

ON VIEW: SEPTEMBER 17 – OCTOBER 31, 2026

OPENING RECEPTION: THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 6 - 8 PM

GALLERY TWO

Leopold Strobl: Underneath

Imagine a world where woods, mountains, houses, buildings, cities and villages, roads, meadows, beaches, lakes and oceans exist in complete stillness; a silence so profound that it makes shapes and colors glow with almost spiritual intensity. This world is both familiar and eerie; constantly intercepted (and strangely enhanced) with the startling presence of densely rendered graphite formations—resembling boulders, mountain peaks, waves, pods, and prehistoric eggs. Each work by Leopold Strobl is a new window to this mysterious place; an invitation into the mind of its creator and a journey of individual discovery.

Strobl was born in Mistelbach, Lower Austria in 1960. He has been devoted to art since his early twenties, but the visual language for which he is known only developed in the last ten years. He works almost every day, beginning in the early hours of the morning and completing one drawing daily. The drawings remain deliberately small in scale; none in this exhibition measures more than 4 3/8 × 5 3/8 inches; they come to the artist as little visual epiphanies and strike the viewer with this poetic immediacy.

The artist's process is a seamless, multilayered appropriation and alteration of a photographic foundation. It starts with combing through the local newspapers for evocative images that will lend themselves to the transformation that is to come. Strobl then scissors these images out of their original context and backs them with thick drawing paper. Strobl's compositions are generally encased in a drawn internal frame that is either very subtle (delicately enclosing each scene with rounded corners) or partially amorphous, covering large areas like a spill or a flood. Depending on the disposition of the underlying clip, he traces over certain outlines—topographic features, horizon lines, architectural details, winding perspectival lines—and if there are figurative elements that don't fit into the artist's vision, he envelops them in graphite, like an insect spinning a cocoon, or a minimalist reducing a representational image into a basic shape.

What might have been firefighters approaching a burning building, a train speeding full steam ahead, an observation booth in the middle of the forest, an animal in the middle of the road, or a group portrait, all become petrified, ghostly presences in Strobl's realm. It is, however, more a process of incorporation than one of elimination: the shapes remain heavy with the figures they have covered, with the motion they have frozen, and the "noise" they have silenced, but they become conduits that merge any trace of human narrative into the landscape that it once sustained. A "classic" Strobl work, elegant in both execution and subject, will often feature shrouded human figures literally transformed into a graphite topography: lone peaks or sinuous curves against luminous green-blue skies. He is a perceptive colorist and imbues his world with shades of green, gray, yellow, blue, and ivory white—blending and layering pigment onto large areas with an eye toward the existing texture and light in the underlying photograph—so that ultimately, we don't know where the artist's touch ends and the found image begins.

Strobl is a tall stout man with a wizard's beard and big eyes that look mint-green or turquoise depending on the light. Over 20 years ago, he began attending the open studio program at the Gugging Art Brut center, which presently encompasses a residence for artists, a gallery, an atelier, and a museum. Gugging's origins date back to the Maria Gugging Psychiatric Clinic, founded in the

late nineteenth century. In 1954, Dr. Leo Navratil, then head psychiatrist, conducted diagnostic drawing tests with his patients and discovered that some of them had innate artistic talent. Only a few years prior, the French artist Jean Dubuffet had coined the term art brut, inspired by experiments similar to Navratil's.

Art brut, as Dubuffet defined it, was produced in unexpected places, by people who didn't call themselves artists—particularly mental patients—and whose freedom from convention yielded art's most powerful raw forms. Dubuffet believed that art brut was the antidote to the corruptive influence of mainstream culture in art. Ultimately, what it accomplished was to allow for a more inclusive understanding of what art can be and where it can occur. This acknowledgement gave Navratil's patients, and their contemporary counterparts (now simply referred to as artists) a place in the spectrum of visual art. Strobl navigates a fine line somewhere within this spectrum.

He speaks little about his personal history. He is personable but hermetic. His mental and physical health seem to entail a delicate balance, one that is surely indebted to the ritualistic aspects of his art making, but owes very little to its commercial success. "He is happy when he wakes up and there are no fears," says Nina Katschnig, director of Galerie Gugging. "That's what's important to him... I'm not sure if he's really aware of his success in the art world," adds Katschnig, referring to the artist's sober reaction to the fact that in 2018 (just two years after his debut exhibition) the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired five Strobl works.

Underneath alludes to Strobl's ability to reconcile opposite visual logics in his work, to smoothly blend his lyrical interventions with the world that he exalts and obscures, to uphold his yearning for equilibrium and transcendence against the sad and dangerous contingencies of the present world, to give the viewer a sense of totality in the fragment, a reliable theme in the variations, the feeling that there's a unifying essence in everything we look at.