

# Bogdan Borčić

# In principio erat Dachau



Bogdan Borčić, Arbeit macht frei, 2014, etching, aquatint, paper, inv. no. BB 8386



Bogdan Borčić, Black door, 2014, etching, aquatint, paper, inv. no. BB 8388



Bogdan Borčić, Double crematorium furnace, 2014, colour etching, aquatint, paper, inv. no. BB 8393

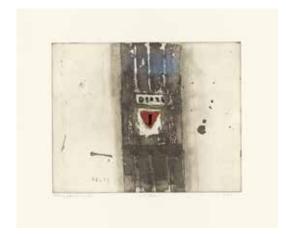
## Thoughts on the exhibition

The exhibition of a cycle of prints by the academytrained painter and printmaker Bogdan Borčić titled In principio erat Dachau, as a paraphrase of the opening of the Gospel According to John 'In principio erat Verbum' ('In the beginning was Dachau' and 'In the beginning was the Word' (God the Son)), staged at the Center of Jewish Cultural Heritage Synagogue Maribor, is actually a touring exhibition prints are from a graphic art folder titled *In princi*than later. The year 2014 marks the artist's death

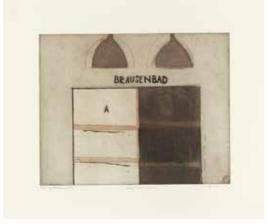
Concentration Camp Memorial Site, the artist received the Prešeren Lifetime Achievement Award. Later that same year, the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Koroška (KGLU) in Slovenj Gradec organised an outstanding exhibition titled Prisoner No. 91324, the expressive power of which left a profound impression on viewers, while also providing a rare insight into the essence of a 2014 exhibition staged as the 10<sup>th</sup> installation in of the artist's minimalism with a soul. This is how the Bogdan Borčić Graphic Cabinet. The exhibited I experienced this exhibition, which resulted in an even deeper bond with the artist with whom pio erat Dachau consisting of 8 x 7 prints, commis- I was in contact through the Maribor Fine Artists' sioned in 2014 by the Dachau Concentration Camp Society (DLUM), of which I was a member, as well Memorial Site (KZ-Gedenkstätte Dachau), which as through the Maribor Art Gallery (UGM). I also was the second commission of this kind. In fact, in authored several texts for him, including the cat-2004 Dr. Michaela Haibl of the Memorial Site paid alogue of his last exhibition staged at the DLUM a personal visit to Borčić to ask him to participate Gallery at Židovska ulica 10 in Maribor, in the imin an international symposium and documentary mediate vicinity of the synagogue. A coincidence? art exhibition later that same year as an artist and I don't think so, because his last graphic art folda person who had born witness to the atrocities er In principio erat Dachau made me believe that at the Dachau Concentration Camp. It took a lot Synagogue Maribor was the most suitable exhibiof persuasion, perhaps even more so at the time tion venue for this shocking, yet optimistic cycle of prints. Although scant pieces of information about and also the presentation of his last Dachau-related Borčić's Dachau imprisonment between 1944 and graphic art folder at the Božidar Jakac Art Museum 1945 can be found in the biographies of every sinin Kostanjevica na Krki. For the purposes of this gle catalogue or monograph, finding some more exhibition, the museum has loaned the Synagogue concrete information about this proves a much Maribor prints that are part of more than 1,000 more difficult task, as the artist never liked talking that Borčić donated to the museum and are in- about the specifics of the most horrifying chapter cluded in the Bogdan Borčić Graphic Cabinet. In of his life. The deep wounds inflicted on the barely a fence), the appearance of non-chromatic, dark Mario Berdič Codella 2005, after his first collaboration with the Dachau seventeen-year-old in one of the most inhumane colours as a symbol of repression, etc. His later Art critic and curator

