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Contemporary Arts Museum Houston
5216 Montrose Blvd.
Houston, Texas 77006-6547
tel. 713/284-8250
fax 713/284-8275
www.camh.org

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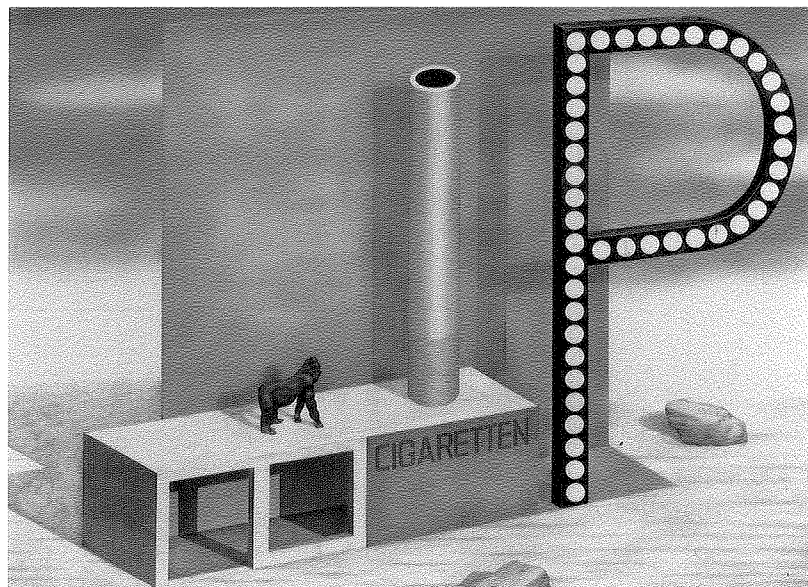
Back cover: *Zementwerk (Cement Factory)*, 2008
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem, Cologne

Frontispiece, top: *Kryogenisches Institut "Wilhelm Reich"*
(*Cryogenic Institute "Wilhelm Reich"*), 2005
Collection Beth Rudin DeWoody

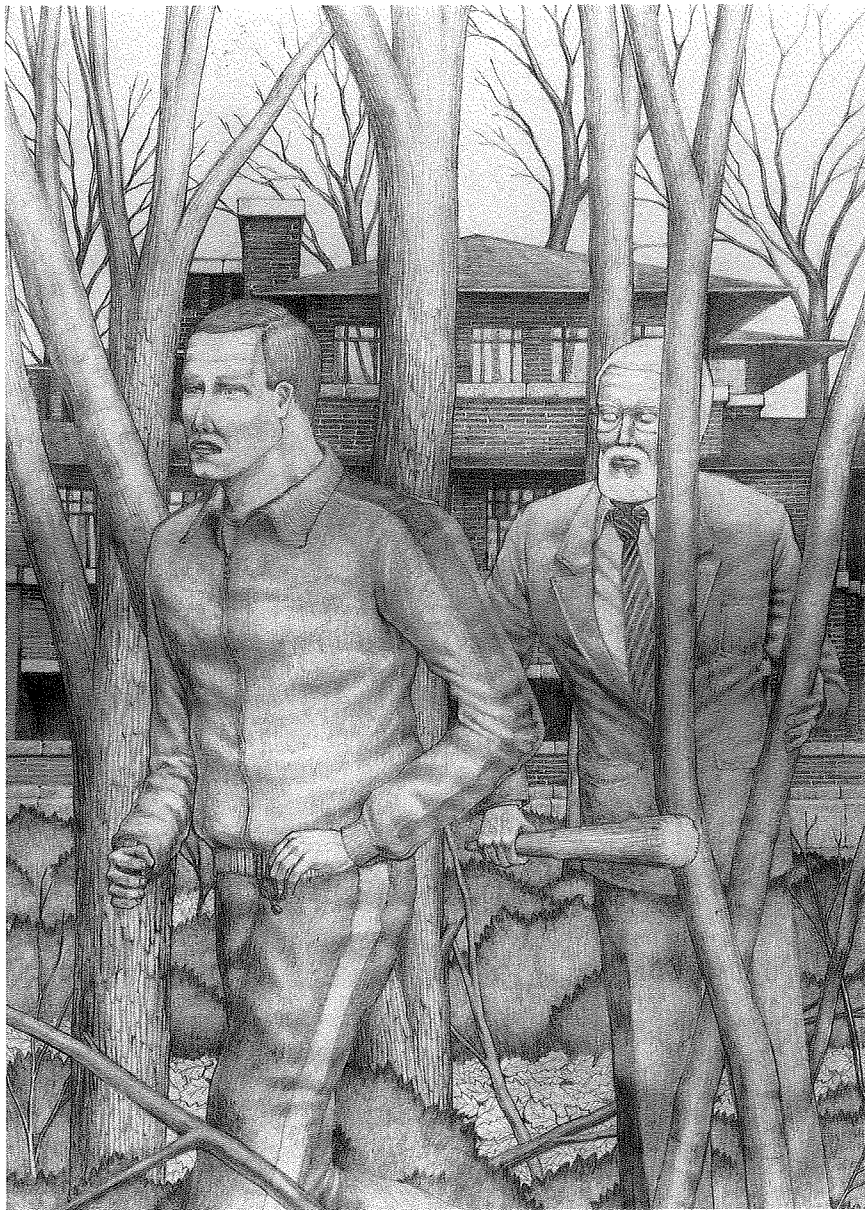
Frontispiece, bottom: *Vision 6: The Herbert Bayer Cigarette Kiosk*, 2007
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem, Cologne, and Hotel, London



