

Arthur Lubow: „The New Leipzig School“ , The New York Times Magazine, 8. Januar 2006

The New Leipzig School

Under communism, an East German art academy preserved vanishing traditions of figurative painting. Today the painters of Leipzig have inherited those traditions — and become an art-world sensation.

By ARTHUR LUBOW

When the painters who are now the young lions of the international art scene enrolled at the venerable Art Academy in Leipzig in the early 1990's, they wanted to study art as it was taught for centuries - drawing from nude models, mastering the rules of perspective and analyzing formal composition. The ascendance of abstract painting in the years after World War II had eroded that tradition in the West, elevating originality and authentic feeling over technique and lifelike depictions, and reducing the word "academic" to a slur. But the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall were effective windscreens, blocking artistic change from ruffling the German Democratic Republic. Figurative art that was deprecated as hopelessly passé in Paris and Düsseldorf never lost its grip in Leipzig. The city prided itself on being the birthplace of Max Beckmann and (if you looked back a few centuries and across Saxony to Wittenberg) on a painterly lineage begat by Lucas Cranach. "The disadvantages of the wall are well known," says Arno Rink, a 65-year-old recently retired professor of painting who served as director of the academy in Leipzig both before and after the wall came down. "If you want to talk of an advantage, you can say it allowed us to continue in the tradition of Cranach and Beckmann. It protected the art against the influence of Joseph Beuys."

Fifteen years ago, the East German Communist regime had only recently collapsed. For students arriving in Leipzig from the West, coal smoke in the winter sky and gaping windows in derelict buildings exuded a dank romantic allure. The atmosphere for those who had grown up in the East was even more intoxicating. Their world was in free fall, mutating rapidly and unpredictably. Even at the academy, which proudly claims a heritage more than two centuries old, change sizzled in the air. A department of new media was established so that students could make videos, design conceptual art and construct installations in the manner of the long-shunned Beuys. Meanwhile, in the unchanged department of painting, the rear guard clung to its palettes. "We learned how to construct a house in double perspective, or a staircase that spirals up," says Tilo Baumgärtel, an artist who was born in Leipzig. The painting students, many of them Westerners who had baffled their friends by journeying to the impoverished East for a traditional education, now had to withstand the ridicule of their peers. "Painting was the most boring department in the school, and everyone was making jokes about the painters, because they were so old-fashioned in the East German style," recalls Ricarda Roggan, a Dresden-born photographer.

The first hint of a shift appeared in 1997, when Neo Rauch won the art prize of the local newspaper, the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*. Rauch, now 45, came of age in the G.D.R., but he was young enough to absorb the imagery of comic books, television and computer graphics that shaped the stylistic tastes of his generation. He was a bridge between the older political painters of the G.D.R. and the young artists of a unified Germany. He wrote his master's thesis at the Leipzig academy on West German abstract painters of the 1950's, discussing works - "abstract painting, which is primarily color," he says - that he was unable to see except in "shabby black-and-white reproductions." Having risen, through industry and talent, to become an assistant to Professor Rink, Rauch painted large canvases in a style that hovered somewhere between Socialist Realism and Pop Art, of workers in 1950's-vintage uniforms performing enigmatic tasks of physical labor. The *Leipziger Volkszeitung* prize and the accompanying show of his work at the Museum der Bildenden Künste, which is the main Leipzig art museum, presaged an escalating demand for Rauch's paintings and a one-man show at the David Zwirner Gallery in New York in 2000. The painter with the strange moniker - his given name was an invention of his parents, and his family name means "smoke" - was gaining an international reputation that resounded in the academy. "Even in the halls of the school, it is a little smoky," the students joked. The success of Rauch seemed like a one-off, however. "During our studies we had the feeling that Neo was a very solitary phenomenon that couldn't be repeated," says Tim Eitel, a painter who moved East from Stuttgart in 1994.

