

Making He



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In the orderly city of Geneva,
the joyous art of Gene Mann
celebrates freedom.

BY EDWARD M. GÓMEZ





On a cold morning in January, the artist Gene Mann darts into a *pâtisserie* in downtown Geneva, Switzerland's cosmopolitan jewel of city at the southwestern tip of Lake Léman, the home of countless watchmakers, private bankers and international organizations, for a cup of hot coffee and a *petit pain*.

She's tucked into a thick overcoat, and from the scarf on her head, the tips of a carrot-colored coif stick out like the shoots of a bush in a psychedelic forest. "I need to escape the Bise and thaw out," says Mann, referring to the bracing alpine wind that sweeps mercilessly through the region in winter. "I need to gather my thoughts."

Mann freely admits that she doesn't fully embody the legendary precision—in business, communications and horology—for which Geneva, the birthplace of Calvinism, has traditionally been proud. Right now she is focusing on preparations for a forthcoming solo exhibition, even as she thinks about the finishing touches she will apply to some new works in progress that will be featured in it.

For this mostly self-taught, 58-year-old maker of mixed-media paintings, collages and sculptures, the stakes surrounding this gallery show feel unusually high. That is because it will be her first-ever solo presentation at Krugier & Cie. Art Contemporain, one of Europe's most prestigious galleries of modern and contemporary art. Founded in 1962 by Jan Krugier (1928–2008), a Polish-born survivor of the Nazi concentration camps and a legendary, discerning aesthete, the gallery is now run by his daughter, Tzila Krugier. It is known for having shown the work of some of modernism's most venerated masters, including Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti, Balthus, Giorgio Morandi and Alexander Calder. (Late last year, Krugier's New York branch closed after a run of more than two decades.)

"I'm both very excited and somewhat nervous about the exhibition," Mann says as she sips her coffee. "This important gallery's recognition of the character and quality of my work, and of what I'm trying to express through it, is very meaningful to me." Mann is the first new artist Tzila Krugier has brought into the gallery's fold since taking over its operation. For Mann's debut there, she will choose a retrospective sampling of the artist's works dating back to 2005.

"For the gallery and for myself, Gene's show represents the start of a new phase in our history, a

Opening spread: Gene Mann, *Tendres Humains (Tender Humans)*, 2010, mixed media;

This page: *Untitled*, 2010-11; papier-mâché figurine.



moving forward," Krugier said in an interview in Geneva in April, on the eve of the exhibition's opening. On a personal level, it would mark the dealer's stepping out from under her legendary father's shadow. At the same time, she noted, it would "honor the aesthetic values he championed." That is because Mann's art shares some essential technical and thematic aspects with the work of some of the familiar modernists whose art the gallery has shown in the past and which it still sells today. Among them: its sense of freedom and experimentation and its exploration of the emotional-psychological language of abstraction.

Born in Grenoble, at the foot of the Alps in southeastern France,

Mann moved to Paris as a teenager and fell in with a community of musicians. "The crazy mood of Godard's film *Breathless*—I lived it!" she recalls. In 1980 she moved to Geneva, where she started to make paintings after first covering the walls and ceilings of her home with hand-painted designs. Around that time an exhibition of Goya drawings made a big impression on her. "It left me in tears, it was so moving," she recalls. Practicing as an interior decorator and auditing classes at local art schools, Mann developed her own mode of making semi-abstract images. Those pictures, which she has presented in such series as *Tendres humains* (*Tender Humans*), *Exquises turbulences* (*Exquisite Turbulences*) and



her ongoing production of *Petits carrés* (Little Squares, or small, abstractly painted pieces of cardboard) are rich in suggested visual textures and in real, physical textures alike.

When Mann was in her early 20s, her mother revealed that the man who Gene had been told was her father—he had died before she was born—had been, in fact, her uncle (the brother of the father of her younger siblings). “I had long sensed that something in my family’s story did not make sense,” Mann says during an interview in her studio in Carouge, a quiet town of old, low-rise buildings that borders Geneva to the south, just across the Avre River. “When my mother told me the truth, it was a tearful, liberating moment and, I believe, the start of my serious work as an artist.” For Mann, making art started to feel ever more therapeutic and urgent; for viewers, she believes, her work can be therapeutic or cathartic.

Madeleine Spierer, a Geneva-based artist with whom Mann has enjoyed a friendship and artistic dialogue for many years, says, “Gene is not afraid to experiment, to take chances—isn’t that what all artists should do?” Spierer, who was born in 1926 in Trieste, Italy, makes abstract painting-collages and sculptural objects using recycled paper and cardboard; for her energy and inventiveness, she is greatly admired by younger artists. Decades ago, she was the com-

panion of the Dutch artist Bram van Velde (1895–1981), whose work was associated with Europe’s post-World War II abstract-art tendency known as “*art informel*.” Spierer’s late sister was the dealer Jan Krugier’s first wife; Spierer is Tzila Krugier’s aunt.

