

An Unusual Success Story – Against All Odds

Andrea Dörn | Dr. Roland Held



K.H.

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For my family.

Kurt Höffner

K.H.

“Recognize the legacy that father and mother have left you. Not money and possessions, but rather models and examples, and what it unleashes within yourself. All life long.” K. H.

"I've remained curious, to this day. I neither avoided, nor avoid challenges – on the contrary. Correspondingly, I found my way and became affluent. It wasn't something I was born into, because my roots are very humble. My grandparents and parents were poor. My father worked hard to earn sufficient living and was a big role model for me in his attitude.

With this insight into my biography I would like to encourage people, most of all young people, to not be afraid of new things: take advantage of your chances and find out where your strengths lie, and what you would like to do. This conveys freedom and the possibility of doing what you like doing, and doing it well – and to realize your dreams, sooner or later.

I've never thought that I would work in marketing, and yet that's what happened. I also never thought that I would actually be able to devote myself to painting someday, and yet that happened. I would have never thought I would edit a book, and yet it is here.

This book emerged from working together with two friends. The communications designer Andrea Dörn brought together my stories in multiple conversations and wrote the first part of the book. The second part was written by the art critic Dr. Roland Held. I was able to recruit him to write about a selection of several of my pictures.

I am particularly thankful to both friends, Andrea Dörn and Roland Held, for the good work together."

Kurt Höffner, May 2017

K.H.

I got a call from Kurt Höffner in the summer of 2016. He asked if I would write his biography, to which I happily agreed. I'm glad he reached out to me and am grateful for his trust.

I had met Kurt Höffner on a few occasions at various art exhibitions and was not, as far as his artistic work was concerned, up to date with his accomplishments. I really didn't know much about him or his life.

I only realized during my preparation for our first meeting that he started his career as an artist at age 62, entering the art world and taking part in exhibitions at 64. In his previous career, he had climbed the professional ladder in management, starting as a wholesale merchant, working his way to become a marketing director and later a managing director, and had representative power. He was given the General Manager's Award, and eventually become a leader in large management enterprises. He was a manager.

A manager who, in retirement, became a painter? I had an uneasy image of what this might entail: most managers play golf in retirement and when they paint, they paint peaceful landscapes, flowers, and still lifes. Imagine my surprise when I looked at his work on his website.

Who was the man behind these abstract, spontaneous, and dynamic pictures? What was his method? Why did he paint like this? This was about to get interesting! I eagerly awaited our first interview.



We met in his studio, located in a residential area in Weiterstadt. It had been a long time since we had last met, but as artists are open in nature, he provided me with a warm welcome. There was at once a friendly atmosphere between us.

The artist is nearing his 79th birthday and is completely full of life. His excitement and creative drive is visible on the walls of his studio: it seems as if the painting process is still in full motion and has only been briefly interrupted for our meeting. The air is electric and the smell of wet paint surrounds us. Countless paintings leaning against the walls leave only a narrow corridor to the actual workspace, which also is surrounded by my canvases. Streaks of color dart between the walls and the floor and as if we are subjects of his painting, we are transported into another world.

The wild and expressive studio stands in contrast to Kurt Höffner's home, which he shares with his wife, Giesela. Here, he modestly presents some of his work. Only a few of his early pieces are hung in the home. One painting hangs above the dining table and therefore has daily visitors, as if to show its importance. It depicts a house on a slope overlooking the sea with a Mediterranean flair. This has always been a dream of Kurt Höffner's: a house like that in a place like that. He wanted to make the dream a reality as soon as he finished the painting.

The painting is finished, but the dream still remains a dream. Sometimes the demands of life call for shifting priorities. Perhaps someone close to the dreamer is rooted where they are planted.

And where is the manager? There must be some essence of the businessman at home, if not in the studio. The Höffner house is, in actuality, quite minimal. Both children are now grown and have been moved out for quite some time. The couple has a very reserved style and has only a few particular decorations and memorabilia.

One photograph shows a young Kurt Höffner and his father, for whom he was named after. This picture of the father and son is deeply moving for the artist.

Moments later we are deep in Kurt Höffner's memories, into his life in 1937 in Hattingen, North Rhine-Westphalia, where he was born. He lived there with his parents in an apartment owned by his father's company and attended elementary school.

"Then came the damn war."

As he was born during the Second World War, Kurt Höffner retains strong memories of the Blitz, deprivation, and reconstruction. Wailing sirens, fear, and gripping his mother's hand while running into a bunker are all burned onto his mind.

It was not unusual that mother and child would run to seek shelter between a wall and concrete barrier that could eventually become their grave.

"There was fear everywhere. You existed from fear."

Kurt had to spend many hours in a dark, cramped bunker. Ominous silence, cautious whispers, and desperate screams composed the crescendo and decrescendo of destruction so that even when hidden, the war screeched in their ears and knocked against their bodies.

On the back of a notebook, a gift from his father, the young Kurt Höffner drew pictures to distract himself from this horrible reality, using pencils and paper to express his thoughts.

The confusion and anxiety in the bunker soon turned to a sure reality: their home had been bombed and they had no place to stay!

Nevertheless, there was fortune in an unfortunate situation. The family was healthy and still together. An attempt to take shelter in a bunker any further from the one they had hid in may have cost them their lives. It was unusual that the family was allowed to flee to the bunker that they had fled to, a so-called boulder bunker at the steel mine Henrichshütte, a cave-like bunker built into a natural rock. These bunkers were reserved for certain people. As the value of steel increased, so did the value of certain people, or rather, of what certain people could produce. As the factory manager, Kurt's father's function was irreplaceable, and his worth in the factory gave him not only the license to flee to the boulder-bunker in the case of a bombing, but also the privilege to flee with his wife and son.

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This little picture of Kurt is one of the few things left behind from the rubble of the house.



Henrichshütte.

Source: Slg. LWL-Industriemuseum, Dortmund.

The family was able to save some possessions from their home and had, at least, the option to sleep on a mattress on the floor at a friend's house until they could find a permanent place to stay. This meant a great deal to the family; at least a mattress on the floor is dry and warm. Many people, whose houses lay in ash and soot, were left to haunt the ruins of their homes and wait.

Eventually Kurt's uncle, Uncle Walter, was able to take the family in. He had a farm with a vacant room in Stüter, a town near Sprockhövel. Father, mother, and child moved their minimal possessions to the countryside. After the trauma of the sounds, smells, and images of the war, the young Kurt could not imagine a life more idyllic than a life in the country. It would be so calming: to witness growth and blossoming, to learn to harvest, to finally breathe fresh air. This was one perspective, a positive one.

It was one room for three people and was to be called a home. This was another perspective, one grounded in a somber reality. It was more than a mattress on the floor, but by no means a permanent solution.

Kurt's uncle did have a solution in mind: He had lost both his sons to the war, and suggested that the boy stay with him and his family, work on the farm, and one day inherit the property.

Kurt's father was uneasy about this offer. He knew very well what this would entail, as he had left home at 15 years old to be raised by his uncle Johann and his aunt Auguste. His parents were poor, and had trouble feeding and supporting himself and his siblings. The pain of being separated from his parents because of poverty instilled inside Kurt senior the motivation to escape the bounds of poverty entirely. He became ambitious and very hard working. As a child, Kurt senior found a position as a laborer through his Uncle at the steel production factory, and from this he rose to become a foreman at the company.

