



Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I*, 1514, engraving, Vevey, Jenish Museum.

**Mélancolie. Génie et folie en Occident**  
Exhibition at the Grand Palais, Paris,  
Oct. 13, 2005–Jan. 16, 2006.

Whatever the final truth of the matter, there is no denying the persistence through history of the equation between artistic genius and madness. This blockbuster exhibition traces the hoary theme across Western culture, from Classicism to modernity. Known to the ancients as one of the temperaments or 'humours', melancholia was identified with black bile and ascribed to the influence of the planet Saturn, its symptoms embracing torpor, world-weariness, deep musing, depression and outright insanity. Eventually, all these were seen as attributes of creative genius. Cesare Lombroso it was who, as a psychiatrist-criminologist with distinctly dotty compulsions of his own (such as weighing the brains of prisoners and madmen), clinched matters in his notorious *Genio e follia* of 1864. The rage for synonyms continued, embracing such technical locutions as neurasthenia, psychosis and schizophrenia.

Eliciting loans from across the globe, the distinguished curator Jean Clair has assembled startling works from several centuries, from a Classical statue of Ajax's suicide to Anselm Kiefer's *Melancholia*, a flying machine made of lead. A surprising number of paintings bear the literal title *Melancholy*, for instance: Corot's image of a sad girl in a ball-gown and De Chirico's

bemusing townscape with a statue of the dreaming Ariadne. Landscapes by Caspar David Friedrich demonstrate how empty horizons reek of melancholia, while dozens of portraits testify that to prop one's head on one's hand is a sure sign of the malady, that is: of genius. Albrecht Dürer's famous engraving *Melencolia I* shows an Angel in just this telling pose, brooding amid a litter of enigmatic objects. Clair nominates this as his archetype, billing it as representing 'a fracture between subject and world', and thereby aligning it with modern notions of schizophrenia and autism.

The iconography of melancholia certainly makes for a rich and provocative exhibition. Unfortunately there is a glaring gap in Clair's eclecticism, namely that significant branch of Outsider Art we might loosely call 'the art of the truly mad'. That there is no place in the Grand Palais for the likes of Aloïse Corbaz, Adolf Wölfli or Carlo Zinelli seems a great pity, for by now those onetime marginals have surely earned their place alongside Bosch, John Martin, Munch, Artaud and the rest.

The exhibition will be shown in Berlin during 16 February – 7 May 2006. There is a weighty French catalogue: *Mélancolie. Génie et folie en Occident*, edited by Jean Clair, Réunion des Musées nationales / Gallimard, Paris, 2005. 504 pp. 300 colour and 80 b & w illns. Hardcover. 50 Euros. ISBN 2-7118-4880-9.

**Roger Cardinal**



Kurt Haas

**Kurt J. Haas**  
Objet Trouvé, Paris, Sept. 9–29, 2005.  
Selected Works from the 1970s and  
1980s, Galerie Andy Jllien, Zürich,  
Nov. 5–17, 2005.

The Swiss artist Kurt J. Haas was born in Zürich in 1935 and laboured in various fields before leaving the workaday world to focus on his art. At the time, he was in his early forties. During an interview at his home in Zürich, he recalled that he had been moved by the works of Paul Klee and Joan Miró when, as a young man, he had encountered them in museums. A proud autodidact, he has strived, he said, 'to make something entirely my own, not a copy of anything I've seen.'

In Paris, Haas showed playing-card-size drawings as well as larger works on paper made with the coloured ballpoint pens that have become his signature tools. The artist also uses felt-tipped pens, acrylic paint and wax crayons in pencil form that are known as China markers in the U.S.A., where they are manufactured. With these media, Haas invents multi-limbed, multi-headed, cartoon-like forms that bring to mind the pictographic writing systems of ancient civilisations and whimsical creatures from imaginary, futuristic worlds. Haas says that his images evolve spontaneously, their lines and colour schemes emerging organically as he draws, with no specific themes or compositions in mind.

In Zürich, Galerie Andy Jllien's concise retrospective revealed the evolution of Haas's technical and formal ideas. On view were elegant pencil drawings of dreamy forests and colourful gouaches. Their free-flowing compositions or loose grids of abstract forms, suggesting trees and plants, could easily hold their own alongside the psychologically intense works of the 1940s period of so-called American surrealism (by such legendary modernists as Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb or Mark Tobey) that presaged a generation's full-blown encounter with more impulsive, free-form abstract expressionism.

**Edward M. Gomez**



Lubos Pliny

**System in Chaos: New Art Brut from the Czech Republic**  
Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York,  
October 15–November 26, 2005

Organised by Terezie Zemánková, granddaughter of the artist Anna Zemánková and curator for the abcd Collection, this show introduced the work of four individuals from the Czech Republic whose work meets the original definition of art brut – unprecedented aesthetic innovation emerging from an alchemical mix of creative intensity and freedom from indoctrination by official styles or canons.

Lubos Pliny's intricate drawings, at once diagrammatic and decorative, revealed the artist's keen interest in anatomy. In such erotically charged works as *The Couple (Two Hanged Tea Bags)* (2004), Pliny's unique mix of linear lyricism and hallucinatory attention to anatomical detail stole the show. By contrast, the ethereal, pencil-drawn architectural fantasies of Zbynek Semarek suggested otherworldly vision; also of interest were this artist's lush gouaches.

The common formal strategy linking all four artists – an extreme devotion to rendering all manner of observed and imagined minutiae – felt nearly overwhelming in the cryptic, untitled pen-and-marker drawings of Zdenek Kosek. These compositions, each an organic mix of circular forms and endless text fragments, felt pregnant with elusive meaning. The comparatively understated, quietly haunting pencil drawings of trains by Leos Wertheimer offered a pleasant counterpoint to the exhibition's intensity.

At a time when the folk/outsider/self-taught field is being flooded with mediocrity and charlatanism, his show marked a rare glimpse into creative authenticity.

**Jenifer P. Borum**