's haunting woodcuts brought him great acclaim. As a member of XYLON – International Society of Wood Engravers, the artist was able to bring his work to the attention of an international audience. During an early study trip to the south of France with fellow artists Etienne Clare and Knud Jacobsen, Ramseier first came into contact with the woodcut technique for relief printing. The late summer countryside around Albi with the typical broad fields of the region inspired his first motifs, with woodcuts by famous Expressionists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Ignaz Epper and Emil Nolde serving as models.

The woodcut technique demands both craftsmanship and artistic skill. The individual steps – from the idea, through the design and production of the printing block, to the finished print – enable the artist to make his own decisions throughout the process. In addition, the very nature of a woodcut entails focusing on essentials. These qualities appealed to Ramseier and he thus saw this technique as an ideal way to express his own subjective impressions and related associations artistically.

Looking at the artist's oil paintings, his virtuoso navigation between filling the canvas and leaving empty space as well as the compactness and reserved presence of the motifs inevitably recall the look of woodcuts. In his colour palette as well, he often uses a combination of achromatic shades and strong colour groups. Only the alternation between dynamic brushwork and smoothly painted monochrome surfaces is unique to the paintings and can be found again and again in the artist's painterly oeuvre,

used as a way to create additional tension. The compositions nevertheless make an immensely harmonious and balanced impression, since the eye, though immediately drawn to the dynamic brushstrokes, simultaneously finds calm in the large monochrome planes.

SINGLE FIGURES AND FIGURAL GROUPS

In particular when depicting people, Ramseier does not place his motifs, whether his characteristic individual figures or densely packed groups, in the centre of the picture but rather relegates them to the edges. Moreover, he often embeds his figures in deserted landscapes, or sets them in abandoned squares. The role of the silent observer, which the artist himself liked to assume, is unmistakably accentuated. Ramseier's images of people thus often seem to beckon to viewers to enter the scene and experience for themselves what is depicted. The painter in a sense casts himself here in the role of a stranger whose sudden intrusion onto the scene has caused the depicted figures to look up in irritation. This introduces a humorous perceptual game in which the viewers become voyeurs but at the same time come under observation themselves. The painting *Hoher Besuch* (An Important Visitor, 1992) [2] presents a vivid example of this interplay: the figures in the painting look viewers directly in the eye, making them feel like they themselves are the "important visitors". At the same time, however, the glances also convey astonishment at the voyeuristic intrusion.

3 SELF-PORTRAIT, 1977

In Ramseier's *Self-Portrait*, orange and blue contrast with black, white and grey. Only the soft pink of the jumper provides a transition between the bright colours and the more

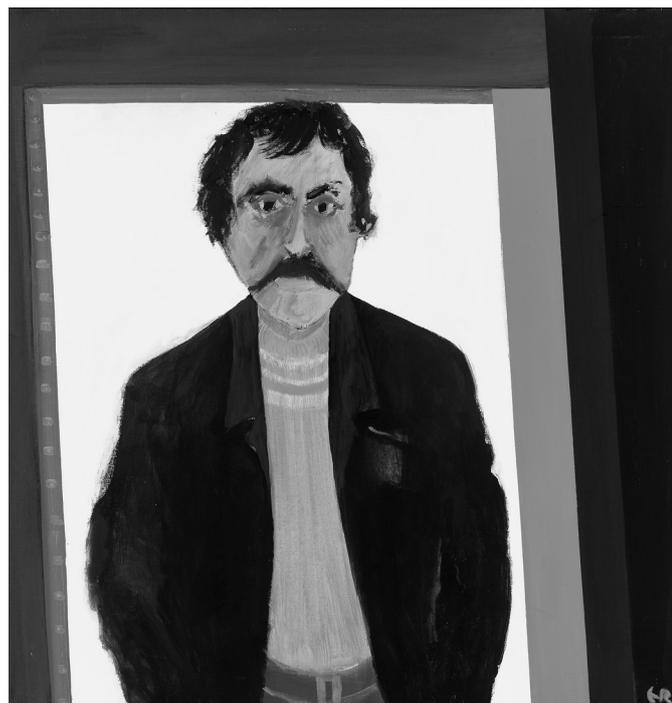
tranquil, timeless tones. In this painting Ramseier seems to slip completely into the role of one of his figures. With a self-assured air, he gazes out directly at the viewer. Geometric shapes and bars, recurring elements in his work, frame his likeness, making it look like a picture within a picture, or like a glance in the mirror, a self-portrait of a self-portrait. In this way, the artist's quiet sense of humour suddenly comes to the fore, which contrasts with the apparent sobriety of his depictions and, in the *Self-Portrait*, mischievously contradicts the serious expression on the painter's face.