Kurt senior knew what life was like, to be raised away from one's own parents. He declined Uncle Walter's offer. His family had told him often, "I won't become anyone's serf," a phrase that would be imprinted on his son's mind and grow to shape his entire career.

"I am incredibly thirsty for freedom."

Other opportunities presented themselves to Kurt's father during their stay with Uncle Walter, opportunities of a particular kind: The Nazis demanded cannon fodder, and the title of foreman at a steel company grew to hold little meaning against the urgency of the Volkssturm. "Are you insane?" said Kurt's uncle, exasperated. "Don't go with them! Hide in the forest!" Kurt's father was hesitant, but went to answer the Nazi summon. It was just as dangerous to disobey this request as it was to enter a battlefield. Both could mean death. His family stayed behind in anxious worry; his son cried for his father and for fear that he would never see him again.

And yet, what they had hoped for finally happened: The young Kurt heard the family whistle and ran to the window. There he saw his father walking towards him from across the farmyard. Kurt senior told his family the story of how he was not chosen to enter the force, but the young Kurt didn't hear a single word. He was so relieved to be with his father again.

The family lived on the farm for nine months, living with the dream to find their own place. An apartment in Hattingen suddenly became available and the family quickly purchased it. They left, freed from the pressures of living with Kurt's Uncle as well as the tiny one-room house. The ability to live independently again felt incredible.

A two-room apartment in the attic of Friedrichstraße 7 was available. There was a sink in the hallway and the bathroom was floor beneath them, to be shared by the entire floor, where there were four other families living in two-room apartments as well. Everyone had to make the best of this situation, and most of them did not complain about it. There were other reasons to worry.

Kurt Höffner's experience at school was one of harsh ideological training, the scars of which still remain. The National Socialist period hadn't been processed by many administrators and was not discussed at school, but rather was buried in silence. Although the war was over, some teachers held on to the old styles of teaching as they pined after the golden days.

There was one teacher who was especially cruel. The children called her "Black Widow" because of her black hair. One day she called Kurt to the chalkboard. Petrified, he walked up to the front of the room but was in so much fear, he couldn't understand what he was supposed to do, let alone open his mouth to ask. The teacher slapped him, hard, with unbridled

1952

force. Kurt felt the sharp pain in his cheeks and moments later, shame, as he realized his pants were soaking wet. Not a sound was heard in the classroom, not even a giggle, only the teacher's screaming rage at her student. The students suffered with the "Black Widow" until the third grade when she finally retired, and Kurt could finally earn better grades.

Kurt finished his schooling in eighth grade in Hattingen and took his first steps onto his career path. The whole family was moving in a more prosperous direction: they found a new apartment near the steel factory, Einbäumchen 7, with three rooms!

"I didn't have my own room there either, but I still felt happy and content."



Christmas 1953.

Through some connections from his father, Kurt received the opportunity to apprentice at an iron wholesale firm. The entire firm was made up of his manager, his manager's sister, and himself, the apprentice. Kurt was compelled, however, to act and perform as if he was in a large company. So with creativity and ambition, Kurt reported on imports, exports, inventory, and other important factory business.

He wrote six such reports, showing his high level of independence and initiative within the company. Little did he know that what he learned here would make his entire career possible.

After three years his apprenticeship ended, and the young professional started his first official position in the accounting department in the steel company. His daily tasks included meticulously writing receipts by hand and taking them to the printing department where they would be typed with a typewriter. Not his dream job, but a good place to start and something fresh. With that, Kurt was decidedly on his way.

Many people find strength in new beginnings by believing in a better tomorrow. They hope that their dreams will come true and trust that the future is bright. The Höffner family was like this, optimistic and hopeful, until suddenly, all hope was taken away from them.

A dark shroud covered the little family. Kurt's father passed away after a stomach operation at 49 years old. He could not be taken care of in a hospital, and as was common for the time, lived his last moments on his bed in the bathroom.

1956

Retelling this story it is clear that for Kurt, the pain of losing his father is clearly one that will last his entire life. The ache of the memory is visible, and the atmosphere changes as he speaks of him.

"I admired him very much. It has been an incredible loss, still today."

Despite losing his father, Kurt could still draw strength his memory of him to persevere. His father was, after all, his role model. He had taken Kurt everywhere with him, to meetings with important people or to exciting places, like the horse track on racing day. He wanted for Kurt to experience the world for himself and learn from it accordingly. His father had set his own path and followed it, working his way up. Kurt decided he would do the same.

His biggest dream was to work abroad. His father had supported this dream fully, and promised him that he would get Kurt a position in the international relations department of the factory. The other members of the company, however, paid no attention to his father's last wishes for his son. It was complete betrayal from the people his father had trusted.

"But that's how people are!"

But Kurt did not give up. He discussed with his mother what they should do. They decided to sell Kurt's father's car. Kurt did not have a driver's license and the money would be used well, namely to send Kurt to the Berlitz language school.

The young man would further improve his English. He had already been taking night classes there for some time and knew it was a good decision.

"I didn't realize it in the moment, but that was the key to my success."

Said and done: Kurt was one of few who successfully completed the translation and communications course. He was eager to achieve his goal, and with a renewed energy, contacted one of his father's former colleagues and told him about his dream, his father's promise, and his disappointment. The colleague fought for Kurt's dream — soon enough, an opportunity to work in Edmonton, Canada was made available at the Alberta Phoenix Tube and Pipe Ltd. Due to immigration stipulations, he would have to work as a laborer for his first year, but afterwards would have the opportunity to take on a different position.

This was incredible news for Kurt — and terrible news for his mother. She lost her husband and now, her son was moving "to the end of the world!" It was his dream, but his mother's tears persuaded him not to leave.

1957

1959

And so he went along his career path, not to Edmonton but to Essen, at an industrial construction company. Nothing dire had prompted his career shift; Kurt simply wanted a new experience.

"I wasn't given any special responsibilities. But there was something that happened that really impressed me: It happened when I had to carry a large Olivetti typewriter from one building to the other. I had to go through a hallway, cross the street, and take the Paternoster elevator. I never liked those things, so I was reluctant to get on, but when I did, who got on after me? Two of my greatest inspirations: Berthold Beitz and Alfried Krupp from Bohlen and Haibach! Here I was, a kid at the time, standing right next to them. They didn't acknowledge me, but that didn't matter. It was an amazing moment and I'll never forget it."

Kurt worked as a clerk in the General Administration department for 16 months, all the while looking out for another position that fit his goals and aspirations.

1960

He applied to Wella Inc. in Darmstadt and there, made a very important encounter. Karl Heinz Krutzki, who had spent 50 years at the cooperation, starting as an apprentice and was now chair of the board, recognized the initiative in the young businessman and invited him to join the circle of junior trainees of the company. Mr. Krutzki founded this group to specially prepare certain employees for higher positions in the workplace and for opportunities to work abroad.

Kurt felt as if he was exactly where he was supposed to be. He was incredibly excited for his new position under Mr. Eckardt, the finance consultant of the Wella shareholders (the Ströher family). He was tasked with writing summaries of long reports of international finance and showed real talent in his performance.