Perspectives 166 TORSTEN SLAMA



Contemporary Arts Museum Houston



Hinterbalt (Ambush), 2002
 Courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York

TORSTEN SLAMA

Toby Kamps

Obviously, in art, realism serves many causes other than reality. It is sweetened into kitsch, idealized into propaganda, exaggerated into satire, and mutated into surrealism. These inevitable slippages, intentional or not, are prime reasons why realistic styles have such a strong grip on the imagination. As existential thinkers from Plato to Lao Tsu to Nietzsche have observed, every consciousness is trapped in its own subjective view of objective truth. Artists' renderings of people, places, and things fascinate us because they offer ways out of the essentially solipsistic human condition. A well executed representational work compels us to pore over its devices and messages. It is as if by comparing its maker's understanding of the universe to our own, we hope to discover some of life's secrets.

The Austrian, Berlin-based artist Torsten Slama understands deeply the seductive power of realism. He draws and paints painstakingly illusionistic portraits, landscapes, architectural studies, and melodramatic mini-narratives that both unsettle and mesmerize. Saturated with intricate detail, mysterious symbolism, and more than a little mordant humor, his works conjure up uncanny worlds rife with meaning and portent.

Slama's work has roots in the 1920s and 1930s, when realism dominated art in Europe and North America, both as a means to return to classical values after the chaos of the First World War and to explore national character. He is especially influenced by the work of German artists belonging to the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or "New Objectivity" movement like Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Christian Schad. Responding both to the horrors of the war and the freedoms of the short-lived Weimar Republic (1919–1933), the *Neue Sachlichkeit* artists blended representational styles with Cubist and Dadaist pictorial strategies, socialist ideology, and new psychological concepts. By adopting cool, precise realistic styles and a disdain for most forms of idealism, they reacted against the German Expressionist movement of the 1910s and 1920s, which sought alternatives to urban life in primitive forms and energetic brushwork. Full of scathing satire, melancholy city scenes, and probing portraits, their art was unafraid to depict the bankruptcy of German society during a time of moral and economic crisis. Also known in its time as Magic Realism, a term that has since come to mean—in art and literature—any form of naturalism in the service of imagination, *Neue Sachlichkeit* inspired artists as diverse as Grant Wood, Balthus, George Tooker, and Salvador Dalí.¹

Of course Slama, who began his career in the mid-1990s, does not encounter the maimed veterans, starving prostitutes, and bloated war profiteers who thronged the streets of Berlin in the 1920s. Nonetheless, for him, the skeletons of a heavy history still rattle around this city. "Berlin," he says, "is the artificially rejuvenated but nonetheless dead flower of a failed authoritarian society."² And he is not afraid to summon some of the misanthropy, moral high-horser, and brutal comedy of his *Neue Sachlichkeit* predecessors to express his discontent with contemporary society's grotesqueries.

Slama's subjects stem from his wide-ranging interests in scientific, philosophical, and supernatural approaches to understanding the world and human psyche. He is a devoted reader of science fiction and horror stories and often uses the genres as a lens in

drawings and paintings that consider the fate of the earth—a subject about which he is deeply concerned.³ The planet, Slama believes, stands at a turning point: “In all Western societies, especially aging ones like Germany, an ever-expanding ecological consciousness has turned into a form of Malthusian misanthropy, where many believe the world would be better off without people.”

Presciently titled in light of the current global financial meltdown, the mixed-technique airbrush painting and ink drawing *Die Vaporisierung des amerikanischen Mittelstandes* (*The Vaporization of the American Middle Class*) (2007), is one of many works that envision life after some unknown biological or thermonuclear catastrophe. Depicting two figures in futuristic armor lying like fallen crusaders under a bright blue, cloud-wisped sky in a rocky landscape littered with ominous fragments of Modernist architecture, the work is a lovingly crafted scene from a Dr. Strangelovian tale—part *Star Trek* episode and part medieval morality play. Similarly, the graphite drawing *Nach einem Strahlenkrieg* (*After a Radiation War*) (2006), an image of a well-built nude woman standing in a crumbling industrial structure, combines Biblical and pulp-fiction imagery. Accompanied by a small monkey, a traditional symbol of lust and the Fall of Man in Renaissance art, who sits on one of the factory’s serpentine pipes, this female figure can be read as a shattered survivor of some unspeakable event or as a postapocalyptic Eve rising from the ruins. Her neatly parted, 1940s-style coiffure and neutral, self-possessed facial expression—a hallmark of all of Slama’s figures no matter how much *in extremis* they may be—add archly eerie shivers to this image of an anti-Venus.