How wrong they were. Aided by the canny promotion work of Rauch's locally born dealer, Gerd Harry Lybke, this city of 500,000 in the distant east of Germany has acquired some of the art-world cachet of New York in the 50's or London in the 90's. Under the rubric of the "New Leipzig School," Eitel, Baumgärtel and several of their classmates - among them, Matthias Weischer, David Schnell, Christoph Ruckhäberle and Martin Kobe - have coalesced into a group phenomenon that, in the words of Joachim Pissarro, curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, is "suddenly the hottest thing on earth." Although the work of these painters, most of them in their early 30's, varies in content, style and quality, they share a technical skill, a devotion to figurative art and a predilection for dry-eyed, melancholy subject matter. From the academy in Leipzig, they derive their proficiency. Beyond that, the mood of Leipzig has provided them with their material. Like other cities in the former G.D.R., 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 Wilhelmine buildings from the early 20th century undergo restoration. "For me it is very important that on the one hand, you have these things coming down, but 100 meters away, they are building a new autobahn," says David Schnell, who hails from Cologne. The Leipzig central train station is a marvel of reconstruction, with glistening platforms and bustling shops. Board a tram to the southern suburb of Markkleeberg, where Rauch lives, and in

half an hour's time you are confronted with a strip-mined, pock-marked landscape that evokes, in the words of Hans-Werner Schmidt, director of the Museum der Bildenden Künste, "the scenery of Mars." In the center of Leipzig, a major thoroughfare named for Karl Liebknecht - the Leipzig-born Marxist revolutionist who was executed in 1919 - throbs with sleek, packed restaurants serving caipirinhas and arugula salads. The taxi driver who brings you there is likely to have worked as an engineer or architect in the G.D.R.



Gueorgui Pinkhassov/Magnum, for The New York Times

With his moody dreamscapes, Neo Rauch helped to bring down the wall between the old and new in East German painting.

Leipzig is experiencing a morning-after moment. The euphoria that greeted German reunification has subsided into sulky disillusionment. A sour scent of curdled dreams seeps through the empty furnished rooms in Weischer's paintings and hangs over the half-dressed, enervated young people in Ruckhäberle's. The rotten barns of Schnell's landscapes, the soulless architecture of Kobe's fanciful futurism, the film-noir chill of Baumgärtel's charcoal cityscapes, the loneliness of Eitel's young people gazing at flattened vistas - all of these paintings emanate a disenchantment that is endemic to Germany, especially the former G.D.R., but speaks powerfully to viewers elsewhere, including the United States. "These are artists who are going back to a literal, descriptive figuration and giving it an air of anomie," says Robert Storr, a professor of modern art at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. "It is happening everywhere. Mostly it is happening in photography, so it is interesting to see it in painting."

Technically accomplished painting with narrative content and a contemporary slant is very easy to sell. One reliable bellwether is the London collector Charles Saatchi, who has turned from such British installation artists as Damien Hirst and Jake and Dinos

Chapman, whom he championed in the 90's, to a wide selection of contemporary painters, including (along with the Leipzigers Weischer, Ruckhäberle and Baumgärtel) the figurative artists Marlene Dumas (a South African who lives in Amsterdam), Luc Tuymans (Antwerp) and Kai Althoff (Cologne). Even in today's superheated art market for painting, the Leipzig artists stand out. Collectors jockey to be wait-listed for their new works, while in the secondary market, their prices rise vertiginously. In 2004, a new painting by Weischer would set you back about \$20,000. At a Christie's auction late last year, a Weischer fetched \$370,000, while an Eitel brought \$212,000. The Web site for a traveling exhibition now at Mass MoCA, "Life After Death: New Leipzig Paintings From the Rubell Family Collection," heralds the Leipzig artists as "the 21st century's first bona fide artistic phenomenon."



Courtesy of MASS MoCA

"Das Neue," 2003, Neo Rauch.

