



Otto Muehl: Earthquake, 1989, dirt, stone, glue on canvas, 63 inches square. All photos this article courtesy MC, Los Angeles.

# Muehl's New “Material Actions”

*The first U.S. solo of veteran Viennese Actionist Otto Muehl leads the author to discuss innovation and tradition, performance and behavior, art and dirt.*

**BY STEPHEN MAINE**

**T**he dark side of the “Happenings” phenomenon, the often-extreme, occasionally scandalous mid- to late 1960s performances of the Viennese Actionists were a revolt against hidebound traditions of art as much as the social proprieties of postwar Vienna (and the ghosts of Freud and Hitler). The discomfitingly corporeal, highly ritualized “actions” of Hermann Nitsch, Günter Brus and Rudolf Schwarzkogler variously addressed taboos concerning the body in their common effort to achieve a psychotherapeutic effect. Otto Muehl looked specifically to Wilhelm Reich’s theories of liberation through sexual release. Even while rejecting the strictures of easel painting, Muehl, in his “material actions,” mimicked its essential structure by applying a colorful variety of liquids and semi-liquids, including



foodstuffs and bodily fluids, to a different sort of canvas—typically, a naked body of a young woman.

Muehl apparently considered this strategy a repudiation of received notions of artistic form, but the “material actions” do conform to Harold Rosenberg’s characterization of the advanced painting of the previous era as “an arena in which to act,” which carried with it an unwitting prediction of art as performative artifact. Muehl, now 82 and living in Portugal, recently had his first American solo exhibition at MC, a gallery in Los Angeles, consisting of a dozen paintings from 1988 to ’90 and three dated 2002. Providing historical context for the exhibition were three short films from 1964 by Kurt Kren, continuously screened in the back room. Taking their titles, *Mama and Papa, Leda and the Swan* and



Above and below, two of 10 photographs from the portfolio *Cosinus Alpha*, 1964/2006. Photos Ludwig Hoffenreich. Courtesy Archive Muehl and MC.



Prince Charles Mounts Europe, 1990, ash and oil on canvas, 35 inches square.

*O Christmas Tree*, from corresponding Muehl actions, they are not documentations but heavily doctored reinterpretations, in the filmmaker’s retina-testing “flash-editing” technique. A more straightforward record is provided by a suite of 10 photographs by Ludwig Hoffenreich, recently published by MC, of Muehl’s first action, *Degradation of a Female Body—Degradation of a Venus* (1963).

Painting must be in Muehl’s blood, for variations on the form occupied his considerable energies during the years that followed the heyday of the Actionists. Works from that period are not artifacts of performances, though several in the show resemble them, bearing the theatrical result of vigorous physical engagement with materials. These date from the last three years of the Friedrichshof commune, the social experiment Muehl founded in 1970, which lasted two decades. The artist’s lust for unorthodox materials corresponds to apparent boredom with oil painting. For *Dark Tumult* (1988), it appears that Muehl briefly sloshed around paint-soaked rags the color of mud, leaving a trail of mopped swipes suggesting

animal struggle. Shards of wood, snatches of packing tape and bits of rather more mysterious debris are embedded in the streaked and clotted surfaces of two other paintings of this ilk.

Against a ground of blackish sand, the white, stenciled silhouette of a writhing human form appears in *Fire Dance—Homage to Yves Klein* (1988). A few years before Muehl turned from junk sculpture to performance work in the early ’60s, Klein had achieved wide notice with his “Anthropométries,” the traces of closely choreographed events during which the bodies of young women were used as “living brushes,” leaving the (usually blue) imprint of their breasts, bellies and limbs on expanses of paper and canvas. It is unsurprising that Muehl, in his direct use of the human body in a ritualistic context that foregrounds psycho-sexual connections, sees a kindred spirit in Klein—although the difference between the poetry of Klein’s playfulness and Muehl’s prosaic appetite for shock tactics is striking. With the stencil of a fireplace ash shovel, the Muehl work also

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wryly acknowledges the protean Frenchman's "Fire Paintings" of 1961 and '62, which presaged a later fascination (particularly in Western Europe) with the idea of destructive forces as a dynamic, regenerative element in art and society.