He felt so assured by the success in his new position that one day, he plucked up the courage to ask to take over the contract of a colleague who had fallen ill. But was he overstepping his boundaries with youthful, blind confidence? Without hesitation, his manager gave him the contract! Kurt was now challenged to write and present a lecture on the ECC, the European Economic Community — a task that he met very well. His manager recognized Kurt's work in the department and was quite proud of him.

Everything was coming up roses. Kurt had the proud recognition of his manager, was learning more and more every day, felt comfortable and capable in the different departments of the company, and was met with interesting and important responsibilities. For example, as the assistant for market research, he worked on the Nielsen reports for external sales. He worked in the purchasing department, as well.

From Kurt's first savings he bought himself an old VW and drove as often as he could to his mother in Hattingen. She was overjoyed that Kurt had traveled only so far as Darmstadt.

"I'll never forget seeing the preacher Johannes Leppich give his sermon, "God's Greatest Weapon." There was a young man, a sort of layman's apostle, who worked with him who I had met in Darmstadt. He asked me to draw a picture for the event to put in a display case in town. I drew the portrait in pencil and attached a short text. I sent a picture to my mother, which is now one of the few documentations I have of my early work. During my professional career, I produced only a handful of pieces. In the time I had, I needed to work and make money."

Kurt was enjoying life: He took a vacation with relatives in Bremen, going dancing with friends, finding peaceful moments to read the paper. Without warning, however, the winds began to change, and clouds came over the sun. One day as he read the paper, he couldn't believe his eyes: his company was seeking new employment — for his position! He read the advertisement over and over again, trying to understand why, how this was happening.

Back in Darmstadt he approached his manager and discovered that his coworkers found him flippant and therefore did not like to work with him. Why had no one told him about this? He felt his colleagues ganging up on him and that his days were numbered.

"My colleagues dumped all over me."

And yet again, luck was on his side. As he was walking through Luisenplatz in Darmstadt one Sunday he ran into Mr. Eckardt. Kurt told him of what happened, and he was shocked. "We can't let this happen," he said, and told him to come to his office the next day. Back at work on Monday, Kurt discovered that Mr. Krutzki had been informed of the situation and had worked with Mr. Eckardt to get Kurt a new position at Wella as an international correspondent in the foreign relations department.

Amazing! A new job, and he didn't have to leave the company! But Kurt was still frustrated about what had happened and hurt that his colleagues hadn't been more honest. He quietly applied to the company Wick. They were just building a new factory not far from Darmstadt in Groß-Gerau.



1964

"What happened at Wella really got to me. I knew that as soon as I had the chance, I was getting out of there!"

Kurt Höffner eventually quit his job at Wella, Inc. He had more than a few reasons to take this leave: He could tell that relationships with his coworkers would no longer be the same and that his colleagues were distrustful of one another. It was affecting their work, so he knew it was time to go.

He started as a marketing assistant, something entirely new, at the Wick Pharma GmbH in branch sales. Kurt had mastered marketing after only six weeks, and so decided to stay in the field. Marketing was a new field in the 60s when Kurt started at the company. Even the name, “marketing,” was unfamiliar to most people. Kurt had a feeling that the field was taking off, and let his intuition guide him.

There was one event at the firm where the company leadership really noticed his talent: During a marketing presentation of inhalers, Kurt found a way to present 36 of the products where previously, only 12 were able to fit in the display. The president of Wick's European sector in Paris, G.B. McClure was seriously impressed and complimented him: “I like this!”

“When I was working with Wick, we constantly had to send documents to Paris to be authorized by one Pierre Rio, who had to sign them. He was really important. Everyone was terrified of the guy. It somehow came out that he was a Gaullist, so I painted him a large portrait for Charles de Gaulle. He didn't give me any trouble after that.”

Kurt knew that marketing was his talent. He came to realize from his interactions with advertising agencies, however, that he had a personal weak spot in advertising. Kurt Höffner wouldn't be Kurt Höffner if he didn't look for another way to improve.

So, here we go again: on to something new!

After working as assistant product manager for two years, he left Wick for a position as an advertising agent in Düsseldorf at a company called TEAM.

“I wrote some crazy applications, a lot of them informal or letters of interest.”

It was an exciting time; Kurt was confident, in full swing of his professional momentum and completely driven by his work. He proved his showed great promise in a deal between his company and the purchasing giant Henkell, which gave him the courage and validation to transfer from Wella to TEAM. Kurt was not only exited by the success, but also the new responsibilities he would gain and the varied experience he would have there, not to mention the professional connections he was excited to make: he would meet and work with Vilim Vasata, Ernest Dichter, Charles Pail Wilp — people who would continue to influence his work throughout his career.

But the most influential and extraordinary person he met was his wife, Gisela. Above all, wanted this connection with this lovely person to last a lifetime, and asked her to marry him and start a new adventure. Soon thereafter, the pair became parents. They had a little boy and were now a happy little family. The world felt at peace.

"My mother would come to visit for a number of weeks each year after I married Gisela. After my father passed, she continued to live in Hattingen by herself for 36 years — right until she died."

Kurt was working for TEAM for two years until, again, luck fell into his lap. At a neighborhood party in Oberwaldhaus near Darmstadt, the couple decided to go on a walk. At the same time another family was going on a walk — Hans W. Bach, the Chief Manager at Wick Pharma. They got to chatting and before long, Mr. Bach had invited the couple to visit him and at his home.

Kurt was ecstatic about the invitation. It was so friendly and unexpected, and he couldn't wait to take him up on his offer for a visit with his wife. The unexpected offer turned out to be more than an invitation to visit, but also to the company! "Why don't you come back to work with us?" asked Mr. Bach. Kurt couldn't believe his ears. This was the company where he had quit, and now he was getting hired again!

It was all true: He was offered a position at Wick. It was a complicated job, and no one dared to take it. But Kurt Höffner did not shy away from a complicated project — he was just the man for the task. Have no fear of the unknown!

The job handled the introduction of a line of medicinal hair care products, HEGOR, from the factory Laboratory Lacharte in Blois, France. It belonged to Richardson-Vicks, the same owner as the company Kurt had worked at, Wick.

Special attention was needed for the marketing of HEGOR in Germany, which was dermatologist approved and already well known in pharmacies in France. French pharmacies, however, aren't so similar to German pharmacies, and are more like German drug stores. Could Kurt make this product just as successful in Germany as it was in France? With confidence and good humor, he rose to the challenge.

"Nobody in the company had the guts to do it!"

It was very clear to him that this product's path to success in the German market was not going to be through drug stores. Against the current products like Schwarzkopf and L'Oréal, Wella didn't stand a chance.

1967



Gisela and Kurt Höffner with Lisa and Hans W. Bach

1968

Additionally, marketing to German pharmacies was probably more challenging than marketing to French pharmacies. What was he going to do?

With his friend and colleague Dr. Bernd Mäuser, he came up with a plan. They would re-brand the hair product into a medicinal product. Kurt called it “scalp cleanser.” The plan worked! The product seemed more valuable due to its marketing and German public was responsive.

“I don't know if that would work anymore.”

The scalp cleanser was tested and approved by the Federal Health Bureau as a medicinal product. It was now officially registered as such and was administered as a hair-care therapeutic agent.