Certainly, it is a collecting phenomenon. The two major museum shows of Leipzig painting in the United States have been exhibitions of personal collections: that of the Miami private museum owners Donald and Mera Rubell, now at Mass MoCA, in North Adams, Mass., and another one, held at the Cleveland Museum of Art, of paintings owned by Michael Ovitz. "What happened to us in Leipzig was very unique," says Mera Rubell, who, with her husband, bought multiple works by five young painters at first

viewing, shortly before a group show in the Leipzig museum in fall 2003. "Discovering five artists in one day had never happened to us in 40 years of collecting." The opening of several new galleries in a former cotton-mill complex in Leipzig last April drew international collectors arriving in private jets. "Many American collectors grab into this pool of Leipzig very blindly," Rauch observes. "They buy it from the trademark. 'Is he young? Does he come from Leipzig? Then I buy it.'" Not so long ago, Leipzig painters were isolated inside a bubble that shut them off from the West. Now they are being borne aloft by the bubble of the speculative art market.

Artists were taken very seriously in the G.D.R., whether they were popular or unpopular," says Sighard Gille, one of three professors of painting at the Leipzig academy. "After the fall of the wall, painters had to struggle to be taken seriously." Under a regime that tightly controlled public information, figurative painting could be a propaganda tool for the state or a transmitter of dissent; either way, it was a potent force. A city historically known for its trade fairs and book publishing (as well as for its onetime cantor J.S. Bach), Leipzig in the G.D.R. maintained a substantial degree of political awareness and openness when compared with the tightly monitored capital of East Berlin and the nostalgic, erstwhile princely capital of Dresden. "Leipzig is still the most open-minded city for contemporary issues," says Barbara Steiner, the young director of the Gallery for Contemporary Art in Leipzig. "Dresden is the opposite, with a very obsessive way of dealing with the past." Dresden's insularity was compounded by geographical deprivation. Located in a low-lying valley, it could not receive the Western television broadcasts that other residents of East Germany secretly savored. "Dresden was called 'the valley of people who don't know anything,'" Steiner says.

The Leipzig academy for painting and architecture opened in 1764, but its emphasis, in keeping with the city's businesslike attitude, had become more practical by the end of the 19th century. Since 1950, in acknowledgment of that down-to-earth focus, it has been known as the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst - a center for graphic arts, like etching, lithography, woodcuts and book design. The academy's importance as a center for painting is relatively recent. In the 60's, a group of Leipzig painters rose to prominence: foremost among them, Bernhard Heisig, Wolfgang Mattheuer and Werner Tübke. Despite their very different styles - Tübke was an exquisite draftsman who emulated the Italian Renaissance and Mannerist artists, Mattheuer's folk-art realism lent itself to parables and Heisig's angry Expressionist paintings recalled Emil Nolde or the late work of Oskar Kokoschka - all of these artists exalted the painterly tradition, and their collective success established a nationally esteemed "Leipzig School." The painting teachers at the academy preferred to concentrate on technical concerns, perhaps because political subject matter under the G.D.R. was often either disingenuous or dangerous. That instrumental approach continues. "The difference between Leipzig and the other schools in Germany is that here there is more discussion about how to build the painting and less about what and why," says Christoph Ruckhäberle, a native of Bavaria. Or, as Matthias Weischer, who grew up near the Western city of Münster, puts it, "It wasn't so important what to draw, it was just important to draw and paint - just to keep on working without having any concrete subject or big vision."

Paradoxically, while the artists of the old Leipzig School didn't discuss subject matter when they taught, they ruminated over it endlessly when they painted. They resorted to symbols to express a veiled criticism of their society without sacrificing their privileged status. "That was a possibility, using multiple layers, because the functionaries weren't the brightest people," Arno Rink says. "Icarus plays an important role in Leipzig painting. He is able to fly - you can see it as a motif of fleeing - and he gets too close to the sun and falls down, like people who got close to power. Heisig, Rink, Tübke - everyone used Icarus, because it looked good as a figure and it also had another meaning." Mattheuer liked the biblical tale of Cain and Abel and the mythological character Sisyphus, who was fated to push a boulder up a mountain only to see it roll down before reaching the top. Tübke favored Christian references, like the Pietà. "These were used in a very intelligent way and could be read by people who were intelligent and had a higher level of education," Rink says. "Nobody paints a Sisyphus or Icarus anymore. Artists are free to interpret the world without enigmatic tools." Rink was a lifelong party member, but people on all sides of the political debates miss the days when both politics and painting seemed important. "Back then, there were problems we had to cope with," Rink says. "I think society today is quite superficial in many ways. It is only normal that painters include this superficiality in their work."



