

EBERHARD STROOT, FROM DECATHLON' TO PAINTING

By Kurt Grasshoff

*"It is actually me in my
pictures".*

Ebert Stroot



It is rare that people who have been keen sportsmen in their youth later find their way into graphic and plastic arts. There are a few examples from the history of sport and art of individuals who have managed it. Thus Maurice de Vlaminck was in his youth a professional racing cyclist; Georges Braque was a boxer; Ives Klein practised judo and Amado Ozenfant was a racing driver. Canadian ice skater Toller Cranston filled his pictures with vividly imaginative images; German track and field athlete Ernst Söllinger left behind masterly paintings of Alpine landscapes. The only thing was — sport found no expression in their works!

This was far from the case with the American artist Thomas Eakins who devoted numerous paintings to his favourite sport, rowing. One should also not forget Max Liebermann who in his student days loved riding and rode frequently, and then as a master painted many pictures with the theme of riding. But he also produced works with tennis, polo and horse-racing themes. On his estate, Neukasten, in the Pfalz region, Max Slevogt paid homage to hunting, which is reflected in his hunting pictures, after having already painted works with boxing, riding, sailing and horse-racing themes in the years before he settled there.

Recently in the German (provincial!) art scene, two successful track and field athletes have emerged and have gained recognition as graphic and plastic artists. Both work as graphic artists and painters and paint track and field themes. The two are Ulrich Zeh from Stuttgart and Eberhard Stroot from Siegen.

This current report is devoted to Eberhard Stroot, mainly because he won a distinction in 1986 at the "Biennial International Desportistes en el Arte". This exhibition is basically a competition instigated by the Olympic city for 1992, Barcelona. Invitations were sent out by the city in 1985 to the International Sports Federations with the conditions of the competition being that participants should be athletes who concentrate on sporting themes in their

paintings or sculptures. The idea of holding this event came from the International Olympic Committee, whose president also donated the prize. Three other organizations, including the firm Adidas which, moreover, sponsored the undertaking, donated the first, second and third prizes. In addition to these, there were eight further awards, one of which went to the sole German entrant Eberhard Stroot who at the suggestion of the German Sports Federation had entered two of his own works.

From 1968 to 1976 Eberhard Stroot was a top level athlete, gaining national and international success as a long jumper and decathlete (personal bests of 7.66 m long-jump and 7,842 points in the decathlon). In 1976 he took part in the decathlon in Montreal where injury prevented him from a higher placing in the field. Between 1969 and 1975 he qualified in Mainz gaining a diploma as a sports teacher, and competed for USC Mainz. Today besides his work as an artist, he teaches sport both within the Education Service and in a sports club.

Stroot's interest in art and his creative talent was already evident in his youth. In Karlsruhe, he took part in an art competition and won a trip to the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico. In his artistic encounter with the phenomena of movement in high performance sport, the motivation grew within him to become a decathlete. Then, when in 1975 he was free of the burden of

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studying and had to give up top level sport for health reasons, he once again took up the artistic work he had started in his youth, broadening his knowledge by teaching himself. He painted not just sporting themes but also landscape and abstract works. In one of his first “work groups”, he painted works with gymnastic and jazz-dance themes as well as track and field themes. It was with these pictures which appeared at regional exhibitions in 1980 that he first entered the public eye. All his exhibitions in subsequent years were characterized as “movement experienced”.

With powerful, bold charcoal and crayon drawings Stroot sketches moments and phases of movement. He has collected all these “notes” together in the monograph “Chronozeichnungen zum Thema Sport” (Time drawings on sporting themes) (1981. 1987). The “time drawings” reproduce movement as it occurs in space and time. “The dynamism in his ‘time drawing’ works relates both to changes of place and changes of body position. The wholeness of the movement is broken up and divided into individual chronological phases... through blurring the whole is once again





re-formed and thus the figures come between analysis and synthesis”, according to one interpretation of the drawings that Stroot displayed in one of his first exhibitions. A second “work group” with sporting themes is formed by the large paintings which he has been producing since 1981 as well as his drawings. In these he has expressed the emotions and feelings, the mental sensations, the good and the not-so-good, which he experienced during his eight years of competition as a decathlete. They are a retrospective look at his sporting past, « contemplations » on experiences during this period. In these pictures performance stress and its psychical effect, coming to terms with failures and successes, the social component of sport and the political effects of the Olympic idea all play a part. The dynamism of sporting activity is placed at the forefront while in the background appear the mental aspects such as victories and defeats, triumph, feelings of elation and of desolation, sadness after defeat through injury, loneliness... When asked about his painting during and interview, he said significantly: “The decathlon is alive inside me. Sometimes as an artist I actually go back in time; my art is a way of coming to terms with the past. It is actually me in my pictures”.

When the Europahalle in Karlsruhe was inaugurated in 1984, Eberhard Stroot was invited to exhibit his latest paintings in the conference room. He brought around twenty large works which he had painted with a wide brush, the palm of his hand or with his fingers on canvas or burlap covered with white paper. He had used water-based paints for these, and the themes were taken from track and field and gymnastics. When he was asked about the response to such pictures from athletes and athletics lovers, he replied: “Athletes don’t buy pictures (from artists !)... or only rarely.” He had devised a performance in order to draw their attention to art with sports-related themes: In two or three hours in front of the visitors packing the hall, he painted a ten-by-three metre “show-picture” on a white canvas, painting with his fingers using dark colours which gave the picture the character of a huge

drawing. To compose the picture he used the ten disciplines of the decathlon. The style was reminiscent of pictures at the “Zeitgeist” exhibition in Berlin. His way of working on large surfaces is ecstatic, expressive, a kind of physical “work-out” session. The strong inner emotion which the painter feels as memories come to him forces its way out and is captured on the surface of the painting; the fact that one sees, alongside the attractiveness and beauty in sport, also a repulsive and even ugly element, is, when one is aware of the artist’s experiences, hardly surprising.

K.G.

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