Another group of Slama’s works envision a world populated only by architecture and wild animals—as if a neutron bomb had obliterated all people. Borrowing the vertiginous perspectives and lunar terrains of classical Chinese landscape painting, the mixed-technique airbrush painting and drawing works *Geröllmine* (*Rubble Mine*) (2005), *Sirupkocherei* (*Molasses Digester*) (2005), and *SAPA Bienenfermenter* (*SAPA Bion Fermenter*) (2006) depict eponymous factories serenely performing their Sisyphean functions without any sign of human intervention. “Every building and machine is in a way a cultural monument—a memorial to the civilization that built it,” Slama believes. The tranquil settings and noble miens of his post-human structures suggest that he takes comfort in the evergreen sci-fi plot in which mechanical automatons survive to personify a civilization’s ingenuity and accomplishments. A new series of paintings of factory buildings pays homage to 1920s *Neue Sachlichkeit* artist Carl Grossberg’s enigmatic images of deserted industrial landscapes and machines, which Slama greatly admires. In works like *Holzfabrik* (*Wood Factory*), *Wilhelm-Reich-Raiffeisen-Institut* (*Wilhelm-Reich-Raiffeisen-Institut Cooperative Institute*), and *HYDA-Hydrierwerke mit aufsteigender Überwachungseinheit* (*HYDRA Hydrogenation Plant with Ascending Surveillance Unit*) (all 2008), Slama intensifies the desolate, dreamlike atmosphere Grossberg cultivated by adding hovering UFOs to the scenes’ skies.

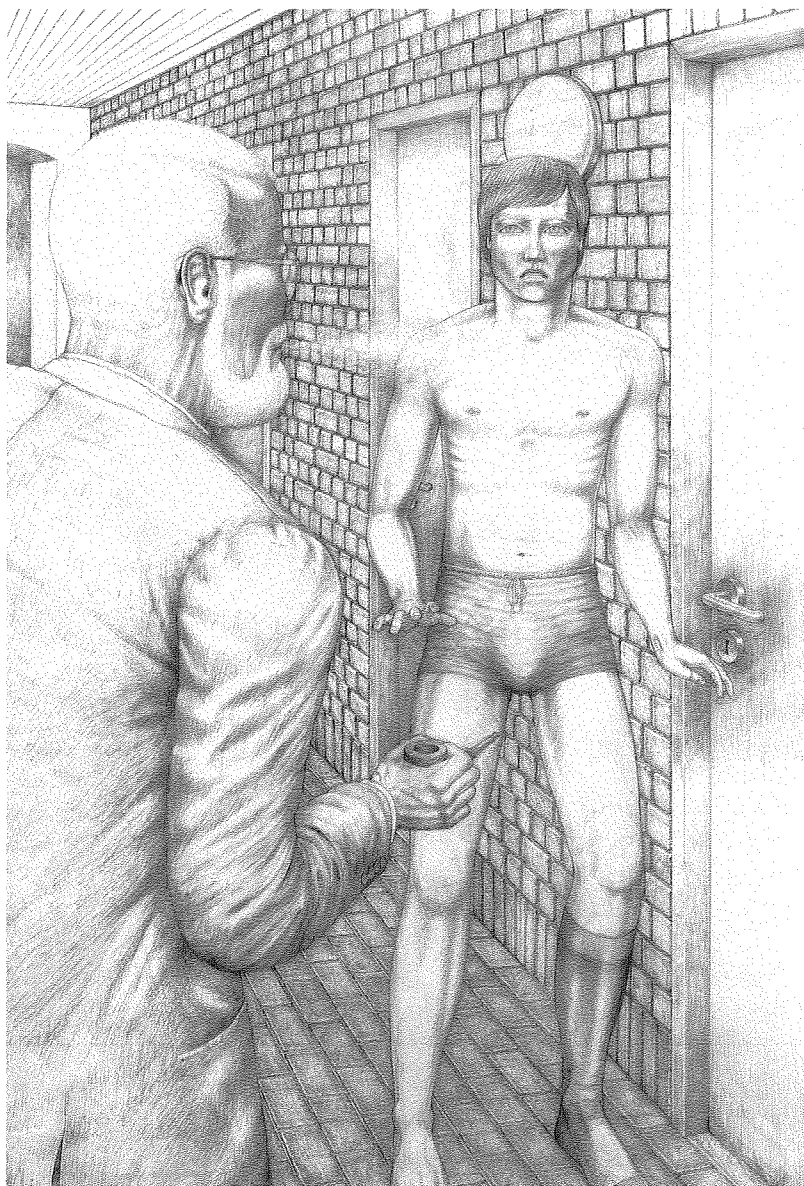
In other drawings and oil and airbrush paintings, abandoned structures also serve as darkly humorous memorials to grandiose cosmologies. *Walt-Whitman-Gedenk-Raffinerie* (*Walt Whitman Memorial Refinery*) (2005) is an image of an automobile wreck in front of a refinery decorated by a sculpture of the title’s bearded poet striding forward, broad-brimmed hat in hand. It ironically juxtaposes nineteenth-century



