

Josef Felix Müller, *Figur mit Kadaver* (1986) / *Mann mit Kind* (1987)

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Josef Felix Müller (born in 1955), along with Martin Disler, counts among the Swiss protagonists of the Neo-Expressionist movement of the early nineteen-eighties, which responded to the conceptual and internalized tendencies of the nineteen-seventies with an eruptive and vehement turning toward subjectivity and corporeality. While Disler moved away from drawing and toward painting in the early nineteen-eighties, the painter and woodcarving artist Josef Felix Müller found his main medium in wood sculpture at the same time.

From the beginning of his artistic activities, Müller's focus has been on the representation of human beings, especially of men. He is interested in obsessions that lurk beneath the surface. He saws and cuts away layer after layer from individual tree trunks and in this way attempts to truly pare them down to their inner states. The concealed or even the suppressed is illustrated physically, brought to the surface, and as a result made vulnerable to attack. The surface of the wood is not sanded smooth but rather left fibrous and often given an intense color. However, it is above all already itself the result of a violation by means of the brute working technique with which Müller gives his sculptures form. With an axe and a buzz saw, he works on softwoods such as poplar, linden, or willow without a design drawing or three-dimensional model. "In the work of Josef Felix Müller, every chop, every cut has a dimension of finality and of irrevocability."¹ The pathos of these expansive gestures is further intensified by the physical act of force in the working process. Nevertheless, Müller is far from creating heroic images of men or from celebrating himself as such. It is much more the case that the use of physical strength helps him to become aware of his own finiteness and not least the abysses and backgrounds of his existence as a man. As a visual correspondence, the damaged and mutilated male body has the character of a leitmotif. At the same time, the existing limbs and genitals, as in the work *Figur mit Kadaver* (Figure with Cadaver, 1986), often have exaggerated dimensions. The mutilation can be read as an expression of a necessary surrendering of power and privileges, which the male gender has to achieve for the benefit of an equitable society. The monumentality, in contrast, serves as testimony to the dimension that the "stronger sex" has to vanquish. As if Müller were, however, disenchanted with reality and the vision of a neutral whole were unattainable, *Figur mit Kadaver* represents a temporary end point for the theme of fragmentation.² Only one year later, *Mann mit Kind* (Man with Child, 1987) shows an interaction that is still painful but distinctly less aggressive. Head first, the child embraces the head of the man and even grabs

for his heart with the other hand. However, the communication with its clear character of turning toward remains unanswered. The man remains inert in his isolation. (Sarah Merten)

Notes

1 Simone Roggendorf, "Da-Sein und Mensch-Sein: Der Wendepunkt im skulptierten Werk von Josef Felix Müller," in *Josef Felix Müller: Frühe Bilder, neue Skulpturen*, ed. Marcel Baumgartner (Cologne, 1996), p. 70.

2 Ibid., p. 76.