

# **SELF-GUIDED TOUR FOR MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

## **LIFE AFTER DEATH: New Leipzig Paintings from the Rubell Family Collection**

February 17 – June 3, 2007

FRYE ART MUSEUM

[www.fryemuseum.org](http://www.fryemuseum.org)

*Life After Death: New Leipzig Paintings from the Rubell Family Collection* was co-curated by Mark Coetzee, Director of the Rubell Family Collection, Miami, and Laura Steward Heon, Director and Curator of SITE Santa Fe. The exhibition was coordinated for the Frye by Chief Curator Robin Held. This self-guide was created by Education Consultant Janelle Graves and Deborah Sepulveda, Manager of Student and Teacher Programs at the Frye Art Museum.

## Getting Started

*Life After Death: New Leipzig Paintings from the Rubell Family Collection* presents paintings and drawings by seven artists from the Leipzig Art Academy. Together they refer to the East German tradition of socialist realist figure painting by creating innovative artworks with mysterious narratives and **surrealist** overtones.

Founded in 1764 and located in the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany), the Leipzig Art Academy is highly regarded for its tradition of figure painting, which, before the reunification of Germany in 1990, was bound to state-mandated **socialist realism**. The school's required focus on figure painting prevented experimentation with subject matter or form, but left technique free to develop. Its rigorous two-year foundation course, which focused primarily on portrait and nude studies, produced some of East Germany's best figure painters.

Six of the exhibition's artists—Tilo Baumgärtel, Tim Eitel, Martin Kobe, Christoph Ruckhäberle, David Schnell, and Matthias Weischer—were students at the Academy in the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The seventh, Neo Rauch, studied there in the 1980s and remained at the school as a teaching assistant throughout the 1990s. Following their graduation, the six younger artists remained content in Leipzig, as did Rauch, rather than follow the path of many other artists who moved to more renowned art centers.

Like other cities in the former GDR, Leipzig is plagued with high unemployment and depopulation. Factories and housing projects stand closed or half-empty, many of them slated for demolition, while ornate buildings from the early twentieth century undergo restoration. These surroundings infuse the artworks with a general feeling of world-weariness and disenchantment that is common in East Germany. The artists' works are first and foremost a product of their time and place.

