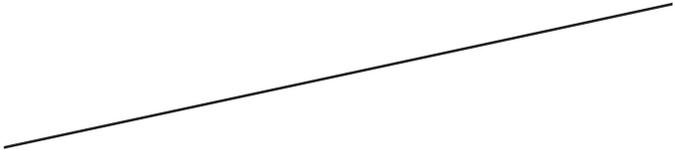


# KUNSTMUSEUM THUN



## RENÉ MYRHA. UN UNIVERS SINGULIER 12.2. – 1.5.2022

### ENGLISH

#### INTRODUCTION

The vibrantly coloured worlds created by the artist René Myrha (born 1939 in Delémont, lives and works in Les Breuleux in the Jura region) range from still lifes to landscapes and architectural depictions to complex figural compositions. A penchant for toying with various levels of reality runs through the artist's entire oeuvre. René Myrha frequently breaches the line between interior and exterior, between stage and image, and ultimately also the threshold between the viewer's space and picture space, in order to probe them anew.

This exhibition takes up one of our collection's core focuses: Swiss Pop Art. René Myrha began his career in the early 1960s, when this art movement was just emerging, and proceeded to craft his own singular artistic universe, which is presented here in the first comprehensive overview in nearly thirty years. The retrospective enables the main phases in the artist's development to be traced from his early works to the present day. A special emphasis is placed on how the paintings and graphic art relate to the artist's lesser-known three-dimensional objects.

#### ENTERING THE ARTIST'S UNIVERSE (GALLERY G)

In the work group *Portes* (from 1969), painted doors open onto a world defined by strong, flat colours. The door becomes a figurative threshold where interior and exterior meet – a metaphor that has long preoccupied artists. In René Myrha's case, the question is not only where the door leads but also where it is coming from. Through this strategy of referring back to the real world, René Myrha integrates the space in front of the picture into his composition. The stylised landscapes that unfurl in the pictorial space behind the door combine elements of nature, architecture and design, constituting aesthetic reflections of their time of origin. They demonstrate the circumstances under which the (urban) landscape and its immediate life realities found their way into art in the early 1970s and the aspects that shaped that period's visual approach to the world. Through the clichéd depiction of landscape fragments such as rainbows, clouds, mountains, rivers and trees, René Myrha's landscape pictures summon analogies with advertising billboards, mass media and reproduction graphics.

Also of note in the images in the *Portes* series is the pronounced central perspective. This allows the artist to lend the pictured objects a strong spatial quality while drawing the eye into the depths of the pictorial space, which, however, remains a deserted backdrop.

#### COLOUR AND PLANE AS SPACE (GALLERY H)

Organic waves contrast with hard straight lines. The fields thus created are painted in flat, unmodulated bright hues. In terms of motif, still lifes reminiscent of Cubism are joined by landscapes, all of the images highly stylised and, with the exception of a few representational set pieces, almost abstract. Wide bands of colour in alternating shades appear in nearly all the works from this period. They call to mind striped awnings, but they sometimes also become roads, rivers or rainbows in René Myrha's hands.

René Myrha's works dating from the mid-1960s onwards were influenced by the emergence of Pop Art, which spread from the USA and Great Britain to Europe. Spurred on by the buoyant spirit of the post-war "Economic Miracle" years and by technical progress, art now embraced the same loud and flamboyant aesthetic used in the figurative visual language of advertising and magazines to appeal to mainstream society.

As a trained graphic artist, René Myrha was well-versed in advertising strategies and the printing techniques that were essential for Pop Art. His three-dimensional multimedia *Art-Moires* are arguably his most characteristic contribution to the Pop Art style. The title of this object group is derived from the French terms for art and cabinet (*armoire*)

– they are art cabinets. For the surfaces of the wooden structures, René Myrha used novel synthetic materials from the consumer world of the 1960s and 70s such as polystyrene, nitro spray and acetates. Inside, Styrofoam elements were arranged into topography-like reliefs and spray-painted in monochromatic tones. Through these works, the artist was able to convey his own reflections on the optical effects of interior versus interior, surface versus depth, and space versus form, exercising his entire repertoire of technical skills to create the three-dimensional objects.

