

# Martin Schmidt Carl Grossberg and the Magic of Technical Design

Carl Grossberg and his paintings stand out as exceptions in an art-historical space that can be mapped out, although not fully illuminated, with terms like "Neue Sachlichkeit," "Magical Realism," and "New Objectivity." Grossberg's oeuvre is located within the shadows cast by this space, meaning we have to illuminate it in a pinpoint manner. The painter himself spoke of "Traumbilder" (dream images) and this term indeed is an apt description for the juxtaposition of

technology-savvy precision and subterranean turmoil that characterizes his paintings. Within his world of machines, for all its fascination, lurks a certain soullessness brought about by the absence of humans that is only occasionally relieved by an uncanny living creature like a bat or our nearest relative, the ape. It is in this limbo, in this gap between reason and the unconscious, that Grossberg's works seem to thrive, nurtured by a freezing of time that sucks up the past and blocks any thought of the future. Carl Grossberg described his own sensibility as follows: "I had always busied (myself) with the advances made by technology, but I also perceived how many essential things seemed to slip out of reach during this evolutionary process" (letter to Consul A. Brinckman dated 25 August 1932, cited from the exhibition catalogue *Retrospektive zum 100. Geburtstag für Carl Grossberg* on the occasion of what would have been his 100th birthday. Wuppertal, Tübingen, Kiel and Bad Homburg, 1994/95, p. 69).

The "essential things" also figure in Grossberg's only self-portrait, which the artist staged in a typically technology-laden setting. Facing us head on, his body rigid, he seems to be staring at us earnestly, yet in truth his gaze is directed inward, towards that in-between world that only his paintings allow us to step into. On the one hand, he plays the dowdy scrivener, a record-keeper whose instrument is the paintbrush. On the

other hand, he seems lost in a trance, as if he were in that very moment being forced to watch those essential things slip away which he had described in his letter. The picture's background, meanwhile, is divided into two sections. To the right is a shiny steam hammer of the sort that might be used to work a metal cylinder – if only it were running. But as so often in Grossberg's pictures, the entire scene has been placed in suspension, just like the painter himself, as if time had paused. On the left, we gaze over a broad plain structured by ever-shorter segments that tend towards a central vanishing point. We are reminded of an extraterrestrial space station, or of the surface of a greatly magnified

microchip. This peculiar combination of interior and exterior spaces, technical processes that are inoperative, and a subject whose emotional temperature remains inscrutable is what makes this self-portrait into one of those "dream images" that defy exact interpretation.

Grossberg's art dealer Karl Nierendorf was eager to market the self-portrait. He was negotiating, as was Grossberg himself, the sale of a series of lithographs the artist was making of the "Kraftwerk West" electric power plant owned by BEWAG, the Berlin utility company (Grisebach, Auction No. 331, Modern Art, Lot 400). They were dealing with the engineer Martin Rehmer, who was acting as agent on BEWAG's behalf. Rehmer initially was unwilling to spend more than 500 Deutschmarks for the portrait, but Nierendorf managed to boost the sales price under discussion to 800 Deutschmarks. And thus, he reported that an agreement finally had been reached, almost as an afterthought: Rehmer was to receive the work to see it hang in situ, and so "I am having the self-portrait brought over right away" (letter from Nierendorf to Grossberg on 11 July 1930). As we know, the engineer proceeded to acquire the painting, while Grossberg was able successfully to complete his series of lithographs of the BEWAG Kraftwerk West plant.

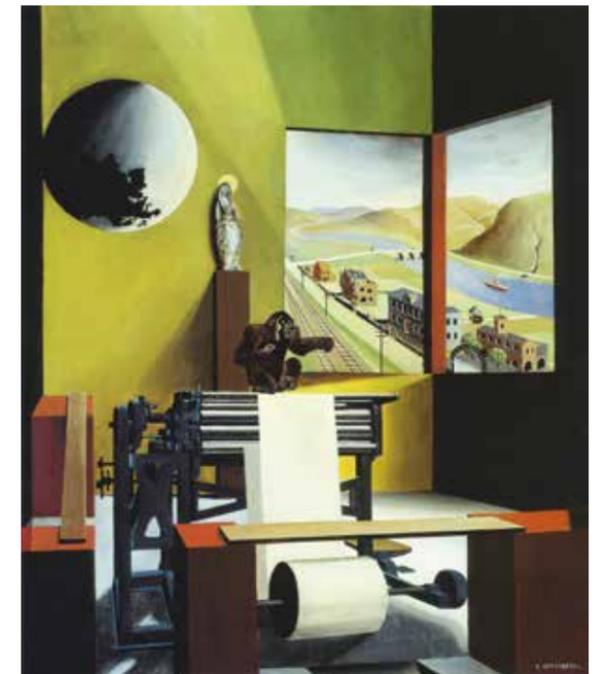
As commissioned works, these lithographs are markedly more sober than Grossberg's freely conceived visions. Nonetheless, they still exude the subliminal magic that emanates from Grossberg's unique way of seeing. After all, the realism of these works can be termed descriptive and neutral only when seen from one certain perspective. The presence of people seems entirely superfluous here, thus giving the machine installations depicted a latent spookiness, as if they were perfectly able to continue running forever, even long after their makers ceased to be. Thus, the soullessness described earlier is alchemically transmuted into a veritable ensoulment of the machine world – a world that no longer works for the benefit of man, and instead turns on its own axis, as it were, out of mechanic and electric self-sufficiency.



Carl Grossberg. Der gelbe Kessel. 1933. Oil/canvas. Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal



Lot 13



Carl Grossberg. Maschinensaal. 1925. Oil/canvas. Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal

## 13 Carl Grossberg

Wuppertal-Elberfeld 1894 – 1940 near Lâon

### Self portrait. 1928

Oil on panel. 70,1 × 60 cm (27 5/8 × 23 5/8 in.). Signed and dated lower right: CARL GROSSBERG 1928. Retouchings. [3003] Framed.

### Provenance

Studio of the artist / Galerie Nierendorf, Berlin (on commission by the artist, 1930) / Martin Rehmer, Berlin (acquired in 1930 at Galerie Nierendorf, thence by descent to the present owner)

EUR 300,000–400,000

USD 357,000–476,000

### Literature and illustration

Exh. cat.: Carl Grossberg. Retrospektive zum 100. Geburtstag. Wuppertal, Von der Heydt-Museum; Tübingen, Kunsthalle; Kiel, Kunsthalle; Bad Homburg, Sinclair-Haus, 1994/95, ill. p. 65 (listed as lost)

We would like to thank Ergün Özdemir-Karsch, Galerie Nierendorf Berlin, for giving access to the gallery archive.

A loan request has been made for the exhibition "August Sander et la Nouvelle Objectivité" in the Centre Pompidou, Paris (11.5.–5.9.2022) and Louisiana Museum of modern Art, Humlebæk (13.10.2022–19.2.2023).

- The artist's only self-portrait.
- A typical example for Grossberg's obsession with technology.
- Grossberg's machines seem to have a magical life of their own.

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towards that in-between  
world that only his paintings  
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