4 SPÄTE HEIMKEHR (LATE HOMECOMING), 2007

The oil painting provides an example of the unusual pictorial structure that is so characteristic of Ernst Ramseier's work. Is the nocturnal village the focus here, or rather the figures? Contemplating the empty street and the dark façades of houses that line it, you feel as though you are being watched by the figures. They look straight out of the canvas with a peculiar mixture of apathy and astonishment. "Have we met?" they seem to ask. It feels a bit like being caught gawking. Are they expecting a certain reaction, or are they just waiting for us to turn our gaze away again so that they can continue undisturbed on their way home?

5 KOPFLANDSCHAFTEN (HEADSCAPES), undated

The work series *Kopflandschaften*, for which the exhibition is named, consists of ten woodcuts – nine portraits and a title page. The similarity between the women and the men depicted is striking, tempting us to assume that the artist has portrayed here a single female and male sitter in different moods and poses. With virtuosity, Ramseier breathes life into these for the most part crudely depicted figures by using small "hatchings" to evoke whiskers, wrinkles, eyelashes and sometimes tears. The sequence of portraits seems almost like a continuing conversation,



Ernst Ramseier, *Self-Portrait*, 1977, dispersion on canvas, 105 × 108.5 cm, Kunstmuseum Thun. Photo: Christian Helmle

with viewers left to imagine the topics discussed. The use of the words "head" and "landscape" in the title imaginatively conveys this fiction. Thus the stories that Ramseier artistically expresses through the subjects' facial expressions and gestures become, in a certain sense, landscapes of subjective worlds of thought.

6 STEHPLÄTZE (STANDING ROOM), 1975

The work *Stehplätze* (1975) is a prime example of the reserved humour that often suffuses Ramseier's imagery. Contrary to expectations, the focus here is entirely on the crowd of spectators rather than the event they are apparently watching. We cannot even see what it is that has attracted their attention. Perhaps the picture can be viewed as an instance of witty revenge taken by the figures: the viewers who normally gaze at what is happening in the picture have obviously been declared to themselves be the main attraction. In this way, the depiction partakes in reality and the present moment becomes a pictorial motif.

7 DIE GLÄUBIGEN (THE FAITHFUL), 1973–1975

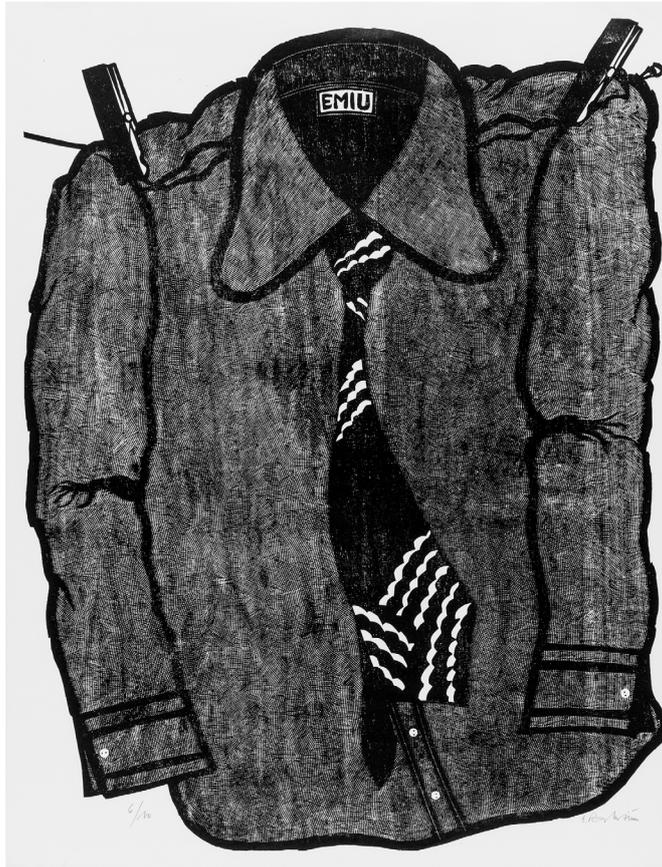
Ernst Ramseier evidently attached great importance to the titles of his works. They not only succinctly describe the respective subject but often provide clues to certain associations that can unlock the deeper meaning of the image. The title *Die Gläubigen* (1973–1975) toys with the viewer's perception, immediately directing the eye to the hands of the figure in front, which are folded as if in prayer. The title and gesture then invite further interpretations. The triangular arrangement of the small group of people might for example be understood as an allusion to the Holy Trinity. The upwardly directed, beseeching gazes of the figures likewise point to something divine, something that does not physically exist. Who or what Ramseier's faithful are addressing, however, remains open. They seem utterly amidst the shadowy picture plane, a darkness that conveys a feeling of mourning and emptiness. The artist seems to be concerned here not so much with the divine per se but rather with the meaning and effect of faith. The staggered group of figures thus takes on a transcendental air, becoming a metaphor for the support and strength to be found in faith.

