

## **Guido Zehetbauer-Salzer: Homage to the forest**

"To the eyes of the man who has imagination, nature is imagination itself." *William Blake*

For almost 20 years now, Guido Zehetbauer-Salzer has been dealing intensely and almost exclusively with the forest in his artistic work. The infinite variety and beauty in the change of seasons, the abundance and fertility of nature, the experience with all senses, the safety and familiarity that Zehetbauer-Salzer feels in the forest are an inexhaustible source of inspiration for him. He loses himself in the forest, and in the process finds himself - or to put it in the words of the American natural philosopher John Muir: "Into the forest I go to lose my mind and find my soul".

For Zehetbauer-Salzer, the forest represents a personal as well as global healing space. A healing space that is acutely in danger (although as a last consequence it is not the forest but humankind that is at risk): Global CO2 emissions continue to rise year after year, forest fires are becoming more frequent and more widespread due to the incipient climate change, and despite all this, rain forests are being visibly destroyed by man at an unprecedented rate. Admittedly, Austria is an island of the blessed as far as its forests are concerned: after Slovenia, we are the most densely forested country in the EU, and our forest areas are even growing every year. Nevertheless, we here in Europe cannot wash our hands off and shift all the blame onto the "evil non-European jungle destroyers", because our consumption behavior is a crucial factor in their actions. Apart from that, we Europeans have, after all, already cut down 80%-90% of our original forests since we settled this continent.

In the end, the forest will have the longer breath (in the truest sense of the word); nature will recapture its place; the only question is whether with or without us humans. For with the destruction of the forests, humankind saws quite proverbially at the branch on which it sits.

If you reflect on it, even the greatest optimist can become a naysayer in light of the looming climate catastrophe. Guido Zehetbauer-Salzer describes himself as an inveterate pessimist even without acute crises, but the encounter with the forest does not make him despair even more but lets him ecstasize. The forest, with all its power, diversity and magnificence, shows him vividly that life is a feast. For Zehetbauer-Salzer, dealing with the forest is a way of visualizing the beauty and abundance of life, an always potent means of looking positively into the present (and perhaps also into the future). Painting pictures of the forest represents for him a way to remember this positive experience again and again, to find the forest in himself, so to speak. With his forest pictures, Guido Zehetbauer-Salzer paints himself an optimist.

He paints for the egoistic reason of recording the happiness felt in the forest and for the altruistic reason of sharing this happiness with others. The theme of the destruction of this infinitely precious ecosystem naturally resonates in the paintings, but Zehetbauer-Salzer does not take the position of the admonitory moralist, but rather that of the admirer who, by highlighting the beauty of the forest, pleads for its protection.

It is not Guido Zehetbauer-Salzer's intention to paint the forest true to nature, but as he perceives it, as he feels it, sees it or even wishes it. For example, there are no people in his paintings: The forest is always for itself, deserted. Only in the paths, the forestry interventions, the traces of humankind are noticeable.

However, it is never fictitious, purely imagined forests, but rather very concrete forested areas that Zehetbauer-Salzer effectively portrays. Every abstraction - emphasis or reduction - that he performs in painting is always made in favor of the authentic characterization of the forest: the inessential is omitted, color nuances and contrasts are intensified, and

striking structures are emphasized until the forest opens up its poetry to even the most remote observer and reveals itself to be a real fairy-tale forest. The images highlight the brilliance and ingenuity inherent in every detail of nature when observed closely. In Zehetbauer-Salzer's eyes, the interplay of nuances intensifies into vibrant color compositions that are far removed from the greens and browns that one would expect to predominate in the forest. For Zehetbauer-Salzer, it shines in all the colors of the spectrum, he teases them out of shadow play, tree bark, and hollow paths and then transfers them to the canvas in intense color force. Thus, a winter forest can dress in strong blue; an autumn forest can be an explosion of red, orange, and pink, and a shady summer forest in magenta, green, blue, and all imaginable colors can unfold its magic.

A crucial experience on this path was becoming acquainted with Emil Nolde's color-intensive depictions of his North German homeland, the Elbe estuary, and the sea.

The freedom Nolde took in the watercolors and oil paintings, the degree of abstraction, especially in the choice of colors, made a lasting impression on Zehetbauer-Salzer. Nolde, too, was not concerned with painting the landscape as true to nature as possible, but with reproducing his feelings at the sight of it: "Every single watercolor by Emil Nolde fills an entire wall and radiates from a distance. The viewer is attracted to the luminous images even before he recognizes what is depicted." (...) "Thus, his landscape paintings (...) are also not just mood paintings, nor reflections of accidental atmospheric phenomena in the course of the year or day, but true 'landscapes of the soul,' free and direct expressions of artistic and human experience." (quoted from: <https://www.lotsearch.de/lot/tiefblaues-meer-unter-gelb-violettem-himmel-br-tiefblaues-meerunter-3266113>)

Zehetbauer-Salzer's mode of expression has changed over the decades of examination: In the beginning, he painted with many small brushstrokes in which every color at his disposal was pure. The technique is somewhat reminiscent of the painting style of the Impressionists, who also juxtaposed pure colors with a clearly discernible brushstroke, which only blended in the eye of the viewer from a distance. The radical, small-scale colorfulness of those early forest paintings, which sought to do justice to the richness of the forest down to the last detail, leads to an intense, energetically shimmering overall impression.

The increasing familiarity with the sujet forest led Zehetbauer-Salzer to a calming of the surfaces, an ever stronger reduction of the pictorial means, to a filtering out of the essential, a focusing on characteristic structures. The atmospheric impression is now no longer transmitted by a wealth of detail, but by areas of color that blur into one another. The ductus became freer, more generous to the point of two-dimensionality, in which the branches are only occasionally quoted. At the same time, the increasing reduction in the formal led to a higher degree of abstraction in the colorfulness, which, however, became somewhat softer. Built-up from glazed layers, Zehetbauer-Salzer now arranges the colors, which he initially placed next to each other, one on top of the other, thereby achieving a two-dimensional, yet deep, gently iridescent colorfulness.

In Guido Zehetbauer-Salzer's graphic work, the forest presents itself as wilder, more impetuous. In contrast to the paintings, it is not large areas of color that transmit the atmosphere, but rather - in keeping with the artistic medium - impulsively placed strokes that attempt to capture the forest in its characteristic features. The drawings appear formally more abstract than the paintings, challenging the viewer's imaginative power more to recognize the forest in them. Although the drawings appear completely different, they basically represent Zehetbauer-Salzer's way of painting. Here, too, it is a matter of comprehending basic structures, only in a linear form. Here, too, Zehetbauer-Salzer works his way from a thicket of lines to those few strokes in which, in a concentrated way, everything is communicated that the many

wanted to say. In the intensity of the colorfulness and the impulsiveness of the characteristic style, the drawings are reminiscent of the early paintings, but through well-dosed reduction and focusing on the essentials, Zehetbauer-Salzer succeeds in saying more with less. The simultaneousness of impulsivity and concentration leads to powerful, harmonious images in the field of tension between horror vacui and tabula rasa.

Basically, Zehetbauer-Salzer implements in his paintings what nature can teach us humans at its best: to reflect on the essential, to perceive the here and now, and to recognize and enjoy the richness of the moment to the full.

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