

Stefan Banz

ANGELS OF THE CHAMP

Les Anges du champion

On September 11, 2015, Stefan Banz presented his 768-page magnum opus *Eilshemius: Peer of Poet-Painters* in Cully on Lake Geneva. This book published by JRP Ringier is not only dedicated to a fundamental reappraisal of Marcel Duchamp's favorite painter Louis Michel Eilshemius (1864–1941), but also, for the very first time, addresses the way in which this unknown artist inspired the great avant-gardist to such well-known works as *Élevage de poussière* (1920) and *Étant donnés* (1946–66). As we know, Duchamp powerfully influenced and changed 20th century art. Not only did he introduce new materials and production methods into art, but, like no one else before him, he also thought about what and when a work of art is. Nevertheless, as surprising as it may sound, he was still strongly committed to the early 19th century, for he vehemently opposed an impressionist, purely aesthetic, retinal mode of artistic expression, while at the same time emphatically promoting the cerebral power of art. In other words, Duchamp did everything he could to lend new impetus to metaphor, symbol, allusion, the ambiguous, the non-linear, the referential, and the invisible concealed by the visible.

But Duchamp, with his sparse output and only sporadic participation in exhibitions, would have soon been forgotten had it not been, from the very beginning, for all those countless people who have passed on his intellectual heritage both artistically and academically to the present day – his friends and artist friends, his countless admirers and imitators, and all the many curators, gallery owners, and art historians who have exhibited, commented on and communicated his work, and today still show, quote and interpret it. Although Banz – himself an acknowledged Duchamp expert – had long been aware of this, there was still a need for this in-depth research into the eccentric outsider Louis Michel Eilshemius, who without Duchamp's help would certainly not have gained entry into the established context of art and would therefore not have advanced to become New York's most famous and commercially successful artist for a short time at the end of the 1930s. In other words, this intensified investigation in the reverse direction,

as it were, was necessary in order to identify Duchamp's extensive and unique reception in the context of art as a challenging artistic concept: The idea for the portrait series *Angels of the Champ* (*Les Anges du champion*) was born. Since then, 86 works painted in acrylic have been produced, all of which are shown here in this publication.

Banz's multi-part portrait series ranges from the well-known poet Guillaume Appollinaire, who was the first to publish a text on Duchamp's works in 1913, Walter Pach, Walt Kuhn, and Arthur B. Davies, who exhibited his work in the same year at the legendary Armory Show in New York (where he became an artist star practically overnight with *Nu descendant un escalier n°2*), to the young curator Susanne M. I. Kaufmann, who recently curated the large Duchamp exhibition *100 Questions, 100 Answers* at the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart. Banz's selection encompasses not only Eilshemius, but also his much more celebrated artist friends Florin Stettheimer, Francis Picabia, Constantin Brâncuși, Man Ray, Henri-Pierre Roché, and Salvador Dalí. And his secret lovers Beatrice Wood, Mary Reynolds and Maria Martins are portrayed as well as his later admirers André Breton, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Richard Hamilton. We find not only portraits of his two wives Lydie Fischer Sarazin-Levassor and Teeny Sattler-Matisse and of his daughter Yo Sermayer, but also depictions of great curators, gallery owners, authors, art historians, and collectors like Katherine S. Dreier, Walter and Louise Arensberg, Peggy Guggenheim, Sidney and Harriet Janis, Robert Lebel, Ulf Linde, Walter Hopps, Anne d'Harnoncourt, Harald Szeemann, Thierry de Duve, Linda Dalrymple Henderson, Francis Naumann, and Molly Nesbit. In other words, Banz portrays almost all the important personalities who, over the last hundred years, have contributed significantly to securing Duchamp's place of honor in 20th and 21st century art. Banz has executed his portraits in different formats in order to visually stress the diversity of the preoccupation with Duchamp. However, Banz did not decide to paint some of his subjects in large formats and others in small on the basis of hierarchical considerations. This is not a reflection of the perhaps lesser or greater popularity of the people portrayed or their possibly more or less important contributions to Duchamp's reception, but merely Banz's personal and zestful treatment of the photographic models found mostly on the Internet: The depiction of

the well-known American curator Helen Molesworth, who has so far written a significant essay on the artist with *Duchamp: By Hand, Even*, for example, is one of the most monumental works in the series, measuring 200 x 135 cm, while that of the owner of all the artist's pictorial rights, Antoine Monnier, is only 12 x 12 cm.

The impressive number of persons painted also underlines Duchamp's permanent place in the collective consciousness of art. At the same time, however, it also shows how fragmentary Banz's encyclopedic collection is in essence, for one can search in vain for such illustrious names as Joseph Cornell, Percy Rainford, John Cage, Jacques Caumont, Jean Tinguely, Michel Sanouillet, Octavio Paz, Amelia Jones, André Gervais, Georges Didi-Hubermann, Dieter Daniels, Rhonda Roland Shearer, Judith Housez, David Joselit, or Sherrie Levine, who have all made important, detailed or controversial contributions to Duchamp's reception. On the other hand, the series features portraits of two young curators, Choghakate Kazarian and David Lemaire, who might not have made it into the final selection if they had been subject to a large-scale rating by Duchamp specialists.

In other words, with *Angels of the Champ*, Banz is not primarily celebrating Marcel Duchamp, the most important artist of the 20th century, but rather takes a surprising and colorful look at this eternally incomplete, comprehensive entity and at the always subjective mechanisms of art as an operating system. And because he does this with vast knowledge, irrepressible joy, and a penchant for mischievousness, this portrait series becomes a unique exhibition experience, both cerebral and retinal.