

HERBERT BAYER

AUSTRIAN (ACTIVE UNITED STATES), 1900-1985

Lacuna 1977

Acrylic on canvas

Gift of the Estate of Joella Bayer

2006.78.3

During the last two decades of his career, Bayer devoted himself to what he dubbed the *Anthology* series. In canvas after canvas, he arranged his trademark geometric and organic forms in thin washes of acrylic to hypnotic and ethereal effect. *Lacuna* contrasts empty space with iconography grouped along the painting's periphery. Bayer's supreme control of the painting medium in this series is tied to his graphical brilliance and Bauhaus-inspired fluency in all media. He was one of the innovators of Bauhaus typography, an inventive photographer, an early exponent of op art and, perhaps, less well-known, a pioneer of earth art. The title of this painting alludes to the gap between the motifs that he has lovingly disposed against the indeterminate expanse of the pictorial field and well captures the lyrical quality of Bayer's art.

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AUSTRIAN (ACTIVE UNITED STATES), 1900-1985

Garden Restaurant ca. 1929

Gelatin silver print, ed. 2/25

Gift of the Estate of Joella Bayer

2006.46.7

The Russian artist and Bauhaus faculty member, Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) believed in geometrical form as an expression of meaning and harmony in life—a concept that became crucial to Bayer’s camera work. Alongside László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946), Bayer captured the geometry of quotidian life through straight photography. From 1928 to 1934, he took snapshots of specific vantage points and remote heights that defamiliarize the everyday sights of urban life. Bayer’s attention to color and form abstracts the table tops of *Garden Restaurant*. His first wife, Irene Bayer-Hecht (1898-1991), most likely developed this vintage print.

HERBERT BAYER

AUSTRIAN (ACTIVE UNITED STATES), 1900-1985

Humanly Impossible (Self Portrait)

1932

From the series *Man and Dream*

Gelatin silver print, ed. 30/40

Museum purchase with funds provided by the Chalifoux Fund, Auction! Auction!, courtesy of Margaret Mallory

1981.1.6

In his reflection, Bayer seems to grip a severed cross-section of his arm, but, in the foreground, we see that he actually holds an ordinary sponge. A fragmented Narcissus, his handsome face is distorted with horror. The materialized discrepancy between the actual self and its reflected image shatters any illusion of wholeness. This disturbing revelation has the hallucinatory quality of a nightmare.

In the photographically precise vision merging reality and fantasy, Bayer built upon the photograph to imagine his dreamlike self-mutilation. To shape the distorted arm and its missing slice, the artist painted over the original self-portrait with gouache containing an opaque white pigment. With an airbrush, he used gouache and watercolor to create seamless transitions from paint to photograph. The maquette was photographed, signed and photographed again. Every subsequent print was made from this third negative. Bayer's exquisite manipulation of the image disables the spectator's ability, like that of the subject, to distinguish between appearance and reality, paint and photograph.

HERBERT BAYER

AUSTRIAN (ACTIVE UNITED STATES), 1900-1985

The Lonely Metropolitan 1932

From the series *Man and Dream*

Gelatin silver print, ed. 13/40

Museum purchase with funds provided by the
Chalifoux Fund, Auction! Auction!, courtesy of
Margaret Mallory

1981.I.I.II

Eyes stare from the palms of hands, cut off at the wrists and floating inexplicably in front of a Berlin apartment façade. Bayer's identity as photographer (eye) and constructor of images (hand) seamlessly unify in a single grizzly apparition. Insight is passed through the eye and transmitted to the hand. Rendered virtually inoperative in the traditional sense due to their sensitive additions, the hands are given the pivotal task of returning the artist's stare. The artist, as subject *and* object of the gaze, is inscribed within and doubled in his photograph. He at once creates, is and scrutinizes his own image.



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HERBERT BAYER

AUSTRIAN (ACTIVE UNITED STATES), 1900-1985

Creation 1932

From the series *Man and Dream*

Gelatin silver print, ed. 12/40

Museum purchase with funds provided by the
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Margaret Mallory

1981.1.8

The celestial hand of the artist emerges from the abstract atmosphere. A crowded tower of organic forms—flowers and plants—is juxtaposed with their man-made equivalent generated by the arts. The fissured gathering endows chaos with form and shape. The works of artists, architects and even God-as-artist are captured in a single, impossible image. Challenging the idea that straight photography offers an objective vision, the photomontage, with its layers of meaning, represents a conceptual shift in the way that photography can recreate, rather than reflect, the appearance of the world.

HERBERT BAYER

AUSTRIAN (ACTIVE UNITED STATES), 1900-1985

Profil en Face 1929

From the series *Man and Dream*

Gelatin silver print, ed. 29/40

Museum purchase with funds provided by the Chalifoux Fund, Auction! Auction!, courtesy of Margaret Mallory

1981.I.5

Amongst roughly drawn clouds, a man's shadow and woman's face, seen simultaneously from head-on and in profile, are positioned as mirrors to one another. This work may reflect Bayer's then very recent estrangement from his wife Irene Bayer-Hecht. Accompanied by a photograph of a skyscraper, the alluring urban woman, actually the actress Louise Brooks of the melodrama *Die Büchse der Pandora (Pandora's Box)*, ultimately eludes possession. But a relationship lost survives in the act of remembering. He will remain in her shadow; and, by reversing the image, as endorsed by the backwards *R*, she will remain in his.