“For some time, the three of us—we were all orbiting around each other,” Mann notes. Tzila Krugier says, “It’s not unusual for a dealer to keep an eye on an artist for a while before inviting her to present a show. Over the years, I had seen Gene’s work at different venues. More recently I decided to organize an exhibition.”

Jan Krugier once observed, “A drawing is the first cry of humanity....It goes back to something deep and primitive.” Mann’s art is rooted in drawing or, even more basically, in a rudimentary, conscientious sense of mark-making. Many of her works, with their inky splotches, patches of impasto and zigzag strokes, appear to share affinities with ancient writing systems or with the gestural bravura of classic abstract expressionism. They reflect the pure creative impulse, unaffected by critical theory or a self-conscious sense of art history, that is found in *art brut*. (“*Art brut*,” or “raw art,” is the French term that has been used in Europe since the mid-1940s to refer to the creations of non-academically trained artists who work outside the social-cultural



Previous page: *Untitled*, 2011, mixed media on paper; This page, from top: *Untitled* (accordion book), 2010, Japanese-made, bound sketchbook with accordion-fold pages; *Paroles Murmurées* (*Murmured Words*).



mainstream. In English, they are known as "outsider" or more broadly as "self-taught" artists.) Mann admires outsider art but does not try to imitate it. The real subject of her work, with its references to the human figure and use of an abstract visual language to con-

vey ambiguous thoughts and emotions, is the raw energy of artistic creation itself.

However, she suggests, as much as art is born in and of any artist's imagination, it is in the physical world that it is made and in which some of the most resonant art has always found



Clockwise from top: View of part of artist Gene Mann's studio in Carouge, Switzerland, 2011; Totem Blanc (White Totem), 2011, mixed media; Portrait of the artist Gene Mann.





its sources. One of Mann's artistic heroes is the French poet René Char (1907–88), who hobnobbed with the Surrealists in the early 1930s and served in the French Resistance during World War II. Char once observed, "It is the spirit behind your actions and words that announces your inner state." So it is, Mann says, that she strives to create art that is honest and passionate, and that expresses a fundamental belief in the joy of human freedom.

The kind of eyes-wide-open, responsible approach to life Char advocated was one the post-World War II French existentialist thinkers, in their own terms, would describe as "authentic." It colors Mann's outlook. In her case, it is mixed with an insouciant joie de vivre that can be sensed in the spontaneous compositions of her *Little Squares* (here a joyous blob, there a face emerging through the colored murk), any one of which, greatly enlarged, could successfully function as a large-scale abstract painting. That spirit also pulses through the mixed-media abstractions in her *Exquisite Turbulences* series. Their earthy tones and spiky lines recall the primeval mark-making of the Paleolithic era, which can still be seen on the walls of the famous Lascaux caves in southwestern France.

"Gene's line is calligraphic," observes Yutaka Miyawaki, the head of Galerie Miyawaki, a well-known gallery in Kyoto, Japan, that specializes in modern and contemporary art from East Asia and the West. Miyawaki saw Mann's work in Geneva in 2003; the next year, he presented it for the first time at his gallery, where, in recent years, he has also shown European *art brut*. "Gene's work strikes an aesthetic chord in the context of my gallery's art program and with regard to the Japanese sensibility," the dealer notes. At his gallery in a city filled with ancient Buddhist temples, Mann has shown mixed-media collage-paintings and small, Japanese-made sketchbooks with accordion-fold pages filled with abstract images. For a show at Galerie Miyawaki



Left to right: *Mythologie Quotidienne (Everyday Mythology)*, 2011, mixed media on cardboard; *Exquisite Turbulences (Exquisite Turbulences)*, detail, 2009, mixed media on paper (monotype).

in 2005, Mann even covered the gallery's plate-glass window, which faces the street, with an all-over, lace-like line drawing in black paint of interlocking human figures. By day, the image seemed to float in the air as it marked the border between interior and exterior space.

On a balmy April evening in Geneva, overcoats have given way to light jackets. It is time for the opening of Mann's exhibition. On the way to the gallery, at the end of a cobblestone street in the city's historic *Vieille Ville* (Old Town), the artist tosses a coin into the hat of a group of young men from Portugal, dressed in tailcoats, who are singing a plaintive song from their homeland. "Their music is lovely," Mann says as she walks on, adjusting a velvet hat-ring around her untamable hairdo, "and the musicians are handsome!"

That kind of exuberance is part of an unabashedly humanistic spirit she routinely pours into her art. In fact, such infectious energy goes a long way toward explaining her work's allure. (Arriving at the gallery, Mann will find that several pieces have already been sold.) Her simple images of semi-abstract human figures and her freewheeling abstractions celebrate the very basic act of making a lasting, personal mark, a gesture that emphatically says, "I am alive and I am here." ■