LANDSCAPES AND TRAVEL PICTURES

Apart from art, Ernst Ramseier's favourite pastime was fly fishing, which he did with his father as a young boy. Fishing took him from the Ilfis River to the Aare and to Lake Thun in Switzerland, and further afield to Canada and the Balkans. Ramseier loved to travel. His landscape paintings in particular often document his various trips.

8 BOSTONER (BOSTONIANS), 1996

In contrast to the work *Lagerhalle* (Warehouse, 2006) [9], in which the American flag clearly identifies the setting, here the only clue to the location, or at least the origin of the group of figures depicted, is the title. In typical Ramseier style they are massed together at the lower edge of the picture while the sky takes up nearly two-thirds of the painting surface. The isolated puffs of cloud steer the viewer's gaze toward the centre of the picture and out over the vast ocean, into the seemingly infinite distance. But the expectant looks on the faces of the Bostonians then draws the eyes back to the beach. It almost seems as if they were posing for a group picture. This has the effect of making viewers part of the scene as they either see things through the eyes of the painter or take on the role of the photographer.



Ernst Ramseier, *EMIU*, o. D., woodcut on paper, edition 6/10, 110 x 84 cm, Kunstmuseum Thun. Photo: Christian Helmle

10 HERBSTGARTEN AM THUNERSEE (AUTUMN GARDEN ON LAKE THUN), 1996

The work *Herbstgarten am Thunersee* (1996) immediately catches the eye, and not only due to its colourfulness. Compared to the artist's other paintings, the composition here seems rather atypical, almost overloaded. The picture shows a landscape divided in the middle ground by a wooden fence demarcating a garden. Two trees obscure the view of the lake and mountains beyond. Colourful autumn leaves are a glaring reminder of the warm season that will soon give way to the cold, achromatic winter. Summer's last stand. Only the figure in the foreground, pushed as usual right to the edge, echoes Ramseier's characteristic composition strategy.

11 AUFKOMMENDER ABENDNEBEL ÜBER DEM BRIENZERSEE (EVENING MIST RISING OVER LAKE BRIENZ), 1977

Instead of an imposing mountain panorama with a view over Lake Brienz, the painter shows us only the rising mist. We can just vaguely make out the mountain formations on the far side of the lake. The focus lies squarely on the small, snow-covered chalet in the foreground and the two mighty evergreens that protectively embrace it. Trees are a recurring motif in Ernst Ramseier's oeuvre. He imbues them with symbolism, ranging from the dreariness of a winter-bare tree to the playful lightness of springtime blossoms. In this painting, the two imposing fir trees towering high above the lake into the cloudy sky recall the words of Hermann Hesse: "In their highest boughs the world rustles, their roots rest in infinity."²

STILL LIFES

Like his other works, Ernst Ramseier's still lifes are distinguished by unusual compositions that make familiar things seem somehow alien and peculiar to us.

