

Loud screaming is coming from the grounds of Castle Prinzendorf, the 19th-century country pile owned since 1971 by Austrian art hero Hermann Nitsch. It pierces the charged stillness in the old granary storage attic Nitsch uses as a studio, turning up the dial in a space already charged with energy. "Aargh!" it goes as I run my hand over canvases covered in thick layers of black, ochre and bright red oil paint and daubs of animal blood dried to a pale greyish-brown. "Aargh!" it goes as I take in a large-scale splatter painting that has a smeared white smock mounted in its middle. The two splatter-paintings either side of it form a church-like nave.

"The role of the artist is to educate people, to intensify and to find a form," Nitsch has said.

"To use and protect all of our senses."

A wooden chair has been placed in the centre of the room, on top of a vast floor canvas muddied with layers of paint and blood and imprints of heavy boots, a covering, a "relic", that may or may not end up on someone's wall, sold for upwards of €30,000 (\$45,000). Nitsch — just Nitsch, not even his wife calls him Hermann — can no longer stand for long periods, his assistant Martha Schildorfer tells me. Between creative bursts he likes to sit, fingers around the silver head of his walking stick, taking in his handiwork, marvelling at its bedazzling intensity.

"Intensity is everything! We have to feel the whole cosmos with all our senses!" the 79-year-old will declaim when we meet — which isn't quite yet. This tour of the castle, an hour-and-a-bit from Vienna on the Zaya River in Lower Austria, in rolling countryside dotted with wind turbines and near a town with a museum devoted to his work (there is a larger Nitsch Museum in Vienna and another in Naples, Italy), is intended as a sort of contextualising prelude to an encounter with a versatile contemporary artist who, over the course of six decades, has been feted and misunderstood in equal measure.

Through the window, down below are out-houses that serve as studios, and a stables-turned-theatre space in which Nitsch and a group of devoted performers will present his *150.Action* over Pentecost (which falls tomorrow). An audience of friends and fans will bear witness to a day-long operatic spectacle that variously involves nudity, dancing, blindfolds, a robed procession and a soaring Wagneresque symphony composed by Nitsch himself, along with mock crucifixions, the entrail-trailing carcass of an animal recently killed at an abattoir (Nitsch never kills any animals himself), litres of pre-purchased animal blood and a feast complete with white wine made on the property. Oh, and a local brass band.

Shocking? Depends. Cathartic? Apparently. Intense? You bet.

Schildorfer leads the way down several flights of stairs to where chickens peck about in a sunlit courtyard, ignored by a few sedentary cats and two small wiry dogs that are gambolling on the grass (in a field out the back, past a giant statue of Buddha, are a mule named Cindy and a goat called Luisa).

A black vintage Porsche — Nitsch's 60th birthday present to his wife, Rita — is parked next to a lilac tree. From the corner of my eye comes a flash of iridescent blue. Then, again that piercing holler: "Aargh!"

"Damn peacocks," says Schildorfer, pointing at the magnificent bird strutting into view, screaming its head off. "They make more noise than guard dogs."

We visit the other studios, where Nitsch's delicate figurative work is on display. Large silkscreens feature repeated Leonardo-like drawings of anatomical figures; Nitsch is big on repetition. A lithograph doubles as a set of architectural plans for the Orgien Mysterien Theater (Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries), Nitsch's official name for his performances, or "actions", which he first conceived in the 1950s and has staged in cities including Vienna, Istanbul and Havana, but mainly presents in Prinzendorf, some running over several days. His *150.Action* will take place this month at MONA in Hobart as part of the Dark Mofo midwinter festival.

BLOOD & THUNDER

Hermann Nitsch's visceral art has courted controversy for decades, and now it's Hobart's turn, writes **Jane Cornwell**

150.Action has been contentious from the get-go, with community concern flaring the moment the event was announced, encouraged by Dark Mofo's online shout-out for "athletic performers aged 18-35, comfortable with blood and gore", to be paid to perform in a show featuring actors — art students, mainly — naked or dressed in white. Last week Dark Mofo voided all tickets after a tip-off that 200 places had been purchased with the intention of disrupting the performance; new tickets will be issued in the coming weeks. What Dark Mofo creative director Leigh Carmichael has officially called an "unfortunate situation" follows a petition signed by 20,000 people and handed to Hobart City Council in a bid to shut the work down.

"We regret the inconvenience caused to those who did manage to secure tickets early," Carmichael stated. "[But] the safety of the artist, performers and audience members remains our first priority."

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Followed by a cross-looking cat we pop into the stables, where an installation of fetish objects — bandages, test tubes, surgical implements — is paired with racks of bright Catholic vestments and a solitary bronze chalice. What it means, what any of it means, Nitsch lets the viewer/participant decide. I'm pondering whether it is to do with the importance of matters of the spirit, the fact contemporary society has relinquished most of its rituals of transformation and regeneration, practices that have buoyed civilisation for centuries, when word comes that Nitsch is ready for his interview.