allow him to open up again, although they left a time in a reinterpreted form (A Letter to My Mother, permanent imprint not only on his day-to-day life KZ Documents), applications and perforations, as but also his artistic creativity. The thing that I found most fascinating about Borčić was the way he confronted this terrible murderous institution, whose aim was not only to kill prisoners, but even more so to humiliate them, make fun of them (Arbeit macht frei) and take away their human dignity. Only Borčić himself knew how much self-control and courage it took for an innocent man to confront the earthly 'infernal abyss' when he accepted the challenge to create the last graphic cycle right before he looked death in the face, so to speak. Borčić never anticipated that the early camp-related theme of his drawings, which he started creating during his imprisonment at the Dachau Concentration Camp, i.e. in a 'realistic', pre-academic period, followed by the prints and paintings in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, could continue in the form of a continuous 'Dachau' cycle in 2004 and onwards, with a longer break in between, all the way until 2014. In his camprelated works the gradual development of the formal stylisation of human figures is noticeable, from people coming together to resist the tyranny of ina portrait to an impersonal sign, the creation of an sensitivity and selfishness. orthogonal, net-like composition of barbed wire or prisoners' clothes, the development of symbolic motifs of shells (burnt corpses) and doors (hopelessness: the barracks, single cells, a crematorium,

institutions of human civilization simply did not works, however, once again feature collage - this well as Borčić's menacing prisoner number 91324 and the political prisoners' red colour, which completely dehumanised the internees to the level of impersonal objects. All this represents an artistic and thematic basis of this last exhibition, for which Borčić – at the time aged 87 – prepared painstakingly; there is, for instance, a 'prototype' pastel on paper titled A Double Crematory created in 2013, which has all the features of prints, ranging from an architectonic construction to glowing colours. In fact, Borčić's crematories are symbols of survival in spiritual reality, because whoever destroys the body is unable to destroy the immortal soul. The crematory and fire symbolise the Holocaust or a burnt offering, which exists in eternity as an innocent victim. Unfortunately, the present time is marked by the deaths of innocent people who have fallen victims to coronavirus, a soulless killer that makes no sense and is reminiscent of wars and natural disasters, yet this is also a time characterised by



Bogdan Borčić, No. 91324, 2014, colour etching, aquatint, paper, inv. no. BB 8387



Bogdan Borčić, Brausenbad, 2014, colour etching, aquatint, paper, inv. no. BB 8390



Bogdan Borčić, Cell wall in the bunker, 2014, colour etching, aquatint, paper, inv. no. BB 8392

## Bogdan Borčić – In principio erat Dachau

of civilization and culture that he will be able to root out violent conflict from his modus vivendi? Any definition of the existential end of man is, sadly, and their loved ones.

himself was a victim of the systematic terror of World War II, as he was detained at the Dachau concentration camp. Surely we are all aware of how intensely the experiences of a young soul, still learning what life is about, imprint themselves; exceptionally broad theoretical grounding, to his entire visual space, and that over the years would day, well into the twenty-first century. Yet it is no

merous citations of and references to the great masters that Borčić liked to use in his art; and vet, the beyond measure; each year, the limits on system- one of Bogdan Borčić's works, is his experience of atic terror and suffering are raised, as if they were the concentration camp. It was the experience of Mediterranean.

somewhat narrative, but also explicitly marked by confined, into freedom. his own recognisable poetics; the result was a num- Following a break from graphic works that lasted ber of drawings, graphic prints and paintings on several years, had Bogdan Borčić in 2014 received the subject. When Zoran Mušič created his shockfew - yet far too many - know of the deep, pain- ing series entitled Nismo poslednji/We are not the Camp Memorial Site. He created the In principio fully branded mark that the experience of a con- Last, Borčić was known to have said, on several centration camp leaves. Artists tell us their stories occasions, that he was finished with the subject. in different ways. Bogdan Borčić is among those In a manner ontologically reminiscent of Theodor artists who have devoted themselves to man's in- Adorno, who openly questioned whether poetry timate existential depths, to a place where there was still possible after Auschwitz, Borčić stated has never been room for ideological pamphlets or that with his series on Dachau, Mušič had said all political radicalism. Over the course of his opus, his there was to be said. Borčić's experience of Dachau, world of artistic expression has slowly slid into a and consequently his open-ended inquiries of minimalism of silence. Into an intimate world that an existential-humanistic nature, would remain knew how to issue a loud cry for attention, when present in his works throughout, but would manneeded, using elements of silence. Many theorists ifest themselves through the symbolism of visual have labelled him a foremost figure of Modern art elements. Be it in the strict geometric, schematic in Slovenia, and have pointed out how, in his opus, order of fishermen's nets, or in numbered shells he uses his wealth of technical skill, as well as his placed in a web-like structure that closed off the