Kurt was in his element. He enjoyed his work and he felt motivated by his successes — not only from his job, but also from his family, especially when his wife had a little girl. He sometimes struggled to find the balance between professional engagements and familial responsibilities, but made sure to always find time on the weekends to be with his family or play soccer with his children.

And so began the HEGOR success-story: Kurt found a small, achievable target audience of 1,600 dermatologists in West Germany. After a trial run in Berlin, it was clear that the product would be well received. The trials made it possible for dermatologists to market the product. Kurt led the advertising team that sold HEGOR as well as another product, MILTON, in hospitals.

It was a fantastic “journeyman's piece” that he could use to build on this market launch of Oil of Olaz.

“If there was anyone who knew anything about hair and skin, it was me.”

He took on the next project with Oil of Olaz and brought it to great success with testimonial marketing strategies. The market launch of Wick MediNait also did well. To commemorate his tireless commitment to establishing HEGOR in Germany, G. B. Mc McClure presented him with the General Manager's Marketing Award.



Bernd Mäuser and Kurt Höffner

1969

1973

A good twenty years before, Kurt ended his schooling and was at the beginning of his apprenticeship. At the time, he never thought he would be Marketing Manager one day and have such success. He looks back with gladness, pride, and an equal measure of melancholy on what he's achieved, because at that moment his son was missing his beloved father. And he would have liked to share his joy.

"I was connected with Dr. Mäuser through friendship and a love of chess. We frequently played for nights on end. My father made me acquainted with the game of chess. He taught me when I was eleven years old. Since then I've been playing in clubs and on tournaments."

Kurt had been employed by Wick for around 12 years when the decision is made to remove him from medical field work. It's said that he has so many other things to do, after all.

Kurt Höffner is slightly perturbed about the decision and that is why he pays attention to a call from Benton & Bowles: The Much AG in Bad Soden is looking for a manager.

It could be an additional interesting chance and a meeting is arranged with the boss, Sanford Mazarin. He is residing luxuriously in the presidential suite in the InterContinental in Frankfurt, and makes Kurt a lucrative offer. Kurt pushes his luck, turning it down – and the boss adds some! Deal — and it's time to start as the Managing Director of the Much AG in Bad Soden.

Upon his departure, the manager H. W. Bach wrote a particularly friendly letter to the person who had been responsible for the area for years. The subject of the letter was very pleased about the letter that underlines the good and consistent relationship: "Dear Colleague, Dear Mr. Höffner, You have informed me that you want to leave us to assume responsibility in the context of ... First and foremost, I want to congratulate you!... but I also want to thank you for what you have achieved with us. You were an excellent colleague, and I was particularly proud of you and your successes, not least because your career path is quite similar to mine. You also had to acquire everything that you are able to do, and the things you achieved were fundamentally your personal success, where your talent in setting up and leading the significant group of our marketing department rounded out the picture. We surely will not lose track of each other..."



Father and son. (ca. 1954)

1980

The central product in Kurt's area of responsibility is called Spalt Tablet's. And although the products is only being milked, as Kurt Höffner soon notices, he is able to bring in a strong profit.

Within his four years at the Much AG, he has four Vice Presidents above him. The last one plays fast and loose with the truth, and Kurt frequently has no choice but to send angry letters to the president in which he documents that the Vice President's claims are unsustainable.

"With four years at Much I had four different Vice Presidents as superiors who were annually dismissed in a 'hire and fire' style. The last one was a dirt bag, a lying so-and-so."

One fine day, he had to travel with the CEO of the Young & Rubicam advertising agency to America to hold a talk. There is an unintended scandal.

Kurt and a colleague go to the toilet during a break. Kurt has to let off steam about his frustration and anger regarding the Vice President, fatally saying, "say, he sure is an a**hole." He explodes and the devil does the rest. The Vice President in question happened to be seated behind the toilet door, unbeknownst! The foundation of a solid feud has been laid.

The subsequent increasing tension is ultimately too much for the President to take – although Kurt recently received a very friendly and recognizing letter from the highest levels. And yet, Kurt becomes recalcitrant and has to go. On the occasion of a meeting in London, he is put under pressure: "Kurt, you have to deliver one million more!" One million DM sure is a pile of money and that kind of increased profits absolutely cannot be achieved with the product. Kurt explains this, and then the President explains to him, "Then you have to jump out of this window."

"I laughed and said: Ok, I'll jump out of the window."

The vice president now has a blank check to fire the obstinate Kurt. But it's not that easy, and Kurt doesn't want to make it too easy for his opponent either. The works council joins in, and Kurt's lawyer is able to negotiate a good settlement and achieve the use of the car for an additional six months.

All in all, an unpleasant situation. But Kurt Höffner looks forward and steers the Much AG company car towards France. The destination is Fontainebleau. This is the location of INSEAD, one of the most highly regarded business schools in the world and this is where he attends a marketing seminar with Professor Hermann Simon in the area of Executive Education, paying his own way.

"I used the time instead of wallowing around."

Kurt had hardly arrived in Fontainebleau when he receives a telephone call. He is to come to London and introduce himself at Nicholas-Kiwi Limited. This job is with a subsidiary of the Nicholas Limited in Sulzbach. After returning from Fontainebleau, Kurt Höffner took it on and did not guess that he could be jumping from the frying pan into the fire: he's hardly there for two weeks when the company is sold to the Americans.

"There I was, back with the Americans, but I had already had enough!"

It was just another more or less interesting product – Rennie – and Kurt sees no future for himself in the company. He doesn't feel at home there, and he followed the advice of a friend from the federal pharmaceutical association, successfully applying with ASTA Medica in Frankfurt.

He started as director there and over time, the responsibility for the Kamilosan products and Transpulmin. He is also given the area of self-medication products from ASTA Medica, which establish the small "Vitapharma" subsidiary, and Kurt Höffner becomes their manager. He enjoys the work and he can successfully integrate his experience.

Then he ends his career and goes into retirement. The board presented him with a large box of excellent oil colors at this farewell and he receives the first easel in his life from the employees.

Now Kurt has to fulfill his own promise.

"Once you're retired, and you make a life, then you'll start painting again."

1984

1985

1999

"My strange stations have bookend. It's called 'Procter Gamble'. Or 'Partings and Changes'."

My first job worth mentioning was with the Wella AG in Darmstadt as a young talent. Years later, P & G snatched up Wella, which meant a change of location or profession for many workers there. It could have hit me as well.

Wick, my most important station, was also acquired by P & G. However, it spun off many of the brands, like the teenager cosmetics Clearasil, for example — for which I was responsible for several years.

Even my 'journeyman's piece', the HEGOR scalp pharmaceuticals, was no longer of importance for P & G.

P & G has parted ways with around 180 brands. The changes were connected to the CEO A. G. Lafley, who was pulled out of retirement in 2013. He operated the massive sales with a steady hand.

Procter & Gamble remained a giant in the consumer goods business despite this bloodletting.

I was informed by the press about the sale of Wick Pharma after my departure. Old colleagues reported how brutally rigorous the situation was for several of them.

For a while I thought that my time at ASTA Medica, the Degussa subsidiary, would be spared such a fate. Especially because there was an interest in bringing the ASTA to the stock market. I had gone into retirement and hadn't experienced this hard cut personally.

"The entire career is very fleeting."

You can say what you want: in the world of modern business nothing remained as it once had been.

