

Visual Memories:

The Collages and Paintings of Horst Gottschalk

Brett M. Van Hoesen

A beautiful and severe landscape: a lake, a mountain, and lots of sky. A railroad track leads from the lake around the right side of the mountain. It seems I have travelled that stretch on a train. I am walking back on foot. The railroad tracks are very narrow, only about a foot wide, and they run through the lake under the surface of the water. I can see them, but make a point of walking without looking at them. I reach shore, and feel very happy and accomplished.¹

Horst Gottschalk carried mental images of his paintings for sometimes years at a time.² He recounted to family and friends that he had a very precise visual memory. By the time the image reached his canvas, he explained, it had “simmered down” to its basic ingredients.³ On occasion, Gottschalk recorded his dreams in journals. The entries capture vivid visual details of landscapes, figures, plants, and emotions, some specific references to his past in Germany, and at times self-conscious notes as to the rationale for the content of his dreams and the very act of recording them. “P.s.,” he writes in a journal entry from 1975, “Why am I writing all that (and this) as if I was telling it to somebody else? . . . To whom am I telling it?”⁴ Studying the work and life of a lesser-known artist, who has yet to be historicized within the larger context of Art History, can be a challenging endeavor. Given that Gottschalk was quite private about his work and creative process, we are fortunate to have some extant primary documents that in some small way “tell us” about the artist and his methods.

As his stepson Douglas Tuttle notes in the foreword, Gottschalk believed in the innate power of the work itself, privileging the image

over words. The artist was also committed to working directly on the canvas. For this reason, there are no sketchbooks or early studies for later works, no indications of compositional alterations: no hints of doubt. The artist also largely avoided the format of series paintings, seeing that method as an imposed pre-requisite of the art market.⁵ Ultimately, Gottschalk created collages and paintings that were stand-alone pieces, unique expressions. As a result, the subject matter of the artist's oeuvre is notably diverse. This diversity prompts important questions about how we accommodate and historicize artists who experiment freely with medium, style, and genre. When do we value experimentation and at what point is it considered a liability for lesser-known artists? To my mind, Gottschalk's commitment to a lifetime of experimentation and relative artistic freedom is the strength and allure of his work. This short essay introduces a small, key group of collages and paintings by Gottschalk in relationship to the larger historical significance of his life and creative output including the lingering legacy German modernism and the role that visual memories played in articulating his work.

Collage Culture - The Berkeley Years

Gottschalk's formative years as an artist in post-WWII Germany were spent in Hannover, Braunschweig, and Dusseldorf. To date, there is little information about his art school training and no complete catalogue of his early works. There is some evidence of Gottschalk's exhibition history in Germany including his involvement in the "New German Artists" show hosted by the State Museum in Baden-Baden in 1959. What is not yet definitive is the type of work Gottschalk was creating and exhibiting just prior to his immigration to the United States and how his approach changed once he settled in Berkeley, California.

We know for certain that Gottschalk created a significant body of roughly sixty large-scale collages, dating from 1960 to 1965. Many of these were composed or mounted on wood, included mark making in graphite or paint, and were finished in a thin, clear

varnish, creating a unified surface, protecting the fine details. According to the artist, his collages combined Kurt Schwitters' Merz aesthetic with the culture of Abstract Expressionism.⁶ Gottschalk's work from the Berkeley years also notably reflects the growing popularity for the tactics of assemblage solidified by the Museum of Modern Art's 1961 renowned exhibition, "The Art of Assemblage," which traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1962.⁷ While there is no extant confirmation that Gottschalk saw the exhibition, it seems quite likely that he did particularly given that his collages during this time are in dialogue with work by artists featured in the exhibit, including Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Joan Miro, Robert Rauschenberg, Bruce Conner, and most importantly, Schwitters.⁸ The latter was the most represented artist in the Assemblage show with twenty-two works for the San Francisco venue, nearly one tenth of the exhibition.⁹