Will man ever be capable of attaining such a degree advantage. This was clear and obvious in the nu- be transformed into points, and ultimately into the longer a question of chronological context, but of small perforations in the monochrome planes of the series of works entitled Znaki/Signs. Yet when and it therefore comes as no surprise that in it, he fundamental motif, which is present in every single the nets gradually burned out, it is not the timeless space of whiteness that remained, but large, usually black, monochrome surfaces that had the effect of Olympic records, while somewhere in between, in a soul fenced off by force, of a soul that was arche- a mighty wall. This is also what Borčić needed in silence and suffering, remain the muted victims typically oriented towards the blue expanse of the order to execute a radical stroke after many years, an incision in a printing plate, through which he At a young, impressionable age, Bogdan Borčić Several years after the war, Borčić addressed the let pass an immaculate shade of white, a symbolsubject of Dachau through an approach that was ic ray of light, a final penetration into a space not That is something that only the greatest of artists

> a commission from the Dachau Concentration erat Dachau graphic art folder, a series of eight graphics in seven prints. With his last remaining strength, but also with an eruptive human energy, he produced numerous preparatory sketches; he prepared the printing plates and meticulously oversaw the printing, as verified by his signature; the other graphic prints, dated immediately before his death, were left to others. These eight prints bear countless references to Borčić's entire creative opus, and with the series, he has quite simply astonished us. He has astonished us by showing us that even after Mušič, it is possible to tell such Goran Milovanović a powerful, intimate story, and he has astonished us with the fact that this story is still relevant to-

pure being. This is Bogdan Borčić's final showdown, returned to the concentration camp. Only this time, it was not a fenced-off view through, but rather a direct confrontation. Although there are no people in Borčić's depictions, which only contain the artist's characteristic series of objects and atmospheres, the works present an eye-to-eye view, a look into the eyes of the civilization man has built. can achieve.

Director of the Božidar Jakac Art Museum (modified text of a leaflet of the 10<sup>th</sup> Installation in the Bogdan Borčić Graphic Cabinet)

## Bogdan Borčić

(1926, Ljubljana-2014, Slovenj Gradec), painter and printmaker. In 1943/44 he studied at the painting school of Matei Sternen and drawings school of France Gorše in Ljubljana. In 1944 he was imprisoned in Dachau concentration camp. He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Ljubljana where he later worked as a Professor, and in Paris. In 2005, he received Prešeren award for his life opus. He is one of the most important artists of contemporary Slovene painting and one of the main representatives of Ljubljana School of Graphic Art. His work clearly shows the development of Modernist painting, starting with realistic representations and evolving through the phases of gradual disintegration of the object towards complete minimalistic - and, finally, associative - abstraction, with thoroughly present spirit of existentialism.

Since 2001 the Božidar Jakac Art Museum holds in the Bogdan Borčić Graphic Cabinet a collection of more than 1400 works by the artist, among which are predominantly graphic prints. Inside the graphic cabinet visitors can also find a collection of exhibition catalogues and a presentation of the basic printing tools. Each year a new exhibition of artist's work is set in the cabinet, according to chronological series.

### Bogdan Borčić In principio erat Dachau

An Exhibition of Prints and Drawings

### CENTER JUDOVSKE KULTURNE DEDIŠČINE SINAGOGA MARIBOR 28 JANUARY – 16 APRIL 2021

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