No looking back would help us. There are designations and determinations we follow now. Yet frequently we are astonished how everything has developed — with and without our participation.

“I didn't really plan it.”

My father worked in one company for more than 34 years. In contrast to him, my own decisions moved me to a “modern” employer with ten different jobs in around 46 years. But around 30 years at two companies.

I ask myself what someone should do with the many memories and experiences? The answer that I didn't want to hear in any case was: being active in marketing as consultant or expert.

*Then I made a quick decision to occupy myself with painting. It would have been a disaster if I would have had to live from it.
This way there is knowledge gained and joy in success.”*

Kurt Höffner

*“Naturally you also need a portion of fortune in life.
The fortune of being at the right place at the right time, and
the fortune of meeting generous and decisive people.
I am very thankful for this fortune and these people.”*



Pablo Picasso

*"My wife didn't think it was funny at all
when I painted the funny heads. She surely asked herself, who'd I marry.
Today the heads are largely banished to the cellar."*

A retirement in the classical sense doesn't seem to suit Kurt Höffner. He dedicated himself to painting with his typical dynamism.

As a child Kurt cultivated dream jobs not very typical for boys. He had three dreams: his first dream was to be a singer. Although he couldn't play an instrument, but he could sing. The second dream revolved around becoming a writer. Kurt was fascinated by Hemingway, devouring all his books.

Becoming a painter was Kurt's third dream – and now it was to come true.

He set up a small studio on Friedrich Ebert Street in Weiterstadt, and he soon made contacts in artist circles. Through recommendations he became aware of the Kulturkreis Reinheim, became a member, and participated in exhibitions.

His pictures' first large series of themes include faces and heads. He presented them in the most varied of ways.

Fortune is back on his side again when the building on Friedrich Ebert Street is to give way to the wrecking ball: a hairdresser abandons his shop and Kurt Höffner is able to make the shop into studio spaces of over 70 m². Here he has space and he uses it to the full.

His urge for something new, for development, leads him to participate in the international summer academy PENTIMENT in Hamburg. The encounter and instruction with the artist Barbara Feuerbach bring Kurt to a turning point. A book about Willem de Kooning lands in his hands, and Kurt is immediately on fire for the pictures. Kurt wants to find out more about the artist and above all, his style, so he takes advantage of the opportunity to visit a retrospective on de Kooning's work in Rotterdam. He is very impressed by the exhibition.

"This inspiration led me to the 'art informel'."

K.H.



K.H.



Steckbrief alter Mann (Wanted, Old Man), 2001, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 100 cm

K.H.



Exogenius, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 80 cm



Endogenius, 2002, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 80 cm80 cm

He leaves behind his heads, which had been his topic for five years, and was occupied with the informal.”

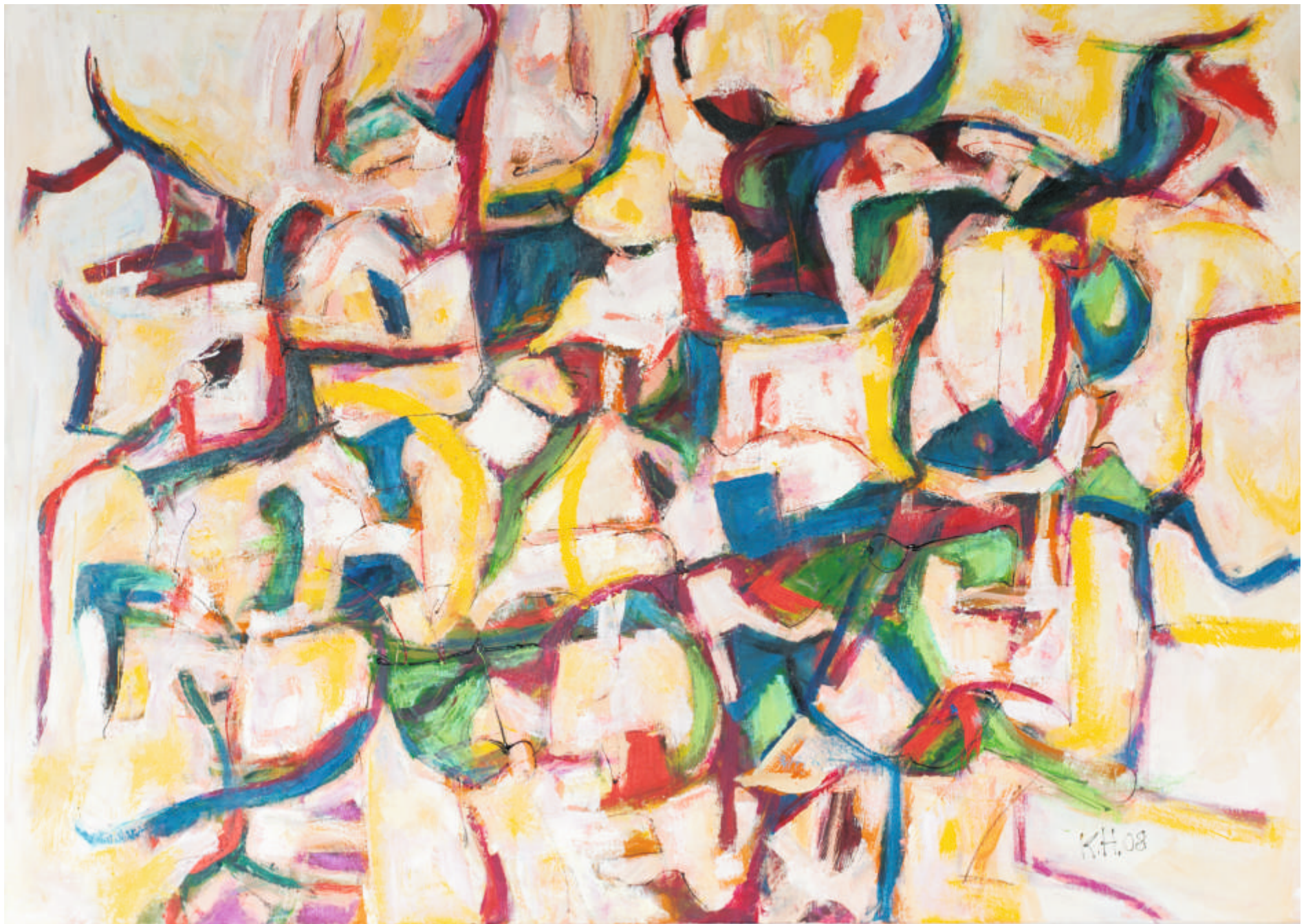
By participating at the European Art Academy in Trier, Kurt Höffner is able to learn new things, experiment, perfect painting techniques. He is increasingly represented in shows and even organizes his own. He has his first exhibition at the Hofgut Gallery in Reinheim and it was to be the starting point for even more.

Kurt Höffner shows his works in a large number of solo shows and group exhibitions in the Jacobs University in Bremen, in the Heylshof Museum in Worms, in the Galerie Kunstraum in Jena, in banks, companies and doctors' practices. He paints and paints so many pictures, and there would be hardly enough space to line them up.

In this way, I return with Kurt to his studio, full of work. It appears to be a kind of island where is able to pursue his passion, withdrawn in a way, and has been doing so for 17 years now. Here he lives for a while in his order or lack of order — completely in his own rhythm, in his world, with his thoughts.

