

## **In a constricted space**

The American painter and sculptor Simon Raab in two Mannheim exhibitions

by Milan Chlumsky

“Two great matters interest me: one concerns the frustration that originates in the inability to define truth and reality. The other concerns the limitless talent of man to do both good and evil”, says the philosopher among the stars of contemporary American art, Simon Raab, in a personal interview. Now, after presentations in Austria and Italy, the artist has opened two exhibitions in Mannheim: one in the Kunstverein, the other in Galerie Zimmermann, which will also be represented for the first time at Art Miami with his work.

In a series of large-format relief portraits – of figures such as Queen Elizabeth, Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill and Michelangelo – he has continuously refined his search for the two great axes of reality and truth, as well as of good and evil. Raab first applies the contours of his pictures to large aluminum surfaces, which he then “folds together” (by hand or with the help of a big hammer), before “stretching” them on a conventional wooden frame and painting them right to the edges, so that the relief-like structure of the surface is highlighted. This provides him with the freedom to question the meaning of sin, justice, truth and reality in an apparently naïve manner.

All of the pictures contain small, disrespectful deviations. Raab only took up art at the age of 30, which meant that the “orthodoxy of the academies” had little influence on him. Instead it was the magic of language, of the verse, of poetry, which led him to turn away from art-historical models and to place himself at the centre of his own questioning.

“Behind These Bars” – the title of the exhibition – was initially a poem. It names loneliness, abandonment and the recollection of lost happiness as the true reasons for his state of withdrawal, which is transferred logically from the language to the picture relief.

Sometimes Simon Raab’s paintings are too colorful, too expressive, too gaudy for European tastes. Yet it is clear that he finds a quite unusual way to interweave poetry and painting with each other: the difficult-to-form material of the aluminum sheet conveys not only lively colors but also subtle messages. In the Mannheimer Kunstverein a number of portraits and large-format pictures with a reference to art history can be seen along with the cycle, while in the Galerie Zimmermann folded aluminum sculptures are shown, illustrating that, for Raab, the step from two- to three-dimensionality is but a small one.

Info: Mannheimer Kunstverein, until 22.5. Galerie Peter Zimmermann, until 14.5., catalog 20 Euro. Internet: [www.mannheimer-kunstverein.de](http://www.mannheimer-kunstverein.de), [www.galerie-zimmermann.de](http://www.galerie-zimmermann.de)

Caption: The American painter Simon Raab in Mannheim. Photo: Milan Chlumsky