

### A.R. PENCK: I THINK IN PICTURES

28 June–3 November 2019



*Edinburgh (Northern Darkness III)*, 1987 | Birkelsche Stiftung für Kunst und Kultur | © DACS, 2019

The Ashmolean is delighted to announce a new exhibition of internationally acclaimed German artist A.R. Penck (1939–2017). He was one of the most prolific and political artists of the ground-breaking generation that includes Gerhard Richter, Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer. His dynamic and unmistakable style ranged over paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures, instantly recognisable by his 'Standart' stick figures, signs and symbols. Yet A.R. Penck remains a relatively unknown and under-explored artist in the UK despite his work being held in major international collections including MoMA and Tate. This museum exhibition, his first in the UK in over thirty years, features forty works made between 1970–90 when A.R. Penck moved between East and West Germany, Britain and Ireland. It also includes the largest work of art the Ashmolean has ever displayed, the monumental painting, *Edinburgh (Northern Darkness III)* (1987), which measures over nine metres wide and three metres tall.

Born as Ralf Winkler in 1939, A.R. Penck's life and work were marked by the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century. At the age of five he witnessed the Allied bombing of Dresden – which he would later paint – watching in horror from the garden of his family home. Associating with nonconformists and dissidents as a young man, he came into conflict with the East German state authorities early in his career. Rejecting the approved Socialist Realism in favour of individual, expressionistic work, he was denied entry into the official art academy, the Verband Bildender Künstler, making it difficult for him to work or exhibit in public. While many East German artists of his generation had already moved west, A.R. Penck continued to work 'underground' in East Germany, using a series of coded pseudonyms to evade official censorship. His most enduring name was adopted in 1968 in reference to Ice Age geologist Albrecht Penck.

As a dissident artist, he was sustained by connections with West Germany. He visited his close friend Georg Baselitz in West Berlin on 12 August 1961, the day before the border was closed; construction of the Berlin Wall began on 13 August. His major champion and lifelong collaborator was the gallerist Michael Werner who would smuggle A.R. Penck's work out of East Germany in a car to show in his Cologne gallery. Despite these restrictions, the artist's reputation and standing grew in the west and he showed work at the prestigious *documenta V* in 1972. But by the end of the decade authorities had made it illegal for East Germans to be involved with western publications and academia and many dissidents felt that life in East Germany was unsustainable. A.R. Penck left for the west, crossing the border on foot on 3 August 1980. Like many emigrants from the Eastern Bloc, he found the adjustment to this new life unsettling. He would travel extensively and move from Cologne to London, Dublin and Killala, Ireland. In 1988 he was awarded a professorship at Düsseldorf's Academy of Art.

Working outside the establishment, A.R. Penck was largely self-taught and restlessly creative, collaborating with amateur artists in a collective; exploring printmaking and woodcuts; working with contemporary, Jörg Immendorff; writing books; and exploring instrumental Free Jazz. He would go on to found a jazz band, *Triple Trip Touch*, in London in 1983 in which he played the drums. His interests ranged from art history to the work of his contemporaries and younger generations of artists, and from philosophy



*Problem Koexistenz (Problem Coexistence)*  
1970  
Hall Collection  
© DACS, 2019

to communications and systems theory (cybernetics). This, combined with a particular fascination with prehistoric art, led him to develop his signature motifs and the language he called 'Standart' which he would use, abandon and resume over the course of his career. In characteristic paintings and drawings we find stick-figure people; marks and symbols; use of either monochrome or bold colour; passages of abstraction contrasted with figuration. The works are layered with meaning and messages, but at the same time instantly legible. Regarding the simple standing figure in *Problem Koexistenz (Problem Coexistence)* (1970), the viewer contemplates everything from a single man to the whole of mankind; life in East Germany, specifically, to the eternal human condition.

The centrepiece of the exhibition is the monumental *Edinburgh (Northern Darkness III)*. This magnum opus was made in the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh in 1987, the third venue of his solo exhibition *Northern Darkness* which had been shown in Derry and Dublin. Painted on bright colour fields is a series of scenes, characters and symbols. The cast includes a man with a large birthmark on his forehead, recognisably Mikhail Gorbachev. There are skulls, an eagle and a serpent, equations, children and stickmen, a mother/goddess, earth and sky. The work is many-layered, 'in-between a comic, history painting and science fiction' as A.R. Penck wrote himself, and can be interpreted in a number of ways. The vast scale and panoramic format encompass everything from a meditation on *perestroika*; the artist's recent exposure to the prehistoric art of the British Isles; while the embattled stick figures explore man's place in the universe, just as artists, ancient and modern, have been doing for thousands of years.

**Dr Lena Fritsch, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Ashmolean Museum,** says: '2019 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and it is a wonderful opportunity to mount an exhibition of A.R. Penck's work. His extraordinary paintings, drawings and sculptures fizz with energy, appearing simultaneously primitive and postmodern, offering comment on both the issues of his day and timeless human concerns. He remains one of the most interesting and surprising artists of his generation whose prolific output is yet to be fully appreciated in this country.'

'It is an enormous privilege to have worked on this exhibition with people who knew A.R. Penck; and particular thanks go to Michael Werner, the artist's dealer and collaborator for more than fifty years.'

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#### FURTHER INFORMATION

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#### PRESS IMAGES

Images for editorial use are available to download at: <http://bit.ly/ithinkinpictures>

#### NOTES TO EDITORS

Exhibition: *A. R. Penck: I Think in Pictures*  
Dates: 28 June–3 November 2019  
Venue: Gallery 8, Lower-Ground Floor, Ashmolean Museum  
Admission: Free  
Publication: The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue; £15 available at the Museum or [online](#)

#### The exhibition is supported by:

[Galerie Michael Werner](#), Märkisch Wilmersdorf, London

#### German Neo-Expressionist Art at the Ashmolean

The Ashmolean's collections of modern and contemporary art include a group of German Neo-Expressionist prints by artists Georg Baselitz, Markus Lüpertz and A.R. Penck, and those by the younger generation known as the Neue Wilde, including Martin Kippenberger and Walter Dahn. *A.R. Penck: I Think in Pictures* features three works from the Ashmolean's own collection. Supported by Art Fund's *New Collection Award*, the Museum is acquiring key works on paper by German artists of this period.