We engage in excursions into his past, returning back here in his “second life,” and I'm able to get to know him a little better, Kurt Höffner the person. The man who belongs to unrest, even to impatience. Who continues to challenge himself and does not remain in a comfort zone.

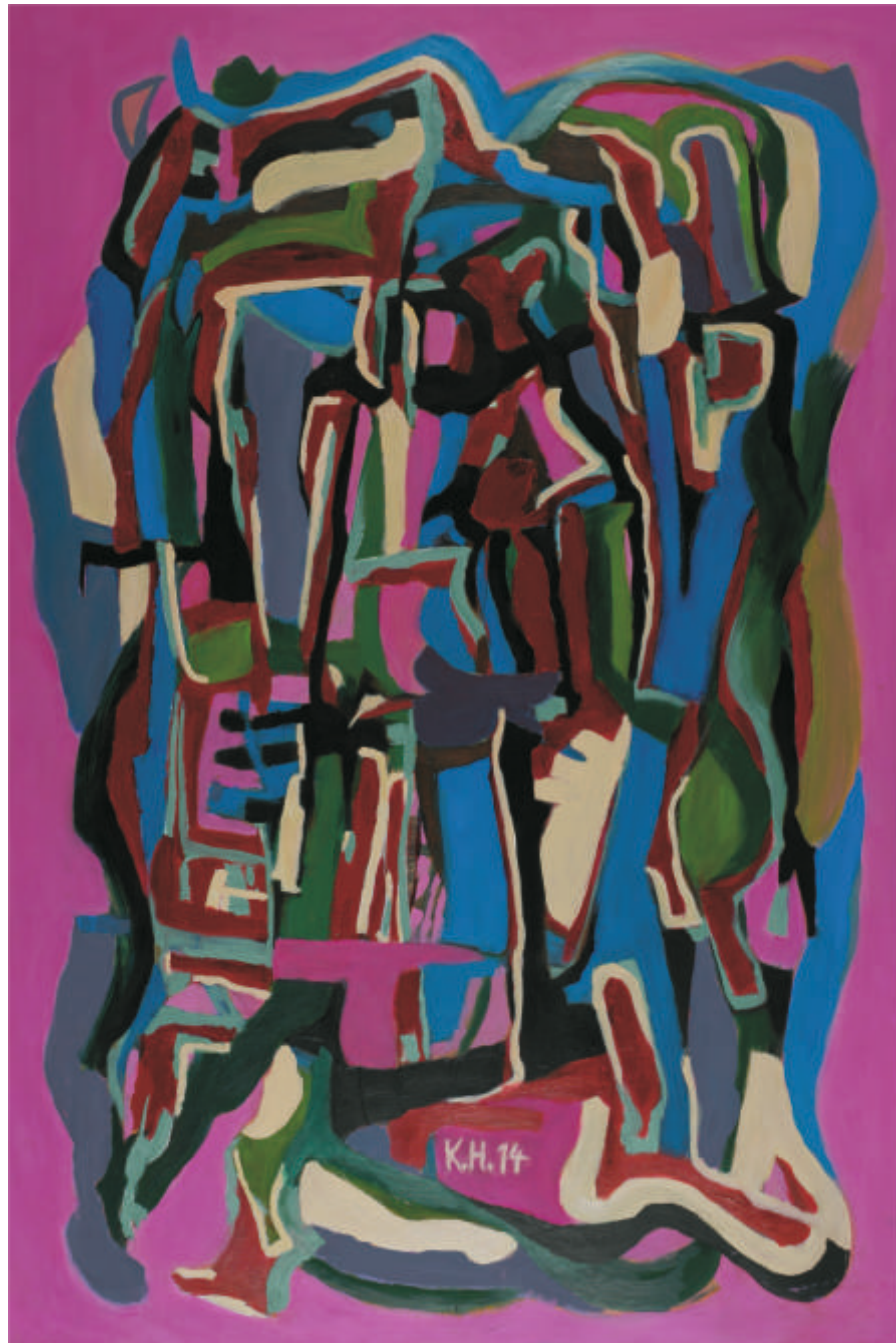
We frequently laughed and even sensed disappointment and injuries. These are insights that Kurt grants and surely there are things that remain unsaid and things remain unmentioned — everyone's right. And in the end: there's very much between the line, and much that can be read in his pictures.



Große Abstraktion (Great Abstraction), 2008, mixed technique on canvas, 100 x 140 cm



Schöne Zeit (Beautiful Times), 2013, acrylic on canvas panel, 80 x 60 cm



Figur auf Pink (Figure on Pink), 2014, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 100 cm

The Hidden Seven-Eighth

Thoughts on the Pictures of Kurt Höffner

*I dislike the word 'art'; in contains
some kind of ideas of necessary rules,
and absolute ideal. ... I want people to create life;
I want for people to be alive, that people start working
creatively again, beyond everything that restricts
one's own eyes and temperament*

Emile Zola

*There is a place beyond right and wrong.
We should meet there.*

Persian Saying

One can be — as the writer of the following words — in strong disagreement with Kurt Höffner regarding the artistic merits of individual pictures, even entire series. However, what can never be denied: that there is a genuine, unquenchable fire burning inside him to express himself through painting. And it continues to burn. If the well-familiar phrase about creating due to an inner necessity fits anyone, then it fits Höffner. Of the three professions he once dreamed of — all are artistically inclined. He took up one of them with his characteristic gusto at an age when others start abandoning it. “I just didn't want to fall into a black hole,” he reveals to me in a conversation in his studio. And leaves open whether he means the strange ocean of newly available time to be filled with meaning, something many people feel upon retirement. Or that final hole into which each one of us is buried, possibly without having worked up the courage to dare pursue our childhood dream.

Achieving Distance and Taking Leave from the Past

Kurt Höffner has started a new chapter in his own biography. To what extent and why this does not immediately include art history will be explored in the following. The dozen painting from the first few years of the new millennium obsessively revolving around the topic of 'heads' and pushing the dark, expressive — with steer's eyes and bulging lips, features as if carved from wood — into the grotesque can be safely left out. In retrospect, it seems clear it should be interpreted as a transitional phase of violently achieving distance and taking leave from the struggles and upheavals and traumas, of which there was no shortage in Kurt Höffner's professional life. (In return, he was able to avoid the economic struggles and sacrifices of an artist in an insecure, freelance position.) An exorcism in rich acrylic and oils, if one will. What remained from the “crazy heads” (Höffner) is the boisterous, occasionally harsh approach. It has now been transferred into the largely non-representational realm of the works produced since then on canvas and paper, the visual language of which — its creator is the first to admit — is strongly influenced by the predecessors from the circle of American abstract expressionism as well as the European informal and the École de Paris. Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Mark Rothko, Joan Mitchell are the names that Höffner repeatedly mentions himself; Hans Hoffmann, André Masson, Alfred Manessier, Emil Schumacher, Emilio Vedova, Pierre Alechinsky should be added to that.