Three smallish figurative paintings from 2002 bear witness to Muehl's steadfastly antibourgeois persona, sharpened perhaps by the seven years, beginning in 1991, that he spent in prison in Austria following his conviction on charges of "criminal acts against morality." (He continues to maintain his innocence.) There is a certain randy energy to the cartoonish images, like *Multisexxy* (40 by 20 inches, excrement and acrylic on canvas), in which the profile of a man's head emerges from the abdomen of a handsome woman. His prominent nose echoes her breasts; his goateed mouth supplants her vagina. But these novelties pale in comparison to the commanding presence of the best of the abstract works on view.

The reddish, sand- and rock-strewn *Earthquake* (1989), a little over 5 feet to a side and exhibited lying flat on its shipping crate, loomed large in the middle of this warehouselike space. Gray ash forms the ground of the 3-foot-square *Prince Charles Mounts*



*Untitled, 1989, sand and pigment on canvas, 47¼ by 71 inches.*

*Europe* (1990), upon which tremulous smears of peach-colored pigment are splayed. The most memorable of these paintings possess a serenity seemingly at odds with the violence of the actions, even while they impart a human presence in their ostentatious manipulation of materials and display of process. A pair of untitled canvases from 1988, in heaving, curdled aluminum paint and thinned, runny asphalt, herewith assume their place in the tradition—including Morris Louis and Larry Poons—to which modern-day "painters who pour" must answer. The uniformly caked, flecked surface of dirt and hay on canvas in *Chaff* (1990, 51 inches square) continues the idea of working with humble materials. And less is truly more in an untitled 1989 work of nearly 4 by 6 feet. Any formalist might envy its mix of sand and pigment, scraped to

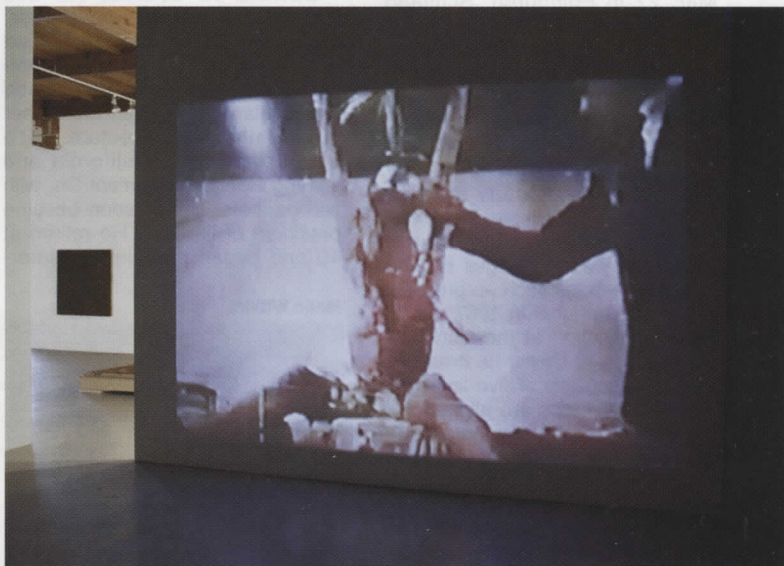


*Dark Tumult, 1988, oil and rags on board, 51 by 67 inches.*

an abstemious, waveringly gritty gray that perfectly balances tactile surface and atmospheric space. □

Otto Muehl's work was on view at MC, Los Angeles [Jan. 14-Apr. 3]. Retrospective exhibitions of his work were mounted in Vienna in 2004 and in Hamburg in 2005, and he was included in the recent "Of Mice and Men," the Fourth Berlin Biennial. His work is currently on view in "Vienna Actionism: The Buzzing Bee" at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig (MUMOK), Vienna, through July 16; "Snafu: Media, Myths, Mind Control," at the Hamburg Kunsthalle through June 5; and "Mapping the Studio," at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, through Aug. 20; it will be exhibited in "Landscape in Your Mind" at the Austrian Cultural Forum in New York City [July 18-Oct. 28].

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*View of Kurt Kren's film of Muehl's action Mama and Papa, 1964, 4 minutes; at MC. Photo Josh White.*