



Felix Nussbaum, *Orgelmann (Organ Grinder)*, 1943  
 © Felix-Nussbaum-Haus, Osnabrück

it comes to areas such as the history of the Jews, exile, and local details of Ostend and Brussels, the internet is an infinite archive.

Felix Nussbaum liked to portray himself as an organ grinder. His tragedy was that he lived in a period which deprived him of any echo. In the end I spent more time looking for a way to tell this story than searching for traces of Nussbaum's existence in the first place: how could I best reinforce the echo his work had achieved by its own strength?

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*Translated by Anna Asbury*

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## 'The Way of All Flesh'

The Graffiti Artist ROA

Zoom in - come on, even closer - and you will see an undercoat of white latex paint applied with a roller, decorated with short black marks from a spray can. A double monochrome on a crumbling brick wall, dead wood or bleak concrete.

Zoom right out and you find yourself face to face with an animal. It remains sitting there motionlessly, but if you look at it long enough you could swear that little shudders passed through its huge body, or that in an unguarded moment it took a quick breath. You imagine that as soon as you turn your back it gives a sigh of relief and relaxes, as if it had been holding this immobile pose just for you.

These amazingly anatomically correct depictions of massively outsized animals in stylish black & white are the trade mark of the anonymous graffiti artist ROA, the only Belgian street artist to be included in *Art in the Streets*, the prestigious 2011 survey exhibition by the curator Jeffrey Deitch at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. This provided him with gilt-edged artistic credentials, since his work hung alongside that of such pioneers as Keith Haring, Shepard Fairey and Banksy. No other Belgian artist has worked abroad as much as ROA in recent years; usually out in the streets, but occasionally in the sheltered cocoon of galleries in London, Brussels and New York. The street is his natural biotope, it is here that he does drawings on walls several metres high, often from a hydraulic platform, armed with a paint roller and spray can.

ROA learned his craft on the street too, as a young graffitist working at night in Ghent in the late 1980s. There are hardly any traces left of his earliest work, which the man in the street and municipal officials invariably classified as 'vandalism'. Graffiti exists exclusively in the here and now, and what is created today may tomorrow already be removed by a cleaning team or overpainted by an unscrupulous rival. Later, a half-ruined overgrown factory in the Ghent area served as his studio. While he luxu-

riated in its almost hallowed silence, interrupted only by the hissing of spray cans and the chirruping of sparrows, he refined his style by decorating the walls with all manner of running, crawling, swimming and flying creatures. But the street remains his preferred canvas, because there his work becomes a part of the lives of local residents, and attracts the attention of chance passers-by. As he tells us: 'They are first surprised, shocked or charmed, but gradually they start to relate to it'.

ROA does not choose his subjects at random, he researches the indigenous species of the country he is travelling to, although he never knows in advance exactly what he will be painting - it depends on the location, the local people, and the inspiration of the moment. An iguana in Puerto Rico, an anteater in Jamaica, elephants and rhinoceroses in Johannesburg, seals in San Francisco, crocodiles and tortoises in Australia, magpies, beavers and rabbits in the moribund village of Doel in the Antwerp polder, a slender kid with an arrogant look in its eye in the Walloon village of Tourinnes-la-Grosse. And elsewhere rats, wild boar, bulls and beetles. Sometimes all that's left on their bones is rotting flesh, sometimes none at all, and then this creature of three metres by eight turns into an imposing ode to mortality. 'The way of all flesh' would make a good tag line to accompany his steadily expanding oeuvre.

ROA's work sometimes inflames local feelings. A civil servant in the London borough of Hackney wanted to have the rabbit that ROA had planted on the side of a café removed (paint is paint after all), but a petition signed by the locals put a stop to it. In the American city of Rochester, a number of sick minds saw a pornographic posture in the cuddly pose adopted by two sleeping bears, which led to some furious argument. Once in a while he makes a statement in paint. In 2013 the Norwegian city of Stavanger, home of the annual Nuart Festival, was treated to a whale chopped up into slices - an artistic harpoon through the host country's heart. That year Norway had caught a record number of whales. In 2014 he painted a three-storey-high



London © ROA.



Rome © ROA

bear cub in Rome, with a stun dart in its paw, a reference to the death of the wild brown bear called Daniza, which was killed after it had attacked a mushroom-picker (the bear had just wanted to protect her cubs).

'I don't make the world any better, at most I make it a little more interesting', as ROA once said, 'It's nice when people take my work seriously, because I take it extremely seriously myself, but on the other hand it's no more than paint on a wall'. But it's paint which - when you zoom right out - amuses, makes you reflect, and even moves you.

KRISTOFF TILKIN

*Translated by Gregory Ball*