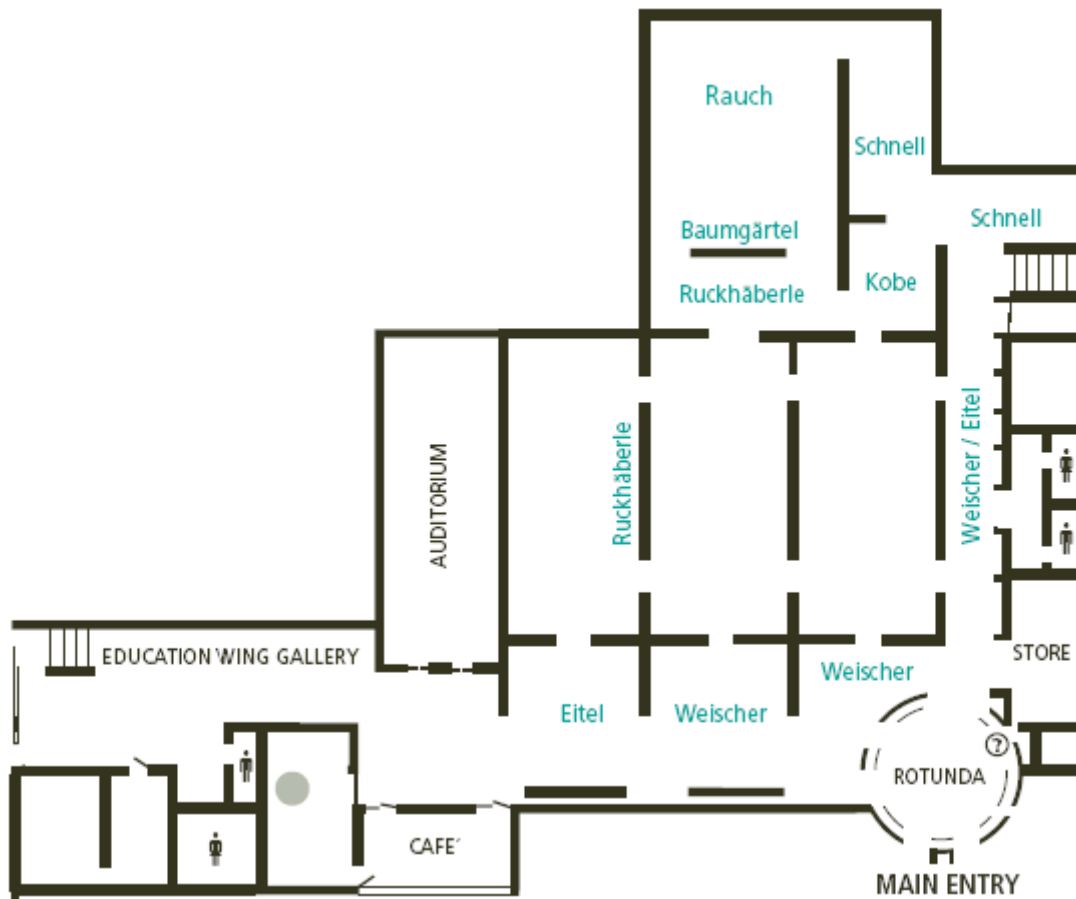
## VOCABULARY

**one-point perspective:** a method developed during the Renaissance of representing a 3-dimensional object, or a particular volume of space, on a flat, 2-dimensional surface.

**socialist realism:** a state mandated artistic style used to create strictly optimistic pictures of communist life. It is a form of visual propaganda based on the principle that the arts should glorify the political and social ideals of communism.

**Surrealism:** a style of art influenced by Sigmund Freud's theories of psychoanalysis. The images found in surrealist artworks often seem confusing and startling like those of dreams. Surrealist artworks may have a realistic, although irrational style that precisely describes dreamlike fantasies (like Salvador Dalí's melting watches). Surrealism also encompasses abstract images created by using spontaneous techniques based on free association (like Joan Miró's organic, amorphous shapes). Surrealist art combines images of the real world with those of the dream world to create a surreality.

## Frye Art Museum Map



This map will help you locate the works of art artworks featured in this self-guided tour. During your tour, you will explore works by seven artists from the Leipzig Art Academy in Germany. While this self-guide focuses on a few pieces of art, you are encouraged to take your time and examine the surrounding artworks as well.

## STOP #1

Step into the first Viewpoints Gallery and examine the painting *St. Ludgerus* by Matthias Weischer.



Matthias Weischer, *St. Ludgerus*, 2004, Oil on linen, 78.75 x 99 in.  
Courtesy of the Rubell Family Collection, Miami

I'm especially interested in the fact that you can show three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional canvas. I feel the world is getting more and more flat, and the vision of people is getting shaped by computers and photographs. I'm trying to give more space, and that is special, I think.

Matthias Weischer

The artist Matthias Weischer is best known for his depictions of unpopulated, furnished rooms. While at first glance this painting looks like a straightforward image of two couches and a coffee table, it also offers a catalogue of the techniques Weischer learned at the Leipzig Art Academy.

First, take note of the black grid he has drawn on top of the paint in the lower half of the canvas. At first glance it looks like a scaling grid. In the past, painters often made a small study for a large painting, drew a grid on top of it, and then transferred the image square by square to a larger canvas. In this case, however, the grid is on top of the painting. Does Weischer mean to imply that this canvas is a study for a much larger one, or is he using this grid as a way to flatten the image, to remind us that we are looking at a painting, not a living room?

