

Endre Tót

Break the Grip of Shame

PRESS RELEASE

We are honoured to present the retrospective of Endre Tót (b. 1937 Sümeg, Hungary), one of the defining figures of international conceptual art. Following his painting experiments during the 1960s, Tót began working with non-image based, text and signal-centred idea art. Shortly thereafter, his work entered international public awareness, partly as a result of his extensive mail art activities. His artworks have been a mainstay of international exhibitions since 1971. From 1974 on, his artist books, which had been initially issued by himself, have been published by prominent international galleries and publishing companies. In 1978 Tót left Hungary for West Berlin, and a year later he moved to Cologne, where he has been living and working ever since. In the late 1980s Tót returned to painting, using it as the primary medium for pursuing his conceptual practice.

The current exhibition showcases a selection of Tót's early ink drawings from the 1960s, introducing works that have not been seen previously outside of Hungary. Evoking the influences of *art informel*, Far Eastern Calligraphy and Pop Art, these ink compositions represent the characteristics of Tót's early artistic thinking and method.

The artist's three major ideas which are a central tenet of his 1970s conceptual period are included in the exhibition: the *ZerOs*, the *Rains* and the *Joys*. The *ZerO*, which simultaneously communicates absence and presence, first made its appearance in the artist's mail art works used for replacing certain parts of a text. Then the symbol gradually took on a life of its own and became the central component of Tót's artworks employing various media. His *Joys* were the artist's response "to censorship, isolation, suppression sensed in every field of life" in the totalitarian state of Hungary in the 1970s. The *Joy* works, entitled "I'm glad if..." were the point of departure for Tót's actionism, as illustrated with the more photo-based pieces in this exhibition. Tót's *Rain* works – the combination of a short text and a simple pattern created by repeatedly hitting the "///// " key on the typewriter – are displayed in a selection of small, image-based works from 1971 to 1980.

The exhibition presents a comprehensive selection of Tót's later artistic period centred on the medium of painting. A few of years after he had settled down in Cologne, Tót decided to return to painting in a form that allowed him to continue his conceptualist phase. He created several painting series, all emerging from the ideas developed in the 1970s: the relationship between image and text and the concept of absence and presence involved in his *ZerOs* and *Joys* turning up in his *Absent Pictures*. The ironically tautological motifs and inscriptions Tót used to draw and write on walls in his creations from the late 1970s on were also transferred to canvasses, boards and objects.

A unique approach characterizes Tót's *Erotic Pictures* which are presented in a separate cabinet. The naked female body appeared in some of his works as early as in the 1970s – as illustrated by the two conceptual photo-based pieces – but the full expression of the subject matter took place in the late 1980s when Tót created a large series of paintings and *décollages* using found erotic and porn images. Enlarged pornographic photos emanating from magazines are thus printed on canvas and have their most overt parts removed by overpainting with black rectangles or cutting them out. The method is similar to that applied in other series of this artistic period, but even the alienating effects of censorship do not conceal their perplexing directness.

Endre Tót's works are collected by major museums such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Centre Pompidou in Paris, Tate Gallery in London and Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, amongst others. Tót has been the subject of retrospectives at Museum Ludwig in Cologne (1999), Fridericianum in Kassel (2006), and MODEM in Debrecen, Hungary (2012).