Entführung (Abduction), 2001
Private Collection

America’s transcendentalist vision of a spiritual union of nature and humanity with the contemporary reality of peak oil, global warming, and stock market crashes. *Kryogenisches Institut “Wilhelm Reich”* (*Cryogenic Institute “Wilhelm Reich”*) (2007) features a white-tiled structure labeled “Cold Store” that conflates two wildly idealistic and controversial pseudosciences of immortality by proposing a deep-freeze facility for the bodies of those who have partaken of German psychologist Reich’s life-giving, sexually charged orgone energy. And *Vision 6: The Herbert Bayer Cigarette Kiosk* (2007) depicts a geometric structure inspired by Bauhaus architect Herbert Bayer’s 1924 design for a newspaper stand that is topped—in one of the artist’s many incongruous twists—by a giant ape. Of the kiosk, which is currently being realized as a sculpture in Cologne, Slama has written, “The cigarette is a phallic symbol of childish oral fixation, and yet a source of dignity. It is both [...] a symbol of the sex urge, and of Thanatos, the death urge. The cigarette shaped chimney, a hollow tube, serves as a monument and a memorial, as a warning to future civilizations. A very strong gorilla guards the Kiosk against acts of disrespect.”⁴

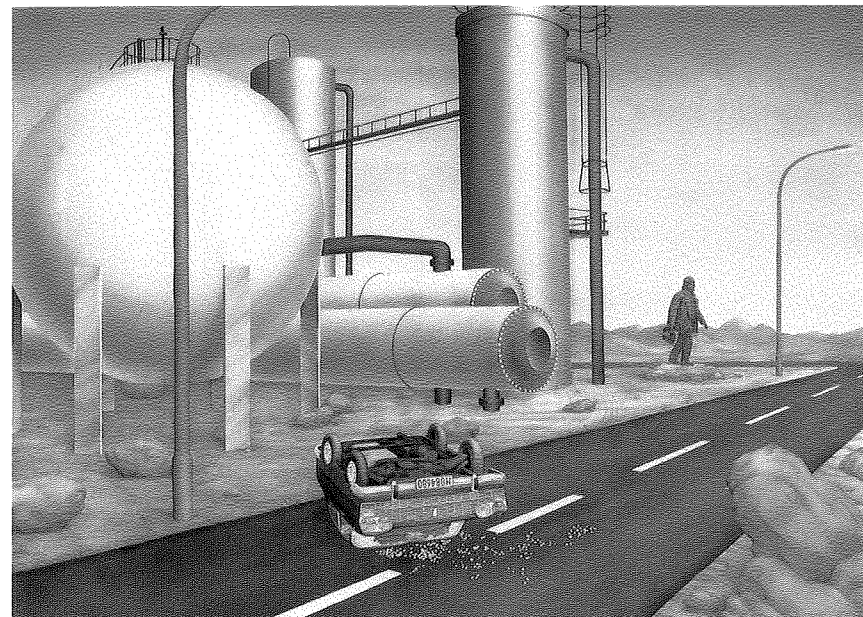
Another group of pencil-on-paper drawings focus on groups of figures locked in high-wrought psychic dramas. *Begegnung mit der Autoritätsfigur* (*Encounter With the Authority Figure*) (2004), like many of Slama’s works, is a veritable smorgasbord of psychosexual symbolism. It depicts a young man wearing a pair of tight shorts and one sock meeting a bearded, suit-clad older man outside a doorway. The white-haired and bearded “authority figure,” who bears more than a passing resemblance to Sigmund Freud, exhales a puff of smoke while the stem of his pipe points at the prominent crotch of the younger man, whose head is haloed, Christ-like, by a round wall lamp behind it. This same white-haired and bearded pipe smoker recurs in many of Slama’s works—in *Dr. Demiurg* (*Dr. Demiurge*) (2007) as the title’s creator deity; in *Die geheimnisvolle*



Begegnung mit der Autoritätsfigur (Encounter with the Authority Figure), 2004
Collection Shelley Fox Aarons and Philip Aarons

opposite page, top: *Walt-Whitman-Gedenk-Raffinerie (Walt Whitman Memorial Refinery), 2005*
Collection Beth Rudin DeWoody

opposite page, bottom: *Geröllmine (Rubble Mine), 2005*
Private Collection, Germany