Gottschalk's collages such as *Blues*, 1961, *Good King John*, 1962, and *Plan of the Hexagon*, 1962, all strong visual statements, represent the type of work that garnered the artist representation by Feingarten Gallery. Based on Sutter Street in San Francisco, the gallery also had venues in Los Angeles, Carmel, and New York. Gottschalk had his first US-based, one man exhibition at Feingarten in the winter of 1961. The gallery's summer show of that year featured the paintings of fellow German émigré artist Hans Hofmann. This high caliber exhibition context, subsequent shows with Feingarten in 1962 and 1963, as well as an exhibition of his collages at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, likely explain the successful sales of Gottschalk's work that strategically fused the lingering market appeal for Abstract Expressionism with aspects of the American Neo-Dada scene.¹⁰

The commercial success of Gottschalk's collages in the early 1960s was likely also due to the richness of the work itself. *Blues* incorporates images of chemical plants and refineries, mimicking the tight photomontage space of the Bauhaus-based artist Paul Citroen's montage *Metropolis* from 1923.¹¹ There are also strong

visual ties between *Blues* and the work of contemporary American assemblage artist, Lee Bontecou, who was featured in the MoMA's *Assemblage* show.¹² Bontecou's construction aesthetic and signature element of dark cavities undeniably resonate with Gottschalk's collage. Other works such as *Good King John*, combine elements of Cubist collage (a central, seated figure) with a broader historical knowledge of collage methods dating from Dada to the work of Eduardo Paolozzi of the mid-century, avant-garde Independent Group in London, also included in the *Assemblage* exhibition. In *Good King John*, Gottschalk, like Paolozzi, emphasized the allure of short commercial slogans in American mass media, such as "tremendous sale" and the gimmicky language of advertisements including one for Mayflower Transit Company which reads: "After a homemaker has experienced an efficient Mayflower move, she doesn't soon forget." In addition to mastering the English language, being able to recognize the subtleties required for sly humor, Gottschalk embraced a fascination for American print culture. In his collage *Plan of the Hexagon*, 1962, fragments of maps from around the world merge with a range of foreign languages, creating a complex network, mapping world languages and topography.

California Paintings

Gottschalk spent roughly three decades in northern California. As a German émigré to the United States, he was presumably acutely aware of vast cultural and economic differences between post-War Europe and America. The phenomenon of Pop Art was just emerging in the early 1960s, a movement that linked American identity with burgeoning consumerism. American Pop Art painters such as Tom Wesselman used the traditional genre of still life to comment upon changing American values. Perhaps it is this context in which Gottschalk created his painting *Harpie*, oil on canvas from 1965. Composed while the artist was still living in Berkeley, this painting represents a significant departure from his successful

collages, a turn that reflects the closing of Feingarten Gallery in 1964, and a subsequent lag in gallery representation.

In true Pop Art fashion, *Harpie* includes high-key color visual icons of national identity (the eagle branded on the face of the ham hock), ambiguous personalized symbols (the portrait silhouette), standard references to *memento mori* (snuffed candle and ripening fruit), and witty additions such as the dangling light bulb. The title refers to the fierce hybrid bird-woman harpies from Greek and Roman mythology, renowned for their greed at the banquet table of King Phineus.¹³ Gottschalk employed George Grosz's style of incorporating subtle phallic symbols (protruding ham bone and knife imbedded in ham), elements that deliver an implied narrative. Despite the characteristic ambiguity, the work signals a real engagement with an American aesthetic, a playfulness that carries into the artist's later paintings.

