

William S. Burroughs

FOR THE ANGEL OF DEATH SPREADS HIS WINGS

June 4th – July 23rd 2016

Opening on Saturday, June 4th from 11 am to 9 pm

Semiose Gallery is pleased to present William S. Burroughs' first exhibition in Paris since 1990, featuring rare paintings and drawings.

As a major figure of 20th century literature and brilliant inventor of the cut-up technique, William S. Burroughs earned himself iconic status in American counter-culture and his influence extends way beyond the world of literature. Less well known is the fact that he dedicated the last fifteen years of his life almost exclusively to painting. He was exposed to the world of visual arts by Brion Gysin, with whom he shared an intense period of collage production from 1963 onwards, but it wasn't until 1982 when he went into retreat in Lawrence in Kansas that he began his experiments covering a wide horizon of artistic techniques. He was quite astonished by the results of his first "Shotgun Paintings" and continued his exuberant experimentation with his "Combine Paintings" bringing together the use of collage, stencils, ink drawing, spray paint and fluorescent colors.

True to his non-conformist thinking, Burroughs painted outside any tradition or established set of rules, corrupting the usual means and formats commonly seen in painting. Self-taught and completely without inhibition, he applied paint employing plungers or mushrooms as brushes and using unusual supports such as cardboard folders or doors: His practice allowed him to continually assess opportunities thrown up by everyday life. He transferred the same cut-up elements from one oeuvre to another, photographing details of his works and gluing them on to subsequent paintings, inserting images of lemurs, cats or aliens as leitmotifs. His paintings were the physical incarnation of his obsessions, amplified by the variety within the repetition.

As director John Waters states "Burroughs did everything he wrote about in his books but in the form of paintings exhibited in galleries. His painting is simply the logical extension of what he's always done." Automatic works, random processes, found materials and coded calligraphy; the artist's practice is shot through with shamanistic thought and is porous to the influence of invisible and magical worlds. It is in this way that his painting is so efficient; it is charged with meaning and prophetic messages, which only reveal themselves to those willing to cross the threshold and enter his world. One of his well-known credos was "Let the picture look at you". William S. Burroughs losing himself in contemplation *within* and *through* his painting, was always the first to be dazzled by the apparition of figures within the abstraction of his oeuvres, his attention drawn towards accidents thrown up by their simultaneity. Rosine Buhler, who organized his first exhibition in Paris in 1990 remarked: "It's almost impossible to decide whether he is ahead of his oeuvre or it is trying to catch up with him."

William S. Burroughs' work can be situated at the confluence of an historic avant-garde, with whom he interacted in Paris during the 50s, essentially coming together around the figure of Marcel Duchamp and esoteric thought inherited from Castaneda. Besides the obvious affiliation with Gysin –whose work many would argue Burroughs continued– and Henri Michaux's drawings –who Burroughs supplied with mescaline– the most recent American expressionist and abstract painting can be considered as obvious paragons of Burroughs' oeuvre. Even after his withdrawal to Lawrence, Kansas he multiplied his collaborations with other artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Keith Haring, John Giorno and Philip Taaffe amongst others. He also brought his creativity to bear in other disciplines such as cinema and opera together with Laurie Anderson, Robert Wilson, Tom Waits and David Cronenberg.

Towards the end of his life, he enjoyed a retrospective of his work at the LACMA in 1996. He was exhibited at the ZKM in Karlsruhe in 2012 and The Photographer's Gallery in London in 2014. Twenty years after his death, Burroughs' pictorial work has remained unseen in France even though his aesthetic philosophy was essentially molded in Paris.

The exhibition at Semiose Gallery brings together an emblematic selection of his works: Large wooden panels shot through with holes and splattered with paint, latticework patterns sprayed onto paper and embellished with negative stencils, collages of images, ink calligraphy on cardboard sleeves as well as two drawings, exceptional in their specific reference to recognizable figures.

Simultaneously, the Pompidou Center in Paris is hosting a vast exhibition entitled «Beat Generation» (22 June – 3 October, 2016) evoking sulfurous memories of a generation guided by stylistic invention and the overthrow of established conventions and of which William S. Burroughs was one of the leading lights.

A bilingual publication will accompany the exhibition, *Pleased to Meet You: William S. Burroughs* (Semiose éditions, 2016).