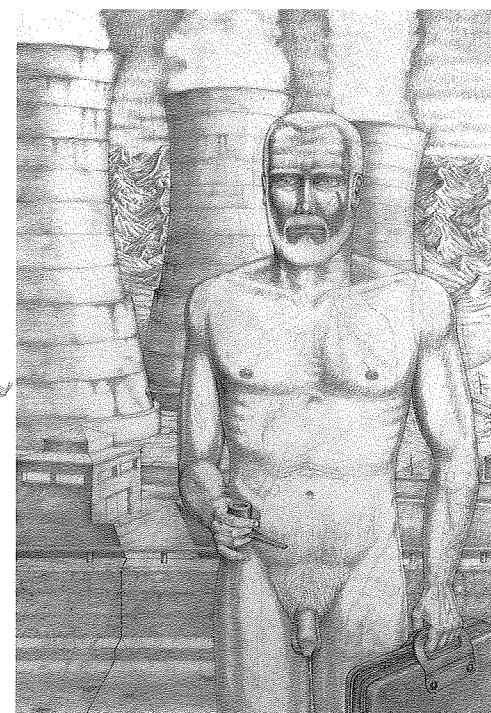


Erfindung/Das Positronengehirn (*The Mysterious Discovery/The Positronic Brain*) (2006) as a self-satisfied inventor; in *Hinterhalt* (*Ambush*) (2002) as a club-wielding assailant pursuing a young man in a tracksuit in front of Frank Lloyd Wright's 1910 Robie House in Chicago; and in *Entführung* (*Abduction*) (2001) as the kidnapper of a young boy whose straight brown hair and sharp jawline, seen from the back as he peers out the window of a car, resemble the artist's.

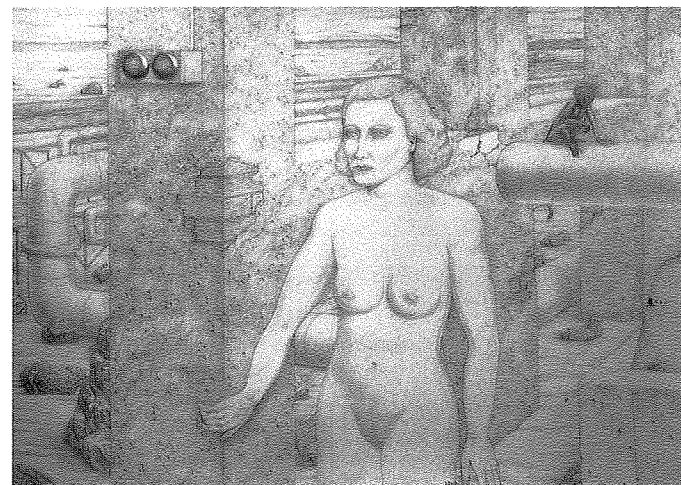
Slama, who grew up without a male parent in the household, is aware that his own "fatherlessness" has inspired an interest in masculine power and even believes that it has contributed to his deep disdain for the German *Vaterland*, or "Father Country." Although fraught with disturbing themes from the work of Freud, Reich, and Carl Gustav Jung, his psychodramas, Oedipal and otherwise, are often leavened with deadpan humor. For example, the graphite drawing, *Der Wärmetechniker* (*The Thermal Engineer*) (2005), an image of another white-haired and bearded figure—this time with a G.I. Joe-style dueling scar on his cheek—standing stark naked in front of three steam-belching cooling towers, absurdly conflates the technocratic and the transcendental. The literally and figuratively phallic figure, who calmly clutches a pipe and briefcase, Slama says, represents an "*Übermensch*," or superman, a being described both by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and science fiction writer A. E. van Vogt, who "believes in his own capacity for development and adaptation," and also a Reichian "genital character," a person embodying "an equilibrium of tension and relaxation as well as creative and destructive forces."

Whether painting a self-regulating and self-possessed factory, as in *Zementwerk* (*Cement Factory*) (2008), or drawing a mystical allegory of paternity, adolescence, and gender identity, as in *Die Rückkehr des verlorenen Sohnes* (*The Return of the Prodigal Son*) (2007), Slama insists he wants to "make a strong impression and tackle the big questions of life." He is aware that, because his painstakingly handmade works are made on a scale and schedule much smaller and slower than most things in contemporary life, they are not quite of this world. In fact, he believes "that art earns its value and dignity through its ability to remain a powerful still point in a world whose appearance is continually being altered by new layers of symbolic thought." In this sense, Slama's closest contemporary may be the German Renaissance painter and engraver Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), renowned for his allegorical *Weltbilder*, or "world pictures," encapsulating a culture's outlook. In his famous detail- and symbol-laden etching *Melancholia I* (1514), Dürer uses a powerfully persuasive style of realism to depict a brooding female angel surrounded by instruments and specimens from esoteric realms of science and mathematics. This print, one of the most-interpreted in the history of art, is widely regarded as an emblem of the limits of learning to comprehend the cosmic order underlying the universe. Although Slama's forms of melancholia are at times more personal and playful than Dürer's, they, too, deploy a masterful style of realism and a polyglot understanding of life's mysteries to envision vast, uncharted worlds located just beyond the boundaries of consciousness.

