

# GALERIE KARSTEN GREVE



Louis Soutter, *Tanagras*, 1938, India ink and blue wax crayon on paper, 43.5 x 57.5 cm. Cat Rais. Thévoz 1976 #2716. Photo: Markus Mühlheim, Switzerland

## LOUIS SOUTTER

### *Un Présage*

29.08.2020 – 12.10.2020

Opening on August 29 from 14.00 to 19.00

The *Galerie Karsten Greve* is pleased to present *Un Présage*: an exhibition of drawings and paintings created between 1937 and 1942 by Louis Soutter. Most notable amongst his works are the visionary depictions of the imaginary, which infuse his identifiably modern style. This exhibition features *finger-paintings* from the artist's lattermost creative phase during which bodily contact played a key role in attaining pictorial freedom and simplifying shape. Several additional works on loan from private international collections are shown here alongside pieces that belong to *Galerie Karsten Greve's* remarkable collection. Gathered together, they highlight the importance of Soutter's unique artwork; long relegated to the sidelines of art history.

From 1923 on, Louis Soutter created a prolific body of artwork seemingly out-of-step with society. But the depression and isolation prevalent in Europe in the 1920s and '30s do indeed resurface in the artist's phantasmagorical and peculiar worlds inhabited by struggling beings. He portrays their scheming, foreshadows a murder, and unfurls ominous tales trumpeting mankind's release from the guardianship of the gods, and bloody biblical narratives - as well as events of historical and personal significance.

Whilst all of the artist's work may well carry a prophetic tone echoing the tumultuous era between the two world wars and foreshadowing the Second World War, history grows hazy amongst his figures from pagan ritual or like

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forest spirits. Using a steady flow of images plucked from mythology and theology - dance scenes jostle with frescoes depicting torture - the artist turns History a holding pen of characters and events that he dips into at will.

Soutter toys with linear time; inserts gaps and leaps - he skips from Mannerism-style drawings including an array of portraits, over to paintings rooted in Primitivism. His primitive-style *finger-painting* phase may bring to mind regressive behaviours or physical defects, but it also provides an opportunity to reconsider the act of creating; particularly with regards to merging the essence of Art with that of History. Memory is the base of his approach to drawing; with scenes reminiscent of pictorial representations done on rock by First Nations people in the Americas.

Night scenes of backlit figures join scattered layers of repetitious finger-drawn stamp-like shapes gathering and dancing across the surface of the paper with stars, crosses, grids, raindrops, ropes or sinew. Characters are shown squeezed together, framed in cinematic close ups; captured in states of judgment, fate or fear.

While quite detached from others in everyday life, in Soutter's creative endeavours he clearly belongs to the early 20th century's group of 'sighted' ascetic artists who favour exhausting walks to heighten body and mind; a fundament of their creative process. The technique of coating his fingers with ink or paint and applying it directly to paper makes him hyper-aware of his surroundings. His naked and skeletal figures with hands raised high appear have an invisible net unfurled above their heads, draped out infinitely across the universe; perhaps as a metaphor of Hamlet's far-reaching question: *to be or not to be?* Shakespeare's plays, to which Soutter makes many references, are also found in his 'fourth wall' compositions that borrow from the theatre world. The set's decor is either stripped down or overloaded with lines and dots that intrude on the action. Characters are lined-up as though in a bas-relief, or as pieces of crowded compositions that they are struggling to stay inside of - similar to the way Soutter's artwork clings to the edge of civilization.

The strangeness and pathos that appear regularly in these images build bridges across gaps in the abyss of Time. By creating links between disparities, these drawings gather together like a collective figurehead representing humankind overwhelmed by its loss of intelligent thought. Serving either as legend or as a commentary on the world, these ensemble compositions, often with footnotes, are like sheet music for a sort of "psalm of the daily news".

Born in Morges, Switzerland in 1871, Louis Soutter started out initially on a promising career in music. A talented violinist, he first studied at the Royal Conservatory of Brussels with composer and conductor Eugène Ysaÿe, and later studied drawing; keenly interested in the European visual art *avant-garde*, most notably the Brussels art group *Les XX*. In 1897, he emigrated to the United States where he married Madge Fursman in Colorado Springs. He taught music and drawing there before he was appointed director of the Colorado College Art Department. During that time he also painted classical portraits and worked as an illustrator in the media. However, the artist suffered a series of psychologically stressful incidents when he returned to Switzerland in 1903: his marriage had ended; a bout of typhus had weakened him; and, then came death of his father, and his sister's later on. First Violin in the Geneva Symphony Orchestra, in 1915 he was asked to leave. He did session work with ensembles that accompanied the silent German Expressionist films of the day. Riddled with debt and too eccentric for those around him, it was in 1923, when he was 52, that Soutter was placed in a hospice for the elderly and the needy in Ballaigues, a remote village in the Vaud Jura region of Switzerland. There, he began to draw at a frenetic pace: after a 'Notebook Period' came a 'Mannerist Period' - with ink, pencil and pen. By this stage he is nearly blind and suffering from articular osteoarthritis; he takes up painting, and in 1937 starts doing *finger-paintings*. He is a recluse, but a handful of acquaintances support his creative efforts, amongst them: Jean Giono and the Valloton brothers who show his work in their Lausanne gallery; the architect Le Corbusier, a cousin of Soutter's, who helps publicise his work and writes an article about him published in *Minotaure* magazine in 1936. Le Corbusier organizes exhibitions for him in the United States, but is at odds with the artist's *finger-painting* period, and eventually shuns him. Louis Soutter, cut off from the world and his loved ones by the war, dies at the hospice in 1942. After his death, collectors prize his works. In 1961 the Lausanne *Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts* devotes retrospective exhibitions to him, and later the *Le Corbusier Foundation* unearths a significant part of his drawings. The *Galerie Karsten Greve* dedicated an exhibition to him in 1998 in Cologne, thus contributing to his renown in Europe and worldwide.