In this painting Weischer also leaves traces of a figure he has painted over. On the right side of the composition, two feet, wearing shoes and socks, can be seen dangling under the unoccupied green sofa. Painterly games of presence and absence are also played on the coffee table. There are two wine glasses: one depicted in paint, the other in bare canvas. Likewise, the glass vase holding flowers is painted, but the flowers are represented by bare canvas. Perhaps most interesting is the absence of a view from the window. Rather than depicting a scene through the window's glass, Weischer shows us the painting's canvas by a method called masking. Masking is a method in which tape is applied to a canvas to mask off areas that shouldn't be painted.

### Something to Think About

Some objects in Weischer's painting, such as the arms of the couches, are represented three-dimensionally in space, while others, like the lampshade, are utterly flattened and two-dimensional. Why do you think the artist chose to paint some objects in perspective, while leaving others flat?

## STOP #2

Continue north into another Viewpoints Gallery until you reach Tim Eitel's painting, *Container*.



Courtesy of the Rubell Family Collection, Miami

...you shouldn't confuse the figures' isolation with loneliness. Instead, it's a solitariness—a solitariness as a possibility to concentrate. In moments like these, you draw closer to your own identity.

Tim Eitel

Tim Eitel, *Container*, 2004, Oil on canvas, 82.75 x 118.15 in.

Whereas Matthias Weischer chooses not to include figures as a means to avoid any kind of story or movement within his scenes, Tim Eitel's scenarios involve anonymous, contemporary figures in generic places. His figures, though rarely facing the viewer, add a narrative component. By facing his figures away from the viewer, he draws us in. However, they seem uneasy in their surroundings, never quite belonging to the place they inhabit.

Occasionally, Eitel covers a large portion of canvas with a stark shape in a simple dark color. In *Container*, he covers the right quarter of the canvas with a dark grey bar that flattens the image overall. Explaining his use of these dark masses, the artist states, "It's a weird kind of ambiguity I'm looking for. It has this sense of space and depth, but it's also in a way abstract, like this big void." The vertical gray bar calls to mind the pictorial grids and color blocks of early twentieth-century Dutch artist Piet Mondrian.



Photo by Uwe Walter

Tim Eitel, *Blau und Geld*, 2002

References Mondrian's influence on Eitel

Courtesy Galerie EIGEN + ART Leipzig/Berlin & PaceWildenstein

### Something to Think About and Do

Can you identify with the figure even though he is facing away from you? Do you think you would relate more to the figure if he turned around and looked you in the eye? Why or why not.

Tim Eitel is fascinated with the emotional impact a painting can have on a viewer, not only because of the subject, but also because of the technique. He believes that brushwork has an almost physical impact. How does Eitel's technique affect you emotionally?

While continuing this self-guided tour, consider the emotional impact of each of the artists' techniques.

### STOP #3

Cross through the Frye Founding Collections Galleries and continue east into the Greathouse Galleries to see Christoph Ruckhäberle's painting, *Theater*.



Christoph Ruckhäberle, *Theater*, 2003, Oil on canvas, 74.75 x 110.25 in.  
Courtesy of the Rubell Family Collection, Miami

I use patterns and almost coloring book colors, so nothing seems very distinguished at first. Everything seems very plain.

Christoph Ruckhäberle

Like Tim Eitel, the artist Christoph Ruckhäberle creates narrative paintings, but in his case, the stories are not immediately obvious. His cartoon-like figures appear to interact, but never truly engage one another. They seem to be trying to get out of each other's way. While at first glance this may seem like an ordinary scene, upon closer inspection, some of the figure's actions are puzzling. They seem to be reacting to some danger, while others remain self-absorbed and pay no attention. His figures seem to be frozen in self-contained realms of thought.

This sense of isolation and detachment is common to the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany) where a general feeling of malaise and discontent was prevalent after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The population was not necessarily prepared to integrate into the West.

Ruckhäberle's painting is thickly painted in alternately muted and bold colors. The figures are arranged in groups and they occupy most of the entire surface of the canvas. The painting is like a jigsaw puzzle, where each part is a flat shape filling a gap in the whole: L-shaped elbows and knees connect to rectangular clothing and socks; squares and bars of color form the windows and doors of the architecture. These techniques lend to the sense of emotional detachment.