Notes, see page 13



top: *Der Wärmetechniker* (*The Thermal Engineer*), 2005
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem, Cologne



bottom: *Nach einem Strahlenkrieg* (*After a Radiation War*), 2006
Collection Alexander Schröder, Berlin

Biography and Selected Bibliography

1967

Born in Schwarzach, Austria

1986–1992

Study of Fine at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf

Solo Exhibitions

2009

Torsten Slama: Ausstellung für die Zukunft
(Exhibition for the Future), Galerie Vera
Gliem, Cologne

2007

Sexualität und Angst (Sexuality and Anxiety),
Galerie Karin Guenther, Hamburg
Illustrated Visions of the Future, Hotel Gallery,
London

2005

Republikanische Automaten/Szenen aus der
Systemzeit/Nachgestellt von
einem Roboterensemble (Republican
Automatons/Scenes From the Weimar System
Time/Reenacted By a Robotic Ensemble),
Galerie Vera Gliem, Cologne

2003

Gärten der Maschinenkultur (Gardens of Machine
Culture), Galerie Vera Gliem, Cologne

2000

Nachmittags, in Manfred-City (Afternoon in
Manfred-City), Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich

1999

Humor in einer Halschlagader (Humor In a
Jugular Vein), Johnen & Schöttle, Cologne

1997

Jazz Me Blues, Lukas & Hoffmann, Cologne

1994

Der wilde Planet und andere Geschichten (The
Wild Planet and Other Stories), Lukas &
Hoffmann, Köln (with Katja Davar)

Zur ewigen Lampe (At the Sign of the Eternal
Lamp), Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Kopenhagen
(with Kai Althoff)

1993

Stop Ylem, Buchholz & Buchholz, Cologne

1992

Lukas & Hoffmann, Berlin

Selected Group Exhibitions

2009

KölnSkulptur 5—Reality Check, Skulpturenpark
Köln, Cologne

2008

Faces and Figures (Revisited), Marc Jancou
Contemporary, New York

2007

The Present Order is the Disorder of the Future,
Museum de Hallen, Haarlem, the Netherlands

2006

In the City of Last Things, Site Gallery, Sheffield
(with Katja Davar und Paul Noble)

2003

deutschmalereizweitausenddreißig, Frankfurter
Kunstverein, Frankfurt

2001

Und Keine Hinkte, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf

2000

Viva Maria III, Karin Guenther, Hamburg

1998

Ars viva 98/99: Installationen, Kulturkreis in der
deutschen Wirtschaft in Bundesverband der
deutschen Industrie, Cologne (traveled)

1994

La Boum, New Reality Mix, Stockholm (with
Lothar Hempel)

1993

E, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin

1992

Tattoo Collection, Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, and
Andrea Rosen, New York

Selected Bibliography

2009

Slama, Torsten. "Herbert-Beyer-Zigarettenkiosk/
Atomskulptur." In *Köln Skulptur 5—Reality*
Check. exh. cat. Cologne: Stiftung
Skulpturenpark Köln, 2009.

