

KER-XAVIER ROUSSEL

Galerie Michael Werner

Ker-Xavier Roussel (1867-1944) was one of Les Nabis. In the 12 years running up to 1900, the group of painters including Paul Sérusier, Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard, and Félix Vallotton held sway as the prophets of an abandoned art religion. They proclaimed that the era commencing with the Fin de siècle belonged to myths and fauns who were all bound to obey a single duty, namely the duty to be happy. Like the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé or the symphonic lyricism of Claude Debussy, Roussel's pictures attest to that never-ending pleasurable afternoon that has fallen out of time. Having moved in 1899 to the country, namely to L'Étang-la-Ville west of Paris, Roussel henceforth adopted bucolic figures for his paintings. While others appropriated the distant cultures of Japan, Oceania, and of the peoples of Central Africa, Roussel preferred to lodge in what he had himself been raised on, namely the high visual and literary culture of Europe. He recited the eternal truths of the inventors of Arcadia, the verses of a Theocritus, Lucretius and Virgil to his friends in the original Latin or Ancient Greek as if he had just heard them recently. The eternal and often violent amorous conflict between nymphs, fauns, dyads, satyrs, goddesses, and on occasion humans, too, became his subject matter, and he transposes it from the grand painting tradition of the academies into his own day. Roussel dips the pastoral idylls of a Nicolas Poussin in a fountain of youth effervescent in pure, anarchic colors, in the process bypassing Pierre Puvis de Chavannes to modernize the genre using painterly effects to foster presence that go as far as Impressionism. The illusionist semi-reality of his Maenads is resplendent in ever new colors, glowing in contemporary and therefore often brutally tinged hues. Through to the mid-1940s, however much kitsch sought to hijack or disenfranchise them Roussel succeeded in immunizing the inhabitants of Arcadia against the banality of film tricks and the glare of fluorescent tubes. Only in noon's shimmering light during the Hour of Pan can the archetypal figures of the unconscious live out their madness; and only painting and the other hand-based techniques for making images possess the means to appropriately imagine that artistic light. In so doing, Roussel reminds us of our melancholic duty to be happy when contemplating images.

The exhibition *Ker-Xavier Roussel* opens at Galerie Michael Werner in Berlin on Friday, February 16, 2024; the show will last until April 13, 2024. The opening runs from 6-9 p.m. and will feature a discussion between Florian Illies and Michael Werner at 7 p.m.

To coincide with the exhibition, a catalogue will come out containing essays by Mathias Chivot, George Condo, Théo de Luca, Florian Illies and Raimund Stecker.

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