"Demos," 2004, Neo Rauch.

Courtesy of MASS MoCA

The old Leipzig School disintegrated in the late 70's, when the G.D.R. began to display these painters' critical works as proof that dissent and freedom of thought existed in their society. "That was not our intention," Gille says. "We thought the state should be criticized. We didn't voice our criticism to support the state. We painted in a figurative way, and the following generation didn't want to do that. They thought it would be a concession to the state. Many started to do abstract paintings." But it was hard to win at this game. Taking advantage of the popularity of abstraction in the international market, the government turned around and sold the nonfigurative paintings in the West to gain hard currency. By the time the wall fell, the Leipzig artists hardly knew where to look or how to paint.

As a young man, Neo Rauch tried on the styles of Francis Bacon, Max Beckmann, Markus Lüpertz and Bernhard Heisig. Eventually he settled into a style of his own. A mature Rauch painting contains figures with the mythological aura of a Sisyphus or Icarus. The iconography, however, is personal, and regardless of how well educated or intelligent the viewer, the code cannot be broken. The paintings convey a mood, not a message.



Courtesy of MASS MoCA

Rauch's own history is the stuff of legend. Start with the name, which, he complains, "was a torture for me in my first 20 years." Every time he said it, he had to explain it. "The most terrible thing about it is most people think it is a pseudonym that I created to make myself more interesting," he says. "And this name seems like innovating, and I consider myself to be a very conservative person." Worst of all, he has no idea why his mother and father gave him the name, because he never had the chance to ask them.

When Neo was 6 weeks old, his parents were killed in a train crash just outside the Leipzig station. His father was a 21-year-old art student at the academy in Leipzig, and his mother, after completing a required stint of farm work, was planning to enroll there. Following the accident, his maternal grandparents raised him in a small town, Aschersleben, in the foothills of the Harz Mountains. He was surrounded on the walls of their apartment by his father's dark charcoal portraits and mining scenes. "There was a prophecy that he would die early, and this seems to be in his drawings," Rauch says. "When he was 5 or 6, he was walking hand in hand with my grandmother through a supermarket, and suddenly an old woman comes up and says to her, 'Be careful with this boy, he will not live to be older than 30.'" Taking up drawing and watercolor painting, Neo resolved when he was 15 or 16 that he, too, would study art in Leipzig.



"Bomberjacke," 2003, Tim Eitel.

Courtesy of MASS MoCA

Rauch's ramrod-straight posture and the unwavering gaze of his pale blue, almond-shaped eyes give him the appearance of a Prussian soldier. "He is an art soldier," Sighard Gille says. "He has a secret love of the military. You can see it in the painting." Rauch's self-discipline is renowned. He works every weekday from 9 in the morning until 6 at night, with a midday break to prepare lunch for his wife, the painter Rosa Loy, and their 15-year-old son. Taking after Rauch, the young Leipzig painters all pride themselves on their orderly work habits, which they contrast with the dissolute lives led by students in West German art academies. "Being an artist is much more important in Düsseldorf than the art itself," Tim Eitel says. "The old clichés of painting at night with a bottle of wine, taking drugs and being excessive - a lot of people in Düsseldorf think this is what it means to be an artist." In Leipzig, being a painter means working slowly and deliberately, like Rauch, to produce 15 or 20 canvases a year.



"Film," 2003, Tim Eitel.

Courtesy of MASS MoCA

Rauch's paintings are, in Robert Storr's words, "Völkisch and science-fictionish." They speak a Pop Art idiom with an East German accent. With their faded and thinly painted colors, anachronistically costumed figures and spatially disorienting landscapes, they recall the paintings that the American artist R.B. Kitaj made in London from the mid-60's to the mid-70's. Kitaj, however, is a highly cerebral artist, and his paintings seem to carry endnotes as copious as the ones T.S. Eliot appended to "The Waste Land." Even though