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HERBERT BAYER

AUSTRIAN (ACTIVE UNITED STATES), 1900-1985

The Kiss 1932

From the series *Man and Dream*

Gelatin silver print, ed. 7/40

Museum purchase with funds provided by the
Chalifoux Fund, Auction! Auction!, courtesy of
Margaret Mallory

1981.1.10

Against a pulp print of a clichéd image of the setting sun, a series of disjointed pictures are still legible as a photograph of a couple embracing. The work suggests the artist's splintered understanding of romance after his wife, despairing of his infidelities, left Bayer, taking their daughter, Julia, with her. His image of desire is irrevocably accompanied by division and loss, which is literalized in the vivid fracturing of the couple's union. Do the pieces of their love come together or break apart? A craving for completion that a relationship provides is cynically made unattainable.

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AUSTRIAN (ACTIVE UNITED STATES), 1900-1985

Bone Breaker 1931

From the series *Man and Dream*

Gelatin silver print, ed. 30/40

Museum purchase with funds provided by the Chalifoux Fund, Auction! Auction!, courtesy of Margaret Mallory

1981.I.4

Before an Orientalist work depicting warfare stands the Teutonic God Wotan. In German playwright Richard Wagner's four-part epic opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*), Wotan, recognizing his faulty actions, becomes the Wanderer—the Latin word *errāre* means “to wander” and “to err”—and nobly journeys towards self-destruction. In Bayer's work, the God's feet are abruptly sliced away, as if hidden in the sand. He casually drapes one arm on top of an enormous bone—a symbolic allusion to death. The phantom-like shadow does not follow the laws of light and shadow, thus, giving it the appearance of a wraith, another harbinger of the Grim Reaper. The iconography dwells upon the inevitability of death, which will bring the Great God's wandering to an end.

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AUSTRIAN (ACTIVE UNITED STATES), 1900-1985

Nature Morte 1936

From the series *Fotoplastiken*

Gelatin silver print, ed. 7/40

Gift of the Estate of Joella Bayer

2006.46.15

In his teenage years, Bayer took part in a travelling German youth movement named *Wandervogel* (in English, wandering bird). Later in Berlin, he reminisced on these days of wandering as he recalled farm imagery, in particular, *Dunstlöcher*—a term for the vapor holes and ventilation windows found in Austrian barns. He recreated the circular absences in such images from *Fotoplastiken*, his photomontage series of organic and inorganic sculptural objects that take on a plastic or malleable quality. Bayer arranged forms in relation to one another and paid great attention to light and shadow. The image *Nature Morte*, meaning still life in French, literally translates as “dead nature.” Such musings on life and mortality, past and future, become constant themes in this series.

HERBERT BAYER

AUSTRIAN (ACTIVE UNITED STATES), 1900-1985

Stable Wall 1936

From the series *Fotoplastiken*

Gelatin silver print, ed. 7/40

Gift of the Estate of Joella Bayer

2006.78.6I

The archaic symbols and tools of Austrian peasant life become ornaments for the constructed environment of *Stable Wall*. The geometry of the everyday tools of Germanic life is presented in wooden forms, but Bayer obscures the function of the objects in their distorted arrangement. The objects become nostalgic symbols of Bayer's travels, but the scene stops short of reality and remains his fantasy. The wooden forms serve as a reminder of a past—constructed from Bayer's memory and transformed by a Bauhaus attentiveness to formal design.

HERBERT BAYER

AUSTRIAN (ACTIVE UNITED STATES), 1900-1985

Bones with Sea 1936

From the series *Fotoplastiken*

Gelatin silver print, ed. 17/40

Gift of the Estate of Joella Bayer

2006.46.9

As if seen through a peephole are the calm waves of a seascape. Bayer, settled in the landlocked Berlin, inserts the infinite sea horizon into a static arrangement of disparate objects, presented as if myopically close to the viewer. His airbrushing genius becomes evident in the seamless integration of 'clouds' within the arrangement. Whereas the bones serve as a striking metaphor for mortality, the heavenly clouds allude to what lies beyond. The sea and clouds lend a euphoric overtone as a counterpoint to the suffocating confines of life led indoors.



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HERBERT BAYER

AUSTRIAN (ACTIVE UNITED STATES), 1900-1985

Shortly Before Dawn 1936

From the series *Fotoplastiken*

Gelatin silver print, ed. 12/40

Gift of the Estate of Joella Bayer

2006.46.16

Bayer's mastery of integrating unrelated materials in complex spatial arrangements culminates in *Shortly Before Dawn*. He creates three framed compositions—each arrangement creating a relationship between natural and imaginary environments. Rather than a static viewpoint within a linear perspective, the image creates multiple dynamic points of view. Bayer successfully borrowed the spatial conventions associated with illusionistic painting and applied them to photography to create a surprising but believable image. The interaction of the real and the artificial becomes one of Bayer's purest commentaries on the modern concept of the photographic image as willful invention rather than mere reflection.

HERBERT BAYER

AUSTRIAN (ACTIVE UNITED STATES), 1900-1985

Still Life 1936

From the series *Fotoplastiken*

Gelatin silver print, ed. 12/40

Gift of the Estate of Joella Bayer

2006.46.13

The reality of his life in Nazi-era Berlin physically constricted and mentally taxed Bayer, but, in what would become one of his most productive creative periods, he continually sought escape through photography. The ladder, a prevalent image throughout his paintings, appears here as an apparatus for real but improbable ascension. Shells and bones as artifacts of the past interact with the objects of Bayer's life. The deliberately selected and arranged objects, seamlessly unified through airbrushing, poetically fuse fantasy and reality.



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