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ROBERTA SMITH | ART REVIEW

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His Art Isn't Even The Half Of It



Richard Gerstl's "Semi-Nude Self-Portrait" (1902-04). The luminous blue color produces an aura, as though the artist is giving off light. Credit Richard Gerstl, Leopold Museum, Vienna

Richard Gerstl had an ill-fated affair, destroyed his work, then killed himself. By the way, you can now also see his paintings.

Any review of the Austrian painter Richard Gerstl must first get his sensational suicide out of the way. On Nov. 4, 1908, barely 25, Gerstl burned an unknown number of papers, drawings and paintings and then managed to both stab and hang himself in his Vienna studio.

He was isolated and distraught: His affair with Mathilde Schoenberg, wife of his close friend, the modernist composer Arnold Schoenberg, had been discovered in late August by the injured party himself. Gerstl had been instantly banished from the couple's loyal, close-knit circle, the only artistic family he had ever known. Even so, the small retrospective at the Neue Galerie exudes an irresistible energy and optimism end to end. Gerstl had unlimited faith in both the varied expressive powers of oil paint and his own abilities to summon them.

Gerstl's art was never exhibited in his lifetime, and this is its first museum solo show in the United States. After his death his family packed away what remained, also disguising the cause of death. In 1931 his brother Alois, whose portrait is in the Neue show, took two small paintings to the art dealer Otto Kallir, who mounted an exhibition in Vienna. This tale is chronicled in the catalog by his granddaughter, Jane Kallir, a director of the Galerie St. Etienne, which her grandfather opened in New York in 1939 after fleeing Austria.

Born in 1883 in Vienna, Gerstl seems to have been a natural rebel, albeit one always supported by his wealthy family. A devotee of music and a voracious reader, he was expelled from private schools and art academies alike, and was an outsider to the Viennese modernists and their leader, Gustav Klimt, whose work he found artificial and decorative. Gerstl was after the immediacy of paint on canvas and of life itself, both its inner and outer purpose.

Gerstl is frequently referred to as the first Austrian Expressionist, since his work developed slightly ahead of that by the somewhat younger Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele. But at the Neue, that characterization ultimately feels too small and neat.

In this show, which was organized by Jill Lloyd, an independent curator, Gerstl is constantly on the move, striking out on his own, and then retreating to familiar territory.

Over his brief six-year career, he pursued a range of styles, including a sober realism befitting portrait commissions but enlivened by texture and chromatic daring; a somewhat stiff, regimented

Impressionism; a scaled-up airy pointillism; and a loose Post-Impressionism indebted to Munch and Van Gogh, whose influences run throughout his work. Most startling is an unprecedented Expressionism that reveled in paint's sheer materiality, achieved with wide, loaded brushes or a vigorously wielded palette knife.

Sometimes Gerstl did a little of everything on the same canvas. In a richly-colored portrait of Mathilde and her daughter Gertrud from summer 1906, the mother's face is dignified, the child's a bit more of a caricature. The various parts of the interior are played out in strokes of different textures, colors and rhythms. But best are the Persian rug on the table before his subjects and Gertrud's pink jumper, where more liberties are taken with paint.

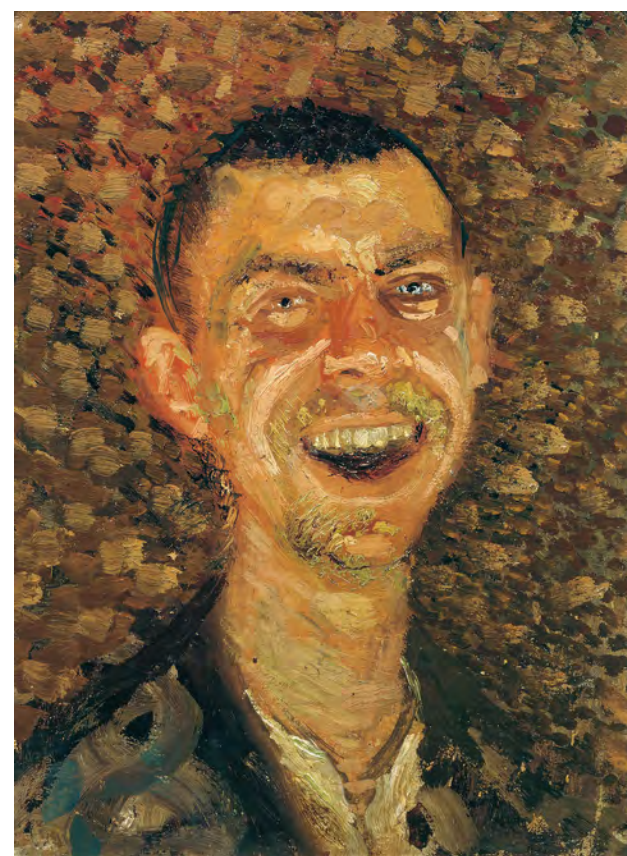
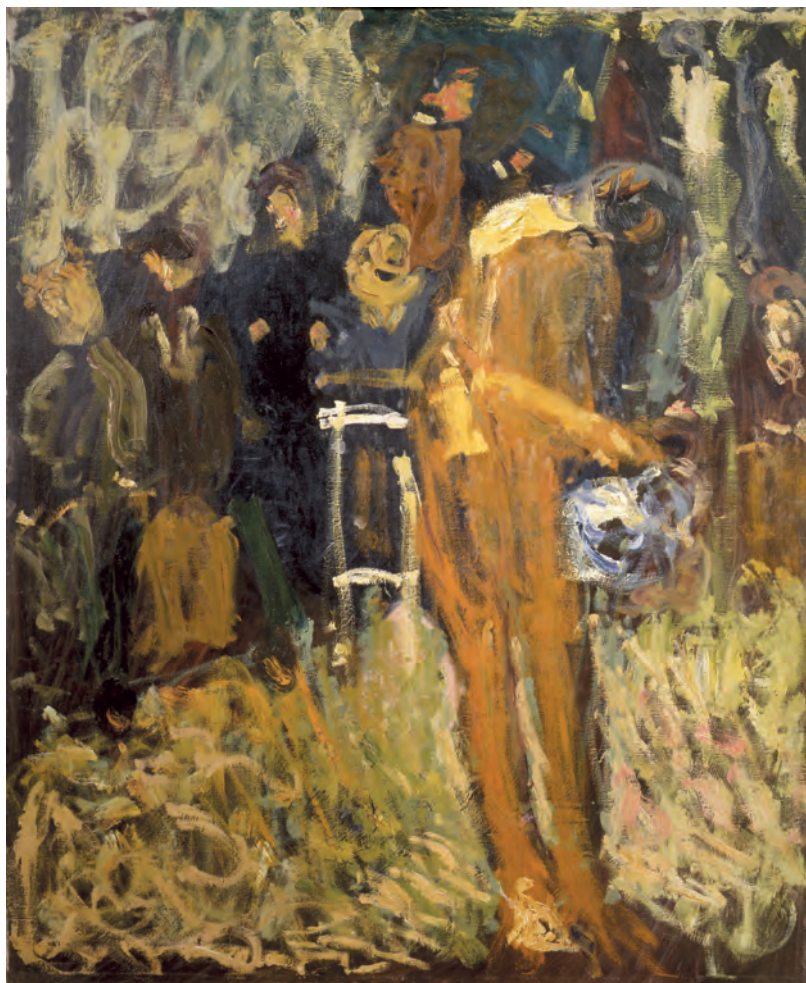
Gerstl met the Schoenbergs in the spring of 1906, when they hired him to teach them to paint, especially Arnold, who was struggling financially and seeking another income stream. (Not a chance: This show includes 13 of the composer's wonderfully strange, visionary paintings on paper, which might be a hard sell even today were it not for his musical importance.)