Rauch's paintings are also informed by history, especially art history, they resemble dreams that are receding from consciousness. "What Neo Rauch does is borrow themes and take imagery from the Socialist Realist paradigm," Joachim Pissarro says. "Along with that, there is a surrealistic quiriness and bizarreness. You see simultaneous scenes that are not connected, that you as a viewer cannot pin down or put a name on. The characters never confront each other, either. There is a sense of isolation that goes on in his picture space." Lately, Rauch's canvases have become even stranger and more complex, as the uniformed characters from the 50's and casually garbed people of today are joined by 18th-century soldiers, peasants and dandies, and occasionally by fantastic animals, all displayed in luridly lighted landscapes with multiple vanishing points. Wildly theatrical, the paintings demand that the viewer's eye jump nervously to take in concurrently played, weirdly suggestive but ultimately inexplicable activities.



Courtesy of MASS MoCA

"Theater," 2003, Christoph Ruckhäberle.

Indeed, Rauch constructs his paintings like a theater director, first daubing in the backdrops. "It is important to create a definite environment or stage on which things can happen," he says. "For me, the function of painting as I understand it is to work with myths. I try to create a widespread system where impulses are trapped. With an analytic understanding, you can't grasp it." He hastens to clarify that he does not indulge in

"psychological automatism." He begins with a general notion of the mood and subject of the painting. "Having set the fundamentals, the stage, I introduce the actors on the stage," he explains. "Then it happens - when I set the inhabitants into a relation, I am not able to plan. In between the figures, and in between the figures and me, subtle relations start to be created. A microclimate comes into being." Rauch blends rigorous precision with foggy mysticism, a brew that is very German. "It seems to me that I am drawn back further and further, that elements from distant periods are knocking on the door and want to be let in," he says. "That is also reflected in my dreams, that I am drawn back to earlier lives. The incarnation cycles are trying to reach formulation." Asked if he believes that he led previous lives, he replies: "Not as direct as that, but I have recurring dreams in the same rooms and same houses and same streets. What you see in the picture is not the dream but a new version of the dream, like from a recycling plant."

