

**Press release  
April 2017**

**Tamuna Sirbiladze  
Traces of Life**

**April 8 to May 20, 2017  
Opening on Friday, April 7, 6 – 8 pm  
Löwenbräu Areal, Limmatstr. 270, 8005 Zurich, 1st floor  
Tuesday – Friday 11-6, Saturday 11-5 and by appointment**

For her first solo exhibition in her hometown Tbilisi, in Georgia, Tamuna Sirbiladze chose the title „The Sun Will Rise“. At the time she had just graduated from the State Academy of Arts in Tbilisi and was about to move to Vienna, where she wanted to continue her studies. There she studied at the Academy of Fine Arts under Franz Graf and Heimo Zobernig. When I was in Tbilisi last fall, photographing the artist's early works for a digital archive, I came upon a poster design for this first exhibition on which the title still read: The Sun Will Rise Again. In this wording the phrase's possible reassuring, comforting intention is even clearer, for it is chosen as a response to existential distress or deep sorrow. Having had to experience warfare during her childhood, there were surely enough reasons to make provisions against pessimism; in any case, that childhood has made Tamuna Sirbiladze a strong woman, and an artist whose classical training enabled her to execute even monumental outdoor frescoes in the Soviet tradition. For this reason, she later never shied away from large formats, attacking them with gestural force, and for that reason she had a sure feeling for the architectural context in which she exhibited her work. Sirbiladze demonstrated this as well with the walls she designed and sometimes installed in the space: there was one in the London group show „Der Ficker“; the work, now in the Saatchi Collection, was titled „The Husband Is No Wall“ (2007). She worked on her largest surface that same year, in a collaboration with her husband Franz West in Venice's Palazzo Grassi. It exhibited her typical style in shades of green and with traces of sgraffito originally inspired by wall paintings in the Villa Medici in Rome. Another collaboration, „Moonlight“ (2001), with walls painted silver and panel paintings of hers with two of her husband's silver seating pieces is currently on view in Vienna's 21er Haus, a pairing that outshines Franz West's collaborations with other artists.

The works now presented at Galerie Eva Presenhuber attest in various ways to Tamuna Sirbiladze's charged immediacy and loose employment of symbols. In the works with oil sticks on raw canvas that she called Banners, sometimes based on drawings by her daughter Emily, the firm attacks clearly reflect the artist's inner rhythm and the lines the sweep of her body. But the oil stick, like an expanded sense organ, can also follow features like the folds of the loosely hanging canvas. Because of this reduction, which, like every reduction transforms vital energy into concentration, viewers have the chance to truly read the markings and perceive the associations that follow the outlines as the form-giving element. The lines and the things they suggest bring to mind similarities in the paintings in acrylic. In their directness these are more frenzied, and in that the pigment frequently bleeds, the unconscious finds its way onto the surface with fewer restraints. The idea of traces of life seems easier to grasp here. But instead of them we begin to read ourselves, our antagonisms, disorientation, love of chaos, hunger for meaning, for order, or whatever we feel. The artist's repeated representation of masks in her paintings, indicative of her subversive interest in social rituals—she had read Claude Lévi-Strauss—can be seen as counterpoint to these raw traces of experience: “In this respect one can observe that the social or religious functions of the various types of masks one juxtaposes in order to compare them relate to each other in the same transformational relationship as the sculptural form, the drawing, and the coloring of the masks as material objects.” (Lévi-Strauss, *The Way of the Masks*) If one abstracts from the masks, it almost seems to be a universal manual on seeing and reading, for there are always vital, hidden connections at the source of art. As for social relationships and their workings, women's roles naturally attracted Tamuna Sirbiladze's critical attention. In addition to the Russian classics, her favorite writers included Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, and Susan Sontag.

Her pictures, often swiftly painted, call the viewer's comprehension into question, and in their personal, biographical nature at times served as a kind of diary. I was able to accompany the artist in her last years and witness the making of many of her pictures, and at times this places me in an awkward position as an interpreter, for I am subject to flashbacks and strings of associations. For that reason I am perhaps not the ideal critic. Essentially, what is dealt with in these works is something universal, a point of view, an unloading, a burst of abstraction into figuration (the direction is crucial!). The titles, not uncommonly hit upon using Surrealist methods, can play a helpful role. Charles Bally, a first-class Geneva linguist and structuralist, provides (in *Le langage et la vie*) a lovely image for the relationship between colloquial and written language, one that I like to relate to

Sirbiladze's fundamental painting style: he compares written language to a layer of ice, beneath which everyday language bubbles as living water. Suddenly the ice breaks, and the water brings life and movement to the surface.

For the artist's book titles, produced by Paris's Onestarpres, Tamuna Sirbiladze wrote the titles by hand on black-and-white reproductions of her pictures. Above the reproduction of one canvas that includes the word "Spiegel" twice—in different typography and coloring—she wrote Mirror : Error. Even though the phonetic echo manages to suggest the visual reflection partially evoked in the picture by the repeated word, what she is perhaps saying is that faithful, mirrorlike representation is itself always false, erroneous. On the reproduction of a picture that hangs in the present exhibition the name of a season appears in Tamuna's handwriting: Autumn. The picture is limited to red tones, the lines seem to be simply flung down, the forms coincidental: two shadowy seated figures in the foreground—facing each other?—the one on the left thanks to a fortuitous blank space a delicate, if very small face in profile. And do its upper projections not resemble the ears of a lynx? In the background on the right is a standing figure—pissing?—and the tangle of lines behind or beside it could be interpreted as the suggestion of a tree. A small, perforated heart floats at the top. Are the two figures sitting next to water? Red waves? Everything read wrong, the white-blue strokes overlooked, you should have let the traces of color be traces, and simply looked.

*Benedikt Ledebur*

For more information, please contact Christian Schmidt ([c.schmidt@presenhuber.com](mailto:c.schmidt@presenhuber.com)) at the gallery.

CURRENT EXHIBITIONS:

Karen Kilimnik  
April 8 to May 27, 2017  
Löwenbräu Areal, Limmatstrasse 270, 8005 Zurich  
2nd floor  
Tue – Fri 11 – 6, Sat 11 – 5 and by appointment

Liam Gillick  
Extended Soundtrack For A Lost Production Line: Ton und Film  
April 8 to May 20, 2017  
Maag Areal, Zahnradstr. 21, 8005 Zurich  
Tue – Fri 10 – 6, Sat 11 – 5 and by appointment