#### REAL-WORLD REFERENCES (GALLERY I)

All of a sudden, René Myrha's universe became animated. Diverse creatures now populated his worlds. The works took on a lyrical and narrative feeling, seeking to tell a story, while René Myrha continued to play with various spatial planes. In retrospect, he would have to say that his non-figural works unconsciously prepared the ground for the arrival of such protagonists in his oeuvre. In his figure paintings of the 1980s and 90s, the artist displayed his talent as a stage director of fantasy spaces imbued with a surreal atmosphere. He places his often gender-neutral actors in situations in which they can take on a symbolic or allegorical role in order to unfold their enigmatic spectacle. Absurd and fascinating constellations are the result. In the painting *Atelier III* (1997), an artist in the foreground paints a bird's head onto the head of a woman standing next to him, while in the gallery space behind them a row of similar masked hybrid creatures can be seen.

#### OVERVIEW





Work table from René Myrha (Photo: Pierre Montavon)

René Myrha's introduction of figures into his works was accompanied by a new artistic technique. He began in the 1990s to work with tracing paper, which he still uses today. The tracing paper allows him to integrate individual set pieces into the overall composition by overlaying them with further drawings. In this way, he can transfer his figures or fragments from one work to another so that they can appear in a new constellation, on a new stage. He also began during this period to cut out rooms and figures from cardboard and lightweight foam sheets with an x-acto knife and arrange them as reliefs or small scenic images to form a backdrop. To call these works sculptures would probably be misleading. Rather, they are spatially staggered planes that do not have a sculptural effect per se but which do flirt with the third dimension.

Even in these narrative works, the artist is not concerned with an exact imitation of reality. "I don't have a penchant for hyperrealism; I'd rather express myself through poetry and imagination," says René Myrha. And yet the references to the real world (a recent group of works is titled *Rapport au monde*) are nevertheless important, because René Myrha's imagination feeds on what is happening all around him. His works deal with his own subjective experience, transferred to paper or canvas and overlaid atop what is happening in the world outside – whether the moon landing, pollution or the current pandemic (e.g. *Confinés*, 2020).

#### SHADOW THEATRE (GALLERY J)

Last but not least, this series of black-and-white collages and reliefs shows in condensed form that René Myrha is quite literally first and foremost a draughtsman: "I look for beauty in drawing, an impression I try to transfer as skilfully as possible to cut shapes." Even in his paintings, all elements are clearly defined by sharp outlines. And there are also passages in which he firmly renounces the colourfulness of painting and instead works in grisaille. This can lead only to a reduction to black-and-white or to silhouettes. Here, René Myrha pits the painter against his own shadow (*L'école des peintres I*, 2010) and thus addresses the simplest imaging process of all, as well as an origin myth of painting: the projection of light and shadow onto a surface.

## BIOGRAPHY

René Myrha was born René Pagnard in Delémont in 1939. After training as a graphic designer at the School of Applied Arts in Bienne and several stays in Paris (where he adopted his artist name), he worked in the advertising department of CIBA in Milan in the early 1960s. In 1963 he settled in Basel, where he continued to pursue his artistic career. In 1969 he met Rémy Zaugg, with whom he ran a print studio in Basel and collaborated closely for several years. René Myrha has lived and worked in Les Breuleux since 1985.

He has been awarded numerous prizes, including for his graphic portfolio *L'Avventura*, which was chosen in 1961 as one of the Most Beautiful Swiss Books. In 1972 he received the Kiefer-Hablitzel Prize as well as the Swiss Art Award, followed in 1980 by an award at the 8th Biennial of European Graphic Art in Mulhouse. In the 1980s and 90s, René Myrha was able to realise various architectural art projects, and he also designed stage sets and costumes for operas and musicals on several occasions, including for the Erfurt production of the Wagner opera *Parsifal* in 2006. René Myrha's works are represented in prominent public collections including the Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau; Kunstmuseum Basel, Department of Prints and Drawings; Nationalbibliothek Bern; Musée jurassien des arts, Moutier; Musée d'art et d'histoire, Neuchâtel; Kunstmuseum Thun.

To accompany the exhibition, Hirmer Verlag is publishing the extensive catalogue "René Myrha: A Singular Universe" in German, English and French, with a foreword by Helen Hirsch, Director of the Kunstmuseum Thun, and texts by Rose-Marie Pagnard and Isabel Zürcher. Design: Bonsma & Reist. ISBN 978-3-7774-3899-3

## EVENTS (SELECTED)

Sunday, 27 February, 15 – 17 a.m., Exhibition visit with workshop for adults (from 15 years)

Break out of the second dimension! We paint and compose a 3D relief picture. With Regula Brassel, cost: CHF 20.– (CHF 10.– with Kulturlegi)

Sunday, 3 April, 11:15 a.m., Tour in dialogue  
With René Myrha and Helen Hirsch,  
Director, admission price includes guided tour.

For further information and events, please visit our website [kunstmuseumthun.ch](http://kunstmuseumthun.ch)

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