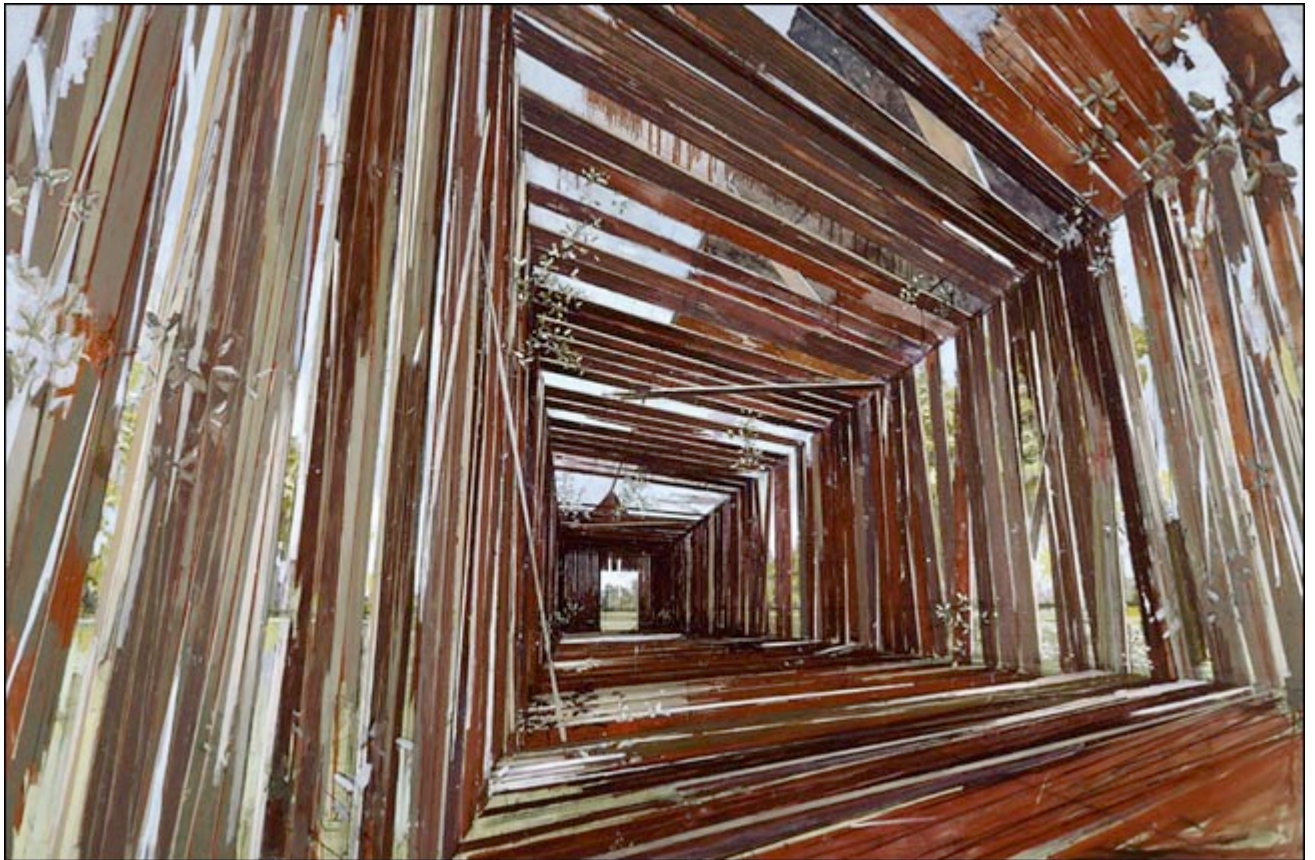
Long before assuming the role of Rauch's dealer, Gerd Harry Lybke worked as his nude model. "He was a little bit thinner then," Rauch recalls. "And he had a lot of Afro-look hair, like Jimi Hendrix." At 44, Lybke now has thinning red hair and a penchant for pinstriped three-piece suits, but his dancing eyes, protruding lower lip and the space between his front teeth still give him the look of a mischief-loving child. It was his boyhood resemblance to the redheaded, freckled and gap-toothed character Jody on the American television show "Family Affair" that won him his lifelong nickname. Western television may have been forbidden in the G.D.R., but it seems that everyone in Leipzig watched it. "When I would walk out, people would say 'Judy, Judy,'" he recalls. "The name was 'Jody,' but a Saxonian couldn't say 'Jody.' Nobody in East Germany knows that 'Judy' is a woman's name."



"Durchblick," 2004, David Schnell.

Courtesy of MASS MoCA

Lybke says that he stumbled into the art world almost by chance. What he really wanted to be was a cosmonaut. "I was young," he says. "To be a cosmonaut, why not?" He did so well in science and mathematics that he was awarded a five-year scholarship to study in the Soviet Union. When he realized that he dreaded the prospect of leaving Leipzig for Kiev, he turned down the honor and his troubles began. "From this moment, nothing," he says. "It was forbidden for me to study, even to work in a museum. I was on a blacklist." In 1981, having exhausted all conventional options, he found a daily gig as a life model at the Leipzig academy. At a monthly salary of 300 marks (considerably less than \$100 but ample for his needs), he continued there for more than eight years, until the wall came down.



Courtesy of MASS MoCA

"Bretter," 2005, David Schnell.

Lybke's career as an art dealer began in 1983, when he opened in his (shared) apartment the only private gallery in Leipzig. He called it Eigen + Art, a pun that means both "your own art" and "weirdness." Eigen + Art in those days was a lark, not a business. "I opened the gallery naked, saying, 'Welcome to the Galerie Eigen + Art,'" Lybke recalls. "I had real dreadlocks, from not washing my hair, and three bird eggs in the hair. After this opening, I met a few good-looking girls, and I said, 'Why not do this again?'"

To make the transition from an East German life, in which sex, alcohol and friendship were the markers of success, to a capitalist system governed by cash, Lybke recognized early that he would have to court international collectors. He borrowed money from a West German industrialist so he could take work to the Art Frankfurt fair in 1990. He opened temporary galleries in Tokyo in 1990, in Paris in 1991 and in New York in 1993 - the same year that he began showing Rauch's work. To establish a permanent Eigen + Art in the capital of the reunified Germany, he found a reasonably priced rental in the Mitte district of Berlin in what was then an out-of-the-way location but is now the heart of the gallery district.