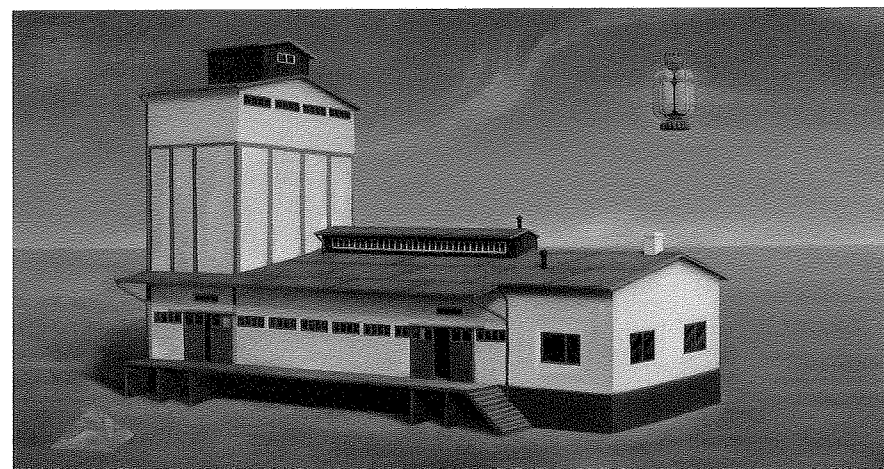
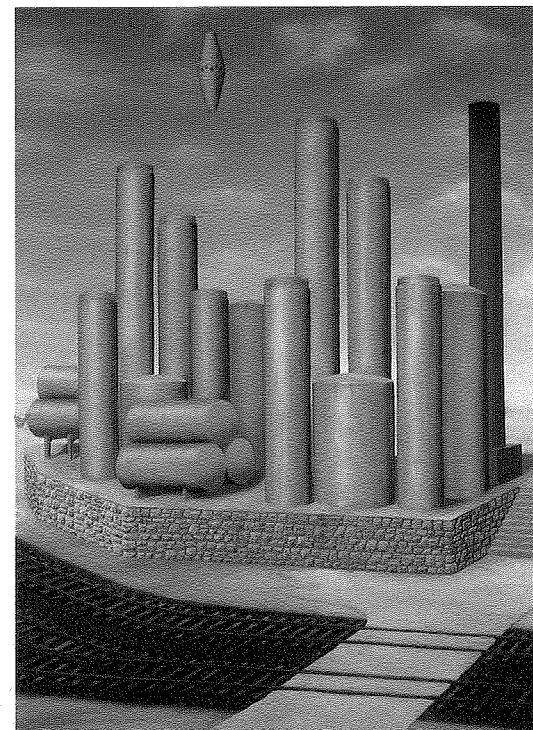
2007

Coomer, Martin. "Torsten Slama." *TimeOut*
London (May 2–8, 2007): 42.

2005

Bell, Kirsty. "Torsten Slama." *Frieze* no. 91
(May 2005): 98.

Dexter, Emma. *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in*
Drawing. London: Phaidon, 2005.



top: HYDRA-Hydrierwerke mit aufsteigender Überwachungseinheit
(HYDRA-Hydrogenation Plant with Ascending Surveillance Unit), 2008

bottom: Wilhelm-Reich-Raiffeisen-Institut (Wilhelm-Reich-Raiffeisen-Institut Cooperative Institute), 2008
Both courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem, Cologne

Catalogue of the Exhibition

Dimensions are listed height
preceding width preceding depth

Begegnung mit der Autoritätsfigur
(*Encounter With the Authority Figure*), 2004
Pencil on paper
39 3/8 x 27 1/2 inches
Collection Shelley Fox Aarons and Philip Aarons

*Beim Vegetotherapeuten/
Die Ermordung Christi*
(*At the Vegetotherapist/
The Murder of Christ*), 2005
Pencil on paper
39 3/8 x 27 1/2 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

Combined Water Pump-Orgone
Accumulator, 2006
Mixed media on Bristol board
27 1/2 x 39 3/8 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

Der Hypnotiseur (The Hypnotist),
2004
Pencil on paper
39 3/8 x 27 1/2 inches
Luis Campaña Collection

Der Ledermann (The Leather Man),
2004
Pencil on paper
27 1/2 x 39 3/8 inches
Luis Campaña Collection

Der Wärmetechniker
(*The Thermal Engineer*), 2005
Pencil on paper
39 3/8 x 27 1/2 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

*Die Dynamik angewandter
Wissenschaftlichkeit (The Dynamics of
Applied Scientificity)*, 2000
Lambda print
37 3/4 x 27 3/4 inches
Edition 1/3
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

Die Erfindung des universellen Vaters
(*The Discovery of the Universal
Father*), 2007
Pencil on Bristol board
40 1/8 x 28 3/4 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

*Die geheimnisvolle Erfindung/
Das Positronengehirn (The Mysterious
Invention/The Positronic Brain)*, 2006
Pencil on paper
39 3/8 x 27 1/2 inches
Collection Darren Flook, London

Die Präsidentin der Instrumentalität
(*The President of Instrumentality*),
2007
Pencil on paper
39 3/4 x 27 1/2 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

Die Rückkehr des verlorenen Sohnes
(*The Return of the Prodigal Son*),
2007
Pencil on Bristol board
40 1/8 x 28 3/4 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

Die Überlebende (The Survivor), 2007
Airbrush and pencil on Bristol board
40 1/4 x 28 3/4 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

*Die Vaporisierung des Amerikanischen
Mittelstandes (Blick auf den elften
Planeten)*
(*The Vaporization of the American
Middle Class (View of the Eleventh
Planet)*), 2007
Mixed media on Bristol board
27 1/2 x 39 3/8 inches
Luis Campaña Collection

Die Vatermaschine
(*The Father Machine*), 2007
Pencil on Bristol board
40 1/8 x 28 3/4 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

Dr. Demiurg (Dr. Demiurge), 2007
Pencil on Bristol board
40 1/8 x 28 3/4 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

Entführung (Abduction), 2001
Pencil on paper
8 3/8 x 11 1/8 inches
Private Collection