In 1968, Gottschalk moved to Sebastopol where he began a new phase of paintings. Some embodied magical realism, others returned to a more representational style. At this time, Gottschalk began a letter correspondence with Barbara Tuttle, who he married in 1971. Many of his letters to Barbara included exquisitely rendered drawings of botanicals, plants native to the northern California region, sometimes paired with commentary reflecting the artist's fascination for botany and his memory of plants from his homeland. "This plant is considered a weed in Germany. . . . If I am not mistaken, it is a kind of wild geranium."¹⁴ Gottschalk's illustrative prowess, developed during his art school training and subsequent work as an illustrator for Biology textbooks, translated into his paintings at this time.¹⁵ Most notable is his canvas *Ice Plant* from 1971, which features a magnified view of the angular growths and not yet fully blossomed pink bloom of a succulent, reminiscent in composition of the botanical typologies by Weimar-era, German photographer Karl Blossfeldt.¹⁶ This painting, which eventually was a wedding present for his wife, marked a new confidence in Gottschalk's life as a painter. "Today I finished the *Ice Plant* picture,

and I have a very good feeling about it. It could very well be the best picture I have ever done. . . ."¹⁷

Gottschalk's fascination for the natural world, gardening, and his everyday environs increased after he and Barbara moved to their house in Fairfax, where the artist planted a large garden of over 300 types of succulents. Works such as *Gold Fish Pond*, 1981, as well as a host of staged still life paintings from the era, refer to specific elements of his domestic surroundings, capturing unique views and perspectives of the seemingly mundane. Visual memories persisted in driving his compositions in canvases such as *Woman Coming Down a Hill*, 1980, which captures the saturated blue skies and delicately lit golden grasses of the Marin rolling terrain. Other works from this period such as *Dog in the Fields*, 1971, *Double Rainbow*, 1979, and *Night Rider*, 1980, merge what were likely partial memories of witnessed vistas mixed with stylized elements of German Romanticism, particularly inspired by the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich.

Bainbridge Island Paintings

Gottschalk's work underwent yet another shift when he moved with Barbara to Bainbridge Island. A keen observer of atmospheric conditions, many of his paintings from this period including *Northwest Passage*, 1991, mirror the environmental character of the region, the large expanses of water, pointy-tipped evergreens, and elongated clouds that stretch across big sky. It was at this time that Gottschalk attempted a small series of paintings devoted to the motif of a toy train set. As if recalling the approach of Bay Area Pop artist Wayne Thiebaud, who used cakes, pies, and ice-cream cones to play with form, light, and shadow, Gottschalk used the train motif as a vehicle for formal experiments. *Locomotive Shack I*, *Locomotive Shack II*, and *Night Scene* all from 1991, play with the concept of doorways and archways, as well as a set of binaries interior/exterior, day/night, fantasy/reality. Collectively the works show influence from Surrealist painters such as Giorgio de

Chirico, René Magritte, Man Ray, and Dorothea Tanning, a departure of sorts from overt German artistic references. More research is warranted to better understand the influences on Gottschalk's work during this time, to merge oral histories from family and friends with the increasingly brief and factual journal entries that date to this period.

Despite his relative seclusion in the later 1990s, Gottschalk was still keenly and impressively aware of trends, of the language of contemporary art discourses. A late painting titled *Post Modern*, 1992, mocks the eclectic style of Postmodern architecture, the potential lack of semblance between form and function so characteristic of Gottschalk's background in Modernism. Brightly painted children's blocks are arranged precariously on a stool. Some have been partially knocked down, implying according to one reviewer, "editorial opinion by the artist on this style of architecture."¹⁸ Pushing against the stool is a vibrantly colored beach ball, a studio prop that dates back to the early 1970s with paintings such as *Boy with Ball*, 1971. In this setting, coupled with the title, Gottschalk seems to also be referencing the kitsch aesthetic of contemporary artists such as Jeff Koons, whose own inflatable sculptures were synonymous with Postmodern culture. Gottschalk, in his own way, was trying on that label, recognizing changes in visual culture and the institution of art.

Conclusion

As is the case with most artists, there is no one definitive account of Gottschalk's work, methods, or philosophy. His collages and paintings purposefully connect on multiple levels; they rarely prescribe one fixed meaning. When asked later in life about the motivation for his work, Gottschalk replied, "I don't like to analyze it too much. In some cases, I don't know where the impetus comes from. In some ways, all of these paintings are self-portraits."¹⁹ To be certain, a good number of Gottschalk's collages and paintings reflect aspects of the artist's life, his experiences across two continents, the culture of old and new worlds. "He was able to paint

about beauty, despite the tragedy he witnessed during his childhood,” recounted his widow Barbara.²⁰ Indeed, on some level Gottschalk’s work speaks to the universal; he endeavored to make the world a magical place, to emphasize the importance of visual culture, to reinforce that memories, particularly visual memories, are valuable tools for better understanding our existence.