12 EMIU, UNDATED

The woodcut shows a shirt hung on a line with clothespins, an image that immediately evokes associations with laundry and cleanliness, and perhaps the removal of stains. A perfectly ordinary motif, and yet something is off. Why is the shirt buttoned up and why is it furnished with a carefully knotted tie when it is apparently freshly washed and hanging on a clothesline? What at first seemed like an everyday motif suddenly seems to reverse subject and object. The body we can imagine without shirt and tie remains invisible, and the shirt, which should be hanging there limp and lifeless without a body inside, seems instead to be alive, inhabited, strangely free and self-determined.

13 BLUMEN (BLAU) (FLOWERS [BLUE]), 1987

Contemplating the work *Blumen (blau)* from 1987, we are instantly struck by the contrasts that literally permeate the oil painting. The rich colours of the flowers and leaves contrast sharply with the monochrome background. The vase and the table are furthermore painted in a reserved style compared to the bouquet. Also striking here are the geometric forms, something often seen in the artist's oeuvre. In this case, leaves become bars, flowers are circles and sometimes even triangles, and the vase clearly takes the form of a cylinder. The bouquet as a whole also has a circular shape. And yet its outlines still follow the curved forms of the individual flowers and leaves, while the lines running through the pictorial space are straight and clearly discernible.



Ernst Ramseier, *Flowers (blue)*, 1987, oil on canvas, 33.5 × 33 cm, artist's estate. Photo: Christian Helmle.

Through overlaps and particularly the shading of the vase, the painter creates an impression of depth. It is only the colours of the bouquet that the viewer may find irritating. It almost seems as if the bouquet is not only composed of flowers and foliage but also adorned with small flags. These shapes can also be found in other floral still lifes Ramseier painted. *Verblüht* (Wilted, 1987) [14] also shows a bouquet of flowers against a monochrome background. Comparing the two works side by side vividly reveals the painter's talents. Although he chose expressive colours for the bouquets in both still lifes, he is still able to capture the flowers' origins as natural plants. While the flowers in the first painting are in splendid bloom, they appear wilted in the second image. The painter achieves this impression by obviously mixing in white. This dims the saturated colours, which, despite the unnatural appearance of the motif, inevitably evokes the theme of transience.

15 STILLEBEN MIT BLUME (STILL LIFE WITH FLOWER), 1983

If one disregards the dates of the works mentioned above, *Still Life with Flower* (1983) might seem like a logical next step on the path to abstraction. In this picture as well, Ramseier combines natural motifs with geometric forms. The fruits in the foreground seem unusually out of place, although they are exactly what make us think here of a classical still life. The other carefully arranged objects are perplexing. We can't help trying to identify things we know in the depicted forms, something we can name, define, understand. The title encourages us in our search for familiar objects, veritably bringing it to a head by mentioning a flower, which, try as we might, we cannot see here. Without further ado, we then assign the label "flower" to the vague yellow form, as it looks more like what we associate with a flower than any of the other objects. Ramseier is doubtlessly toying with the viewer's perception here, making us aware of our natural need to search for and recognise familiar shapes.

The works are for sale (information at the reception).

- 1 Peter J. Betts (2003), in *Schalttag. Lyrik mit fünf Holzschnitten* (Bern, 2004), unpaginated.
- 2 Hermann Hesse (1919): *Wandering: Notes and Sketches*, trans. James Wright (New York, 1972).

LAUFLEBEN

Den ersten Schrei
tat ich in Langnau
erhielt auf Lebenszeit
eine AHV-Nummer
wurde Emmentaler
Berner
Schweizer
bin Bürger
von Trub

Mein frisches Dasein
benötigte allerdings
die Intervention
meines einarmigen
Grossvaters
mütterlicherseits
damit Pfarrer Gygax
1936 zu Langnau
an mir die Taufe
vornahm

Ich wurde etwas
verspätet Christ

Seitdem bin ich
ein Liebling
Helvetiens
Die Ämter kennen mich
ihre Rechnungen
kommen periodisch
wie das Amen
in der Kirche

Für sie bin ich
ein dankbarer Bürger
denn meine Arbeiten
machen das Überleben
der Rechnungsschreiber
erst möglich

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