Picture Frames and Space for Pictures

Before addressing individual works, it would behoove us to collect a couple characteristics about the more recent “abstract” production. Considered roughly, two different, even contrary groups can be identified: on the one hand, panels dominated by spontaneous, powerful, soon jagged zig-zags, soon winding, elastic brushstrokes. On the other side, such that despite rejecting all strict visual geometry, yet carefully constructed, under circumstances seem soothed. Although in this case, the image narrative is often — but not entirely — keeps its distance to the edge, while it spreads in an all-over, which makes it be assumed that instead of stopping

beyond the edge, continues, tending towards limitlessness. Category transcending totality versus an excerpt of a painted reality. The “combination of chance and control” repeatedly mentioned by Kurt Höffner is clearly not static, but rather vacillates in alternative directions, being expressing in differing mixed relations. It is noteworthy that the ideal examples typical of spontaneous, gesture variant tend toward horizontal form, the constructive variant examples, in contrast, contribute to the more rare vertical formats. The contours, predominantly in black, drawn subsequently around the colors fields, demonstrate a second, systematically executed work step. This bundles the details and prevents the explosion of untamed bright colors. Höffner's better depictions draw completely on black, white and little else. What is sufficient to suggest a visual space with strong dark over light or light over dark is not illusionary in the sense of central perspective, but is effective due to its mysteriousness. Depending on the orchestration of light and large, the viewer gets the impression that the space in question opens in one case, closes in another.

Patterns Emerge Organically

Rhizomes and thickets, webs and weaves, x and cages — visual patterns of order that arise organically with Kurt Höffner, even seemingly growing rather than construed. Plate 1, for instance: here is a seemingly stable brown web that holds together the multicolorism like a grocery bag holds the mixed vegetables. Or illustration 2: a red scrum of thorns, filigree as coral, where no part is isolated because everything is entwined, elevating from the gray, plus traces of green that might represent life. The association of the green background with nature in illustration 3 is even more clear because the dominating colorful mosaic in the middle is lifted on the white stem as a branch or mass of leaves on a trunk. (An elegant trick our painter fondly uses, of focusing on a form put together out of various colored threads. Elsewhere the relation between flag and pole is reminiscent of axe blade and handle.)



Plate 1

untitled, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 100 cm



Plate 2

untitled, 2014, acrylic on canvas panel, 60 x 80 cm

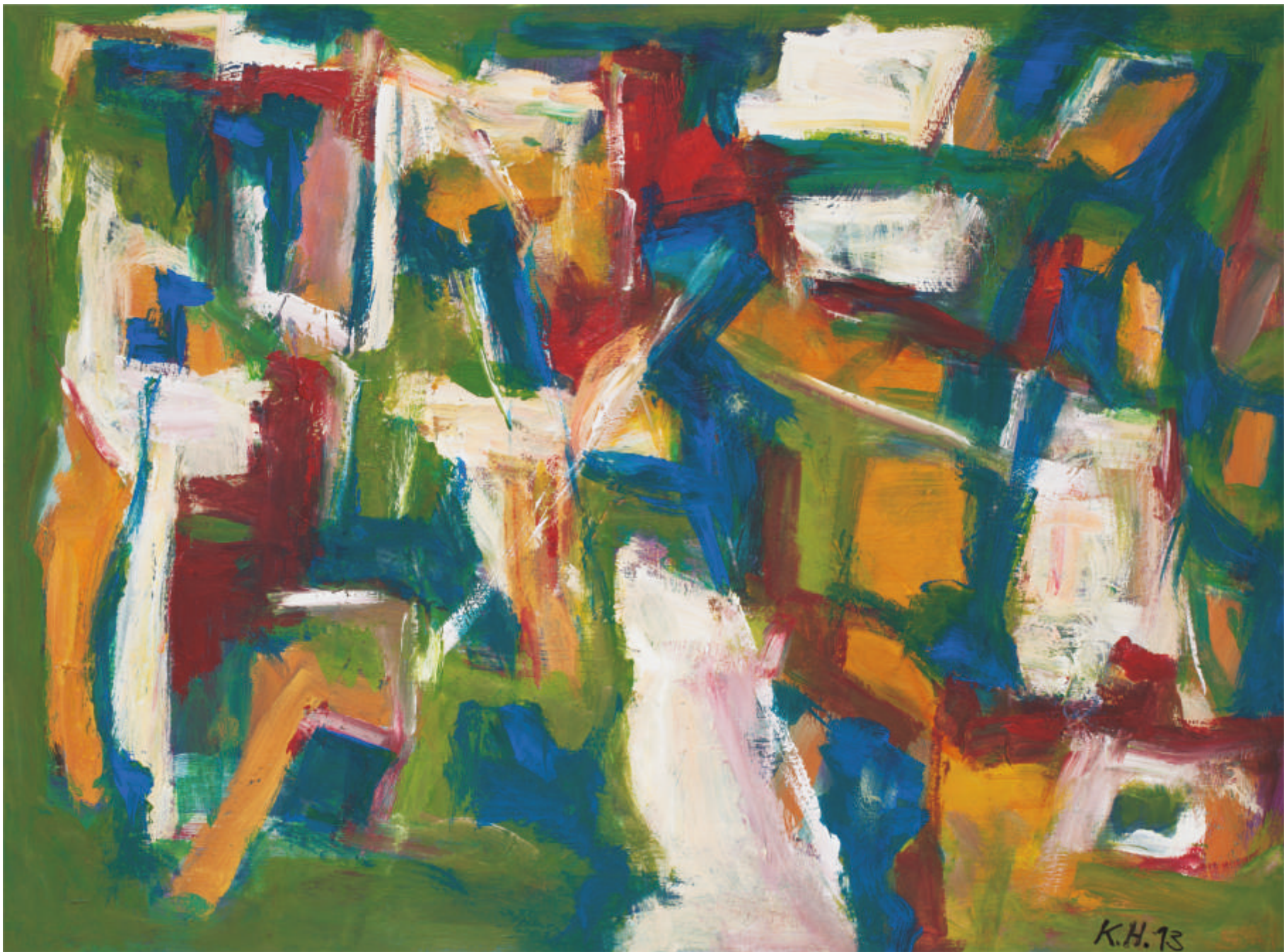


Plate 3

untitled, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 80 cm

Within the format filling all-over the black paths and angles on illustration 4 seem as if they were forming a branched modern metal sculpture, catching the light and color. In sharp contrast, not only in regards to composition and the associated sense of corporeality, plates like 5, 6, or 7: a fidgeting and wriggling, a wriggling and writhing over and through the boneless-flowing brushstrokes, as if someone had dumped a bucket of rain worms, if not emptied a swarm of octopuses into the aquarium. Dynamic movement that in their combination of wide swipes and pencil-thin traces on the drawings (illustrations 8 and 9), can rise to a dance of racing, whirring elementary particles, now almost incorporeal.