"Chair," 2003, Matthias Weischer.

Courtesy of MASS MoCA

In 1997, when Rauch began to win international recognition, his fashionable peers in Leipzig were conceptual and installation artists. That soon changed. The next generation of painters, many of them originally Westerners drawn to Leipzig by its traditional education, stayed for the cheap rents and relaxed pace of life. In 2001, a group of them banded together to start the Liga Gallery in Berlin, a cooperative with a limited two-year run. Although he had no financial interest in the Liga Gallery, Lybke served as its godfather, recruiting a director, Christian Ehrentraut, and sending over collectors. The Rubells, for example, made their big investment in Liga artists after futilely trying to buy a Rauch. (Since then, they have acquired three Rauch paintings.) Lybke also monitored the gallery as a kind of farm team and took on three of the artists following the closing of the Liga Gallery. He shepherds their careers like an attentive, sympathetic older brother.

Both the diversity and the group affinities of the New Leipzig School are evident in the Rubell exhibition that is at Mass MoCA until April 2 and then travels to Santa Fe, Washington, Seattle and Salt Lake City. Like their mentor, Rauch, the young Leipzig artists often construct their pictures as theatrical sets. Matthias Weischer typically paints empty rooms that bear the palpable presence of the absent occupants. In "Bisected," a two-panel painting of a room corner that is bare except for a pinned-up picture of a nude woman, he has built up the surface of the brown wall in layers of paint and then scored,

smear and encrusted it. A more ambitious picture, "St. Ludgerus," recreates a room that is fully furnished in a late-20th-century style and, at the same time, offers a refresher course in 20th-century painting: the window shade and lampshade are color stripes; the triptych window panels are Abstract Expressionist splotches; the bouquet and wall sconces are drawn on white canvas like elements in a Matisse; and a hanging picture of a house represents the realist tradition. Meanwhile, the awkward, alienated youths in Christoph Ruckhäberle's stagy paintings occupy spaces that recall the streetscapes of de Chirico and Balthus. Not that these artists ignore art forms that are younger than painting. Martin Kobe's elaborate architectures, graced by Escher-ish illusions and painterly smears, combine the artificial reality of video games with abstract brushstrokes. Of the group, Tilo Baumgärtel owes the most obvious debt to Rauch's dreamscapes, an influence he is escaping by eschewing color in his large charcoal drawings, like the one the Rubells acquired of two people in an urban room, somewhere in Asia, that is dominated by illuminated octopus tanks.

A great deal has changed in Leipzig in the past few years. Lybke has become a wealthy, powerful art dealer. Rauch is a newly appointed professor at the academy, succeeding his own teacher, Rink. ("A very Prussian notion of duty," he says. "I've let myself be taken into service.") Saatchi is telephoning Matthias Kleindienst, a Leipzig gallery owner who scouts young talent, to buy paintings. All of the original Liga artists have waiting lists for their work. The commercial success of the formerly outcast medium of painting has, according to Rauch, produced "a very negative climate," so that "even in the early years of starting out," the artists are "considering the market."

Yet some things seem not all that different. In October, Weischer won the Leipziger Volkszeitung prize, the same award that, eight years earlier, catapulted Rauch to prominence. And although Weischer already commands a devout following, the event still had the flavor of a coming-of-age ritual. There was a reception at the museum, with the requisite Champagne and canapés, that inaugurated an exhibition of new paintings, in which Weischer has incorporated humanoid (if not quite human) forms for the first time. After that staid event, many of the guests walked across the street, where, in one of Leipzig's unoccupied buildings, an alternative project space called Laden für Nichts (Shop for Nothing) was the setting for a party. "I don't know why there were so many gallerists at our party," the multiply-pierced painter Francisca Holstein said a couple of days later. True, there were, and at least one foreign journalist. The party lasted until 5 or 6 in the morning. And the next day, the Leipzig painters were back at their easels.

Arthur Lubow, a contributing writer, last wrote for the magazine about Clive Gillingson, Carnegie Hall's new director.