#### Something to Think About and Do

What was your initial reaction to this artwork?

Often your first impression about an artwork can change once you take the time to look closely at its details. Upon closer inspection of the figures and their actions, did your original impression change or remain the same?

## STOP #4

Walk to the opposite side of the temporary wall that is centered in the gallery. There you will find Tilo Baumgärtel's drawing, *Die Pause*.



Tilo Baumgärtel, *Die Pause (The Pause)*, 2004, Coal on paper, 62.5 x 102 in.  
Courtesy of the Rubell Family Collection, Miami

Perhaps the most mysterious artwork in the exhibition is the large-scale charcoal drawing *Die Pause (The Pause)* by Tilo Baumgärtel. In the foreground of this dreamlike fantasy, two Asian figures occupy an apartment terrace in an anonymous urban neighborhood. The female figure seems to contemplate the traditional ink painting she has created on the wooden floor beneath her. Above the ink painting she has written “The Pause” in German. Seemingly in another world, her companion sits holding a small fishnet and stares at the cuttlefish that has released its ink into the light-filled aquarium before him.

Apart from the erupting ink, a profound stillness pervades the scene, which Baumgärtel has drawn with heavy geometry and sharp angles. Eerie light moves through the water and glass to illuminate the darkened apartment in shadowy, watery pools, an effect echoed in the adjacent apartment windows.

The black ink cloud, the peculiar aquarium light, the rainy afternoon, “Die Pause” in black script, even the presence of seemingly new immigrants, together create a sensation of dislocation and the unknown. The English phrase “living in a fishbowl” does not exist in German, but that is what the artist has evoked. The two Asian figures occupying the terrace in this rainy, forbidding place live in a fishbowl just as surely as the cuttlefish does.

### Something to Think About and Do

The dreamlike quality of this artwork recalls the style of surrealist artists. It seems to illustrate a fantasy or something drawn from the unconscious mind. Write a story about what you think is happening. What are the figures thinking about? What will happen next?

Why do you think Baumgärtel's female figure wrote the words “The Pause” above her ink painting?

## STOP #5

Locate Neo Rauch's painting, *Das Neue*, in this gallery.



Neo Rauch, *Das Neue*, 2003, Oil on canvas, 82.5 x 118.25 in.  
Courtesy of the Rubell Family Collection, Miami

Ten years older than his fellow artists, Neo Rauch is a bridge between the older political painters of East Germany and the young artists of a unified Germany. Rauch studied at the Leipzig Art Academy in the 1980s and remained at the school as a senior teaching assistant throughout the 1990s, working closely with the other artists whose work is included in this exhibition.

Rauch finds inspiration for his paintings in his immediate surroundings: in the people and the flat landscapes around Leipzig. In his painting *Das Neue*, which means The New, three figures who seem unaware of each other uneasily occupy the same space. One figure in a T-shirt stands in the middle of the scene with his back to us. He could be Rauch's contemporary. A seated woman concentrating on her knitting looks as if she could exist almost any time after 1950. A speech balloon emerges from the mouth of a figure with a top hat, pointed beard, and cane. He seems to belong to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. In precise lettering, this figure says "*Das Neue*". This is apparently a bewildering time and place for these refugees of history.

Seamlessly coupling socialist realist techniques with the dreamlike ambiguity of surrealism, Rauch's painting style and figures blend the old and the new, the East and West. Simultaneous actions, parallel scenes, and dream sequences create a jarring and unusual sense of space and forced **perspective**.

### Something to Think About and Do

A pan with fried eggs, a lizard, a bearded bespectacled man's head, and even the background architecture seems to be floating among the main three figures. The sign on one of the background buildings reads "spiel," which means "play." Why do you think Rauch included these odd, dreamlike symbols? What, if anything, do you think they mean?

Write a story as if you are one of the characters in Rauch's painting.