Precursor — Successor

Pictures full of energy, without a doubt. But does it go beyond what has been brought to the canvas by now over half a century ago on both sides of the Atlantic in the sign of abstraction as the international idiom of art and especially in the context of international trends of the informal? Do they forge into uncharted territory, aesthetically or conceptionally? To be honest, no. Instead, it is astounding the casualness with which Kurt Höffner attributes his visual creations — touchingly ahistorical — as 'art informel'. There is a passionate zeal with which he reports about his using techniques such as dripping, splashing, scratching, as if he had just recently to have discovered it. The humility with which he speaks of the artists — primarily American — from which he derives his actions. "Alas for thee, that thou a grandson art!" Yet Mephisto's warning pronounced at the first part of Faust did not seem to frighten Höffner... in fact, the belief in the avant-garde, as expressed in the previous century by Clement Greenberg (1909-1994), the head theoretician of abstract expressionism and 'discoverer' of Jackson Pollock, seems fairly pathetic today. According to this, avant-garde artist alone were the only ones to keep society and culture vital and bring it forward — instead of the anemically chewing on past styles. And according to which art is dependent on permanent innovation and thus provocation

of the public's understanding, like a fish depends on water. At the latest, upon the establishment of the idea of postmodernity around 1980, the avant-garde concept became discussed, and it was apparent that the caravan of the apparently evolutionary regularity of one "ism" of modernity that grew out of the modernity and therefore this had itself reached an ending. Humility was suddenly en vogue, humility in light of changed priority. In 1986, the painter and creator of color wood cuts, Esteban Fekete (1924-2009) summarized his thoughts under the title "Precursor — Successor" in such a succinct way that it justifies an extended quote here. "For today we no longer believe in progress, at least not in the holy, all-healing progress. We would like to survive. We have become more humble and less sure. [...] I'm convinced that eschewing absolute curiosity is not detrimental to the quality [of art]. There is sufficient space for individual formulations, to the extent that the painter has something to tell humanity and can express it visually."



Plate 4

untitled, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 100 cm



Plate 5

Starkwetter (Strong Weather), 2015, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 120 cm



Plate 6

untitled, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 60 cm



Plate 7

untitled, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 70 x 100 cm



Plate 8

untitled, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 cm



Plate 9

untitled, 2012, acrylic on paper, 30 x 30 cm

Painting with Hand and Eye

When Elaine Sturtevant (1924-2014), quasi a representative figure of Appropriation Art — by now accepted in the official cannon — which created works of art by copying other works of art (and in the case of Sturtevant, signed on the back), raves about the “beauty of repetition,” then it should be allowed that the self-proclaimed outsider Kurt Höffner inscribe his own personal footnote into the big folio of abstract expressionism. For that, he (though he was in New York several times) does not have to have sat at the bar in the legendary Cedar Street Tavern with Pollock and Co., making a contest out of knocking back beers. At the time the gestural-action painting might have been — as certain art critics assured, a beacon of the heroic, existential feeling of existence. Today it is one stylistic option among many, accessible in the endlessly flexible framework of “anything goes.” And at best a quasi-therapeutic inner attitude: acting out the physically, cathartically unleashing something psychological. Admittedly it had long not been haphazard. Let us remember — “fortune and control” as augmenting authorities that Kurt Höffner emphasizes. Drawing on the experience of at least twenty years of practice, he pursues in his abstract-informal and abstract-tachist works in a sophisticated, reflective way as in the “crazy heads” of his early phase. Observe the reserve of comparatively small-scale formats (illustrations 10 and 11), how they utilize the shine of ancient wall pieces like baked-on red-brown-black skin despite limited size, standing out from the white, mysterious Sgraffiti: characters? playing field? Relaxed architectural blueprint, even overshadowed by the crescent moon for once? Whether the relief character of the luminosity of the colors — Höffner had learned to test the powers of the material. Whoever wants to dismiss him as an autodidact, ignores that he has gained a powerful hand with a self-critical eye. Whoever curses him as an epigone, cannot avoid acknowledge in the next breath the infectious enthusiasm, looking towards the future, he continuously produces, switches, experiments.



Plate 10

untitled, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 cm



Plate 11

untitled, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 cm

Son with Many Fathers

"I never stuck with one thing, always trying out something new instead." And: "I was never afraid of something new." And: "I was always occupied with the incomplete, unfinished, the surprising." To that extent, the last thing one could accuse Höffner of is that he imitates a certain role model in art history. His creations have many models, many fathers. Anti-purist that he is, he does in fact dare to leave the firmly associated path, and once in a while smuggling in a hint of a figure. Isn't there one or two lascivious, lounging feminine figures à la de Kooning hidden somewhere in the red-and-white mixtures coagulated to flesh colors on plate 12? Head-motif is allowed a careful withdrawal elsewhere. However, this time it is pulled through the mill of abstraction, to articulate itself new and completely differently: brown jagged bars, supported by lines, evoking a face on plate 13, aggressive and pointed like an Aztec deity, seeming even with a raised hand in front of its screaming mouth. While a stocky pedestal of a neck carrying a dinosaur-like blocky skull, filled with a smeared red and green and blue as well as a cyclopoid staring eye, fixed in such a way as to make its viewers freeze with its stare — a beautiful "child's picture" — according to the original title! It should be noted: exterior reality is not obediently repeated here, but rather admitted suggestively, based on form analogies.



Plate 12

untitled, 2016, acrylic on canvas panel, 60 x 80 cm



Plate 13

untitled, 2006, acrylic on paper, 50 x 63 cm



Plate 14

Figure, 2007, acrylic on paper, 30 x 40 cm

Stepping Out of the Shadows

If expressionism originally meant expressive art, what is being expressed on Höffner's tables and pages? Are the event of a professional life still taking effect — although it is emphasized by this painter that it was successful, generally “proceeding happily”? Or should one stretch the biographical narrative arc even further, back to the child who armed himself against the terror of bombed out nights by scribbling full his notebook in the semi-darkness of the air-raid shelter? The blotter his father had given him... in a personal conversation, the near octogenarian repeatedly returns to the early death of his father as a decisive, enduring formative life trauma. When one reads his biographical memoirs, it is noteworthy how often he has found a fatherly figure in superiors, bosses and mentors in his professional lives. Possibly with a hint of self-criticism: “I was easily enthused by people who have success.” The fatherly figures remain temporary, not least because he rebelled against them sooner or later, in doubt through moving to a different, better paid position with more power to influence things. It begs the question of whether the intellectual-artistic development should also be viewed from this perspective. The urge to heal wound, balance out a handicap, compensate a loss, is not infrequently the root of creative activity. Equally an autodidact as reader, as a young man Höffner devoured the books of John Steinbeck,

Thomas Wolfe, John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway. By the latter, in particular, he raves even today, admitting he was “in love with the way he wrote.” One can assume that he did not zealously study English at the time due to its career advantages. Thus it is logical when precisely the group of the previously mentioned prominent American painters were his muses during his professional career and the ones who he selected as fatherly figures, most significantly the enfant terrible Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), once he awoke from the long “hibernation.” It speaks for Höffner that he, as once in his career, remained a rebel to the extent that he did not remain slavishly subjected to any “father” permanently, usually stepping out from the shadow of the mentor at some point. Frequently enough, to step behind the shadow of another mentor. Most recently, stepping into the light of his own painterly presentation and groups of works, drawing on many other influences. There is a Hemingway quote he constantly has at the ready, “The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one ninth of it being above water.” With his paintings of the past years, Kurt Höffner reveals a view of the hidden seven-eighths of his essence.

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"I'm no painter who can be categorized into one stylistic directions because I don't let myself be limited by certain forms. For me there are many paths, but also detours that lead to a figurative result. The informal aspect is always current in my painting because it can be completed and interpreted by every viewer anew. For example, I'm intrigued by Jackson Pollock's Action Painting and WOLS' Tachism. I love experimental approaches and am open to surprising twists and turns."

Kurt Höffner about his paintings, in January 2008



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