Geröllmine (Rubble Mine), 2005
Ink on illustration board
28 3/4 x 40 1/8 inches
Private Collection, Germany

Götzenbildnis des Wolfgang- "Joy"
Engel (Idol of Wolfgang "Joy" Engel),
2006
Oil on canvas
47 1/4 x 27 3/8 inches
Collection Alexander Schröder, Berlin

Hefe-Experimental-Labor
(*Experimental Wheat Laboratory*),
2006
Ink on illustration board
28 3/4 x 40 1/8 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

Hinterhalt (Ambush), 2002
Pencil on paper
16 1/2 x 11 3/4 inches
Courtesy Andrew Kreps Gallery,
New York

Holzfabrik (Wood Factory), 2008
Oil on canvas
65 1/8 x 48 1/4 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

*HYDRA-Hydrierwerke mit
aufsteigender Überwachungseinheit*
(*HYDRA-Hydrogenation Plant with
Ascending Surveillance Unit*), 2008
Oil on canvas
65 1/8 x 48 1/4 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

Kryogenisches Institut "Wilhelm Reich"
(*Cryogenic Institute "Wilhelm Reich"*),
2005
Ink on illustration board
28 3/4 x 40 1/8 inches
Collection Beth Rudin DeWoody

*Labor für Lebensmittelchemie mit
Bürohaus und Arbeiterwohnheim*
(*Laboratory for Food Chemistry with
Office Building and Worker
Residence*), 2006
acrylic on linen
33 1/2 x 47 1/4 inches
Luis Campaña Collection

*Nach dem Strahlenkrieg (After the
Radiation War)*, 2004
Pencil on paper
39 3/8 x 27 3/8 inches
Courtesy Marc Jancou Contemporary,
New York, and Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

Nach einem Strahlenkrieg
(*After a Radiation War*), 2006
Pencil on paper
39 3/8 x 35 1/8 inches
Collection Alexander Schröder, Berlin

SAPA-Bionenfermenter
(*SAPA-Bion Fermenter*), 2006
Mixed media on Bristol board
27 1/2 x 39 3/8 inches
Luis Campaña Collection

Sirupkocherei (Molasses Digester),
2005
Ink on illustration board
28 3/4 x 40 1/8 inches
Private Collection Heidelberg,
Germany

Transistorenfabrik (Transistor Factory),
2005
Ink on illustration board
33 3/8 x 47 1/4 inches
Luis Campaña Collection

Vision 1: The House of The Geomant,
2007
Pencil on paper
27 3/8 x 39 3/8 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne, and Hotel, London

*Vision 2: The Abandoned Transonic
Windtunnel*, 2007
Pencil and Chinese ink on paper
28 3/4 x 40 1/8 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne, and Hotel, London

Vision 3: The Wilhelm Reich
Cryogenic Institute, 2007
Pencil, colored pencil, and Chinese
ink on paper
28 3/4 x 40 1/8 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne, and Hotel, London

Vision 4: The Secret Missile Silo, 2007
Pencil and Chinese ink on paper
40 1/8 x 28 3/4 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne, and Hotel, London

Vision 5: The Father Institute, 2007
Pencil on paper
28 3/4 x 40 1/8 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne, and Hotel, London

Walt-Whitman-Gedenk-Raffinerie
(*Walt Whitman Memorial Refinery*),
2005
Ink on illustration board
28 3/4 x 40 1/8 inches
Collection Beth Rudin DeWoody

Weiche, herbstnahe Luft weht von West
(*A Soft Autumnal Breeze Blows from
the West*), 2003
Ink on illustration board
23 1/4 x 16 1/8 inches
Collection Beth Rudin DeWoody

Wilhelm-Reich-Raiffeisen-Institut
(*Wilhelm-Reich-Raiffeisen-Institut
Cooperative Institute*), 2008
Oil on canvas
35 1/2 x 66 1/8 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

Zementwerk (Cement Factory), 2008
Oil on canvas
48 3/4 x 34 1/2 inches
Courtesy Galerie Vera Gliem,
Cologne

Zyklopische Landschaft mit Glashaus
(*Cyclopean Landscape with Glass
House*), 2003
Colored pencil and pencil on paper
23 1/4 x 16 1/8 inches
Collection Daniel Buchholz and
Christopher Müller, Cologne

ESSAY NOTES

1. The term Magic Realism first appeared in Franz Roh's *Nach-Expressionismus. Magischer Realismus. Probleme der neuesten europäischen Malerei*. (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1925).

2. This and all subsequent quotes unless otherwise indicated, Torsten Slama, in conversation with the author, April 4, 2009.

3. Slama also writes poetry and science fiction under various pseudonyms taken from E.E. "Doc" Smith's fantasy stories of space pirates. Examples are published online at <http://www.nalizok.com/> (accessed April 15, 2009).

4. Torsten Slama, unpublished notes, 2007.