But the three soon became close, and their complex relationship is convincingly detailed in the catalog by the scholar Raymond Coffey, who argues that the affair between Mathilde Schoenberg and Gerstl was barely underway before its discovery, which occurred while Arnold was completing his atonal breakthrough in the "Second String Quartet."

The indications here are that most of Gerstl's best works were painted during two summers spent with the Schoenberg Circle in the town of Gmunden, on the Traunsee, a lake several hours from Vienna. The show's most sustained moment is a thrilling suite of progressively liberated views of mountains, fields and gardens painted directly from nature, between spring and September 1907, and two thickly limned views back in Vienna. They startlingly pre-empt the uninhibited brushwork of generations to come: Chaim Soutine (1893-1943), Willem de Kooning (1904-1997) and Frank Auerbach (born 1931).

Things become even more extreme in July 1908, just before the expulsion from Eden. Gerstl basically goes rogue: reducing the Schoenberg family to a series of rounded smears of varying sizes, applied with a knife one over the other until they are brazenly abstract. They seem beyond anything being done in Europe in 1908, Austrian, Expressionist or otherwise. As far as anyone knows, Gerstl painted only one other work like this at the same time, a group portrait of the Schoenbergs and two other couples from their circle (not in the show). There might have been more among the 20 to 25 paintings, now presumed lost, that he abandoned when he and Mathilde fled back to Vienna.

Five self-portraits form the spine of this exhibition. They show a charismatic, maybe narcissistic young man, sure of his talent, but also unstable, who has appealingly artistic looks. Gerstl was tall and lanky with a long neck, proportionally small head kept neatly cropped and perpetually gleaming eyes. The self-portraits are psychologically riveting, at times delusional or slightly mad. In the first, the artist, against a deep



blue background, is slightly luminous himself, bare-chested and wrapped in white below the waist: an ascetic prophet, seer and seeker, barely 20. The most disturbing is "Self-Portrait: Laughing" from 1907 — a small, maniacal close-up of Gerstl, face flushed, eyes aflame, with a toothy grin. He seems to be laughing in the face of hell. Behind him patterned wallpaper enlarged from Vuillard adds hallucinatory daubs of dancing paint. (The paint dances even more in a portrait of Mathilde from around the same time.)

Gerstl's final self-portrait, painted in September 1908 after the break with the Schoenbergs, is nude and full frontal — a rarity among male painters. His direct stare is distracted, his hair uncharacteristically long, the rendering of his body relatively, academic, but the light blue background is alive with long tendrils of scratched, looping lines. Gerstl took a tremendous pleasure in painting, almost to the end, which came several weeks later, after Mathilde returned to Schoenberg for the second time, on the day of an important concert of the composer's students, to which Gerstl was not invited.

Looking at this extraordinary show you may wonder why, since he could afford to, Gerstl

Clockwise from top: "The Schoenberg Family" (July 1908); "Landscape Study (Traunsee)" (September 1907); "Self-Portrait, Laughing" (1907); Richard Gerstl's "Nude in the Garden" (July 1908).

didn't just leave town, get away from it all. You want to shout at him like he's in some horror movie: Don't stay there! Go to Paris! Berlin! See art! You'll miss Cubism!

Then you recall "Nude in the Garden," also from the heady month of July. It shows a blurry figure, slightly bent, holding a carefully-positioned painter's palette (or is it a watering can?). At first you may think he's surrounded by strangely large flowers. But they're more like faces, laughing at the figure in the sunlight, who seems cowed and humiliated, rooted to the ground.