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Köhler, *Petrushka Alone*, 1990-1995. Oil/collage on masonite, 65 x 95 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Captivating Portraits and Raw Collages: Why Carl Köhler's Art is Worth the Looking

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Henry Miller, Virginia Woolf, Antonin Artaud – Carl Köhler knew them all. At least, so it seems when facing his portraits. From the edgy, black lines of Franz Kafka, crudely cut in wood, to the airy blue shades used to capture the sensitivity of Joyce Carol Oates. Little known outside the borders of his native land, the author portraits of Swedish artist Carl Köhler (1919-2006) have recently gained wide attention, touring the US and Canada. The series of critically acclaimed exhibitions have been curated by his children who, left with an impressive collection of drawings and paintings, set out to give their father's art a late but justified recognition.

While few painters of the 20th century dedicated themselves to the art of portraiture, Carl Köhler chose not only to venture into this field in order to combine the two main interests of his life, but also to renew the genre. Far from settling down with the realistic approach traditionally used in portraiture, he explored the whole spectrum of techniques and expressions offered by modern art. The result is an innovative body of work, where every portrait speaks in its own voice. Haunting, subtle and insistent, they demand the viewer to take a closer look. Seen in the context of Scandinavian art history from the 1950's and onwards Carl Köhler emerges as a solitary figure, although not unique in his stance. Neither modernist nor traditionalist, he navigated between the concretists, abstract expressionists and surrealists who dominated the postwar art scene, developing his own figurative idiom. In a sense he was more of an European intellectual, but far too humble to ever consider himself as such. Leaving the Royal Academy of Art in Stockholm he went to Paris, like so many artists of his generation, where he was deeply influenced by French art and literature.

But there is more to his art than portraits. Following a life long interest in music and dance, he devoted his last years to the dynamics of bodies in motion. From Matissean dancers to raw flesh and bold abstractions, his depictions own a striking rhythm, be it gracious or disturbing. While this being a subject most suitable for an artist constantly on the move, he also went on to experiment with the collage technique. Roughly nailing or gluing pieces of primitive materials to the canvas or wooden board, these works expose a vivid and distinctive quality which clearly shows the strength of Carl Köhler's art.