He is smaller than his work suggests: gnomish and rotund in black, his trousers held up by braces, his eyes twinkling behind a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. He is sitting at a great wooden table, his silver-topped walking stick resting against his chair.

"Tasmania," he says in a heavily accented voice that seems to tumble into his beard. "I hear it will be cold down there."

We're in an upstairs room with a pedal organ in the corner (Nitsch loves to play the organ, and tells me he's even had a go on the famous Bruckner organ at the Abbey of St Florian in Upper Austria). On the shelves, books on poetry, psychoanalysis and philosophy jostle with tomes on Michelangelo, Monet, Caravaggio, Goya and Nitsch himself, along with his many exhibition catalogues.

There's been a bit of controversy in Australia, I mention. Not unlike last time, when the 1988 Sydney Biennale featured an installation of his blood paintings, fashioned by Nitsch with blood poured from a cloth at Pier 2/3, Walsh Bay, in the process attracting sharks and — thanks to his explicit video tapes — the vice squad.

"The interpretations that people make of my work are mostly good but sometimes stupid," Nitsch says with a sigh. "Unfortunately animal rights activists misunderstand my work and their protests are blown up by the media, even though their demonstrations are only ever attended by very small groups. In actual fact, I see myself as animal rights activist."

"In our world, a dreadful, mean, business-minded breeding and exploitative killing of animals takes place in slaughterhouses," he

continues. "The animals are not killed by my theatre but by the society that consumes them. I use the dead cadaver like an anatomist, displaying meat, blood, inner organs and mesentery."

The mayor of Palermo, writing in the catalogue accompanying a Nitsch exhibition hosted by the Italian city, recalls a story about Picasso — who, when asked by a Nazi officer observing the horror of [his war painting] *Guernica*, 'Did you do this?', replied: "No. You did."

Nitsch insists his work is necessary. "I want to show what is really going on. To show everything: happiness, joy, death and resurrection, the cycle of life, of nature. I

want to show truth. When you look at history you see that all the great artists worked this way." He pauses for a beat. "Think of Bach, Michelangelo and Shakespeare, the Greek playwrights. Think of Artaud."

That's Antonin Artaud, the 20th-century French mastermind whose Theatre of Cruelty, a non-traditional style in which artists assaulted the senses of the audience, allowing them to feel their unexpressed emotions, was developed in parallel to Nitsch's work. The similarities between the two aesthetics are marked, and spookily coincidental. "I was in America in 68 and had great success, and they asked if I knew of Artaud, who wasn't then translated into German. Then I read him and that was a revelation! I was amazed that someone else was thinking in this same way as me.

He runs a hand down his bushy white beard. "Art is a very deep medium."

Nitsch is considered the last of the great actionists, a loosely affiliated group of Viennese artists that mainly featured Gunter Brus, Otto Muehl and Rudolf Schwarzkogler. Their violent, radical and explicit performance art grabbed a postwar Austrian society by the scruff with performances — *aktionen*, or actions — they collaboratively staged, filmed and photographed in an attempt to force mainstream society to deal with the atrocities inflicted on their country by the Nazis.

Taking their cue from Sigmund Freud and the Vienna-based Carl Jung (Vienna being the cradle of psychoanalysis), they used their performances to purge the trauma of their own World War II experiences as well.

Like other pioneering performance and conceptual art movements of the 1960s such as Fluxus and the multidisciplinary "happenings" staged in the US by the likes of artist Allan Kaprow and composer John Cage (who is a big influence on Nitsch's music), the actionists wanted to break free from the restrictions of conventional production and explore new artistic territory. Naked bodies were used as canvases. Instead of paint they used blood, urine, milk, entrails. Nitsch's later use of paint in his arte informale style was all about texture, substance: it was primal, visceral, a la Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning. Or an infant let loose with, ahem, its own waste.

His oeuvre is that of an artist unleashing his psyche, letting his insides burst out.

"To feel! To feel!" Nitsch taps the table. "In the beginning the colours were not so important. I was interested in the substance: the throwing it and smearing it and making the picture dirty. The more liquid colours with their trickling, running and splattering" — as used in his explosive splatter paintings — "have to do with metaphysical power of the cosmos."

What of the use of blood? The almost exclusive use of the colour red? "When I first started my actions, my theatre performances, I only worked with blood," he says. "I think blood is important because it is essential to life. Blood from pigs, sheep, cattle; blood I buy from the slaughterhouse. I must tell you that [French romantic painter] Delacroix liked so much the colours in the slaughterhouse that he went every morning to see what was going on. In one way it is a very, very sad place to be. But in another way the colours make a great experience."

"For me red is not the most beautiful colour."



A performance of Hermann Nitsch's *150.Action*