Notes

¹ Artist’s journal, 1975, p. 28, Horst Gottschalk Estate.

² I want to sincerely thank Barbara Gottschalk, Douglas Tuttle, and Lynn Brantley for sharing their vast knowledge of Horst Gottschalk’s life and work with me. I also want to thank Jain McClain for introducing me to the Horst Gottschalk Estate. Lastly, I want to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of my student research assistants Lisa Cassidy and Kyle Kuczynski at the University of Nevada, Reno.

³ In Althea Godrey, “He Brings Color to the World,” newspaper article, review of Gottschalk’s paintings at the Harbor Gallery, no date.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵ Interview with Barbara Gottschalk, May 8, 2015.

⁶ Cited in Douglas Tuttle, *Horst Gottschalk - Retrospective*, 2010, p. 9. While Gottschalk saw the connection between Dada/Merz and Abstract Expressionism mostly on formal terms, there is a documented historical connection between these movements. See: Catherine Craft, *An Audience of Artists: Dada, Neo-Dada, and the Emergence of Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

⁷ “The Art of Assemblage” exhibition was shown in three venues: at MoMA from October 2 - November 12, 1961, the Dallas Museum for Contemporary Arts from January 9 - February 11, 1962, and San Francisco Museum of Art from March 5 - April 15, 1962.

⁸ As I noted in the artist’s biography, the gallery flyer for Gottschalk’s one-man show at Feingarten in 1961 strategically mimicked the style of the

catalogue cover for MoMA's *Assemblage* exhibition. At the very least, this visual connection implies an awareness of the MoMA's show.

⁹ Thirty-five works by Schwitters were included in the MoMA version of the show; twenty-two travelled to Dallas and San Francisco. See William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Doubleday and Museum of Modern Art, 1961), 163-164. In comparison, there were only three works by Picasso and two by Rauschenberg.

¹⁰ There are no extant gallery brochures or documents from these later two exhibitions at Feingarten Gallery (1962 & 1963), but the dates are noted in later exhibition histories authored by the artist.

¹¹ See Citroen's photomontage *Metropolis*, titled "The City" on page 107 in László Moholy-Nagy's *Painting Photography Film* (1925, reissued in 1967), volume 8 in the *Bauhausbücher* series. I am currently researching the potential use of Moholy's book in the early 1950s, during the era of Gottschalk's schooling in Braunschweig and Dusseldorf.

¹² Lee Bontecou had her first one-person exhibition at Leo Castelli's Gallery in 1960. Along with artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Frank Stella she became one of Castelli's premier artists and thus well-known to the American contemporary arts scene.

¹³ Tuttle, *Horst Gottschalk - Retrospective*, p. 24.

¹⁴ Letter to Barbara, #11 of the botanical drawings, 1971, Horst Gottschalk Estate.

¹⁵ Gottschalk's goddaughter, Susi Kiehling, daughter of Horst's life long friend Hans Joachim Becker, confirmed Gottschalk's work as an illustrator for Biology textbooks. Email correspondence, April 7, 2015.

¹⁶ See: Hans Christian Adam, *Karl Blossfeldt, 1865-1932* (Cologne: Taschen, 2004).

¹⁷ Letter to Barbara, May 10, 1971, Horst Gottschalk Estate.

¹⁸ Randy Barrow, "Stinson Tribute to West Marin Painter Horst Gottschalk," Guest Review, *Point Reyes Light*, November 30, 2000, p. 6.

¹⁹ Althea Godrey, "He Brings Color to the World," no date.

²⁰ Barbara Gottschalk, cited in artist's obituary, 1998, Horst Gottschalk Estate.