## STOP #6

Make your way into the next Greathouse Gallery where you will find David Schnell's painting, *Bretter*.



David Schnell, *Bretter (Planks)*, 2005, Oil on canvas, 78.75 x 118.13 in.  
Courtesy of the Rubell Family Collection, Miami

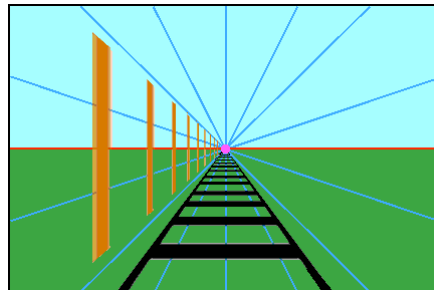
David Schnell's landscapes are painted in **one-point perspective**. All the lines converge at one point, called a vanishing point, near the center of the picture. This technique was invented in the early Renaissance by Filippo Brunelleschi. Brunelleschi created this technique to place figures and architecture in realistic space and create rational pictures in which objects and figures are depicted at proper scale. Schnell, however, uses perspective to place irrational things in rational space. Rarely has this technique been taken to such an extreme.

In his painting, *Bretter (Planks)*, we are inside what seems to be a dilapidated barn. The boards are so decrepit and distressed that they offer little protection from the elements. Instead, they call to mind some kind of incarceration device allowing us to see what is beyond but still trapping us inside. We see the landscape through the cracks, a landscape that seems to be overwhelming the structure. One-point perspective leads us to the vanishing point, which is an open door. However, with no human presence it is impossible to determine the barn's actual size. We don't know whether we can walk up to the door and exit the barn. These conflicting elements of order and disorder give the painting an extraordinary energy and dynamism that never leave the viewer's eye or mind at rest.

Schnell has said his inspiration comes from driving around the environs of Leipzig. More than a third of the population left for West Germany in the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the atmosphere of a "shrinking city" or ghost town is certainly present in this work.

### Something to Think About and Do

The horizon line is the place where the ground and the sky seem to meet (red line). In one-point perspective the vanishing point, represented as a magenta dot in this picture, is always on the horizon line. As things get closer to the vanishing point they get smaller and smaller until they appear to vanish.



Back at home or at school, go to the website [http://www.sanford-artedventures.com/teach/lp\\_1pt\\_handout.pdf](http://www.sanford-artedventures.com/teach/lp_1pt_handout.pdf) and practice creating your own architecture using one-point perspective. Once you have mastered that, research two-point perspective and practice drawing what you have learned.

## STOP #7

Continue through this gallery and locate this painting by Martin Kobe.



Martin Kobe, *Untitled*, 2003, Acrylic on canvas, 64.75 x 90.63 in.  
Courtesy of the Rubell Family Collection, Miami

Much like Schnell, Kobe takes one-point **perspective** to illogical conclusion. Floors seem to hover, walls open up into windows, windows seem to be paintings, and ceilings become floor tiles. Nothing is grounded and his fanciful architecture seems incapable of supporting human habitation. His dynamic architectural visions, while meticulously executed, seem temporary and in the process of breaking down and collapsing. Interior and exterior views are compressed by use of interlocking horizontal planes; sharp, dizzying walls and ceilings affixed with multidirectional beams lead the eye around the canvas.

Kobe's color palette is vibrant but restricted. He intentionally limits the number of colors he uses to create a sense of unity that enhances the artwork's conveyed emptiness.

### Something to Think About and Do

Color is said to affect human emotion. How does Kobe's use of red affect you? Would you feel differently if the painting was mostly blue or purple?

Given that art is a product of the artist's life and times, what do you think this otherworldly architecture, free of human life, is saying about Kobe and his life in Germany?

Back at home or at school, research information about what it was like to live in East Germany before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. After you have finished your research, look again at the artworks. Write an essay about what you have learned. Answer the question – How did living and working in East Germany affect the New Leipzig School artists?



[www.fryemuseum.org](http://www.fryemuseum.org)