

## Gert & Uwe Tobias

BY KATHERINE SATORIUS

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Gert and Uwe Tobias's installation at LightBox, a group of 29 drawings made with a typewriter and collectively titled "C" (a homonym for "sea" and "see," a cracked oval, part three, the shape of the gallery where it was installed, Culver City, a random letter...), is actually one prong of a larger exhibition that includes the twins' concurrent installations at UCLA Hammer Museum, where they're showing woodcuts and sculptures, and Chinatown's Happy Lion Gallery, where it's mostly paintings. Sorting their diverse output into three distinct groups separated by hard miles may be a clever approach to exhibiting in Los Angeles, but it also emphasizes the considerable sprawl of their practice. The Tobias brothers, who spent their childhood in Transylvania but now live in Cologne, shuttle as easily between media as they do between whimsy and the morbid. Their constant is a vocabulary of florid patterns and symbols culled from Romanian folklore (vampires, bats, ghouls) combined with a purely geometric language influenced, perhaps, by a more recent bank of Eastern European and Russian imagery: the works of Kandinsky, Moholy-Nagy, and others.

The Tobias brothers' typewriter drawings preserve a handmade quality despite the intervention of a machine. Lines of black or red type, blocked into areas outlined by half-erased pencil marks or casually cut and pasted into new configurations, overlap, grow uneven, and fade. Subverting the typewriter's purpose of creating coherent, legible texts, the brothers use its letters and symbols like halftone dots, building human figures, grinning wraiths, ships, and abstract forms out of O's, %'s, Z's, @'s, X's, W's, and parentheses. The drawings suggest a space beyond the grasp of language where symbols are closed unto themselves, where comprehension ends and art and myth take over. Being twins, the Tobiases are presumably well-acquainted with the outer bounds of communication—they create work as if they're two parts of the same person, co-signing everything they produce, blurring the line between one self and the other, until only they can recognize their individual contributions.

In Angela Carter's short story "The Lady of the House of Love" (1979), a "beautiful queen of the vampires (...)" sits all alone in her dark, high house under the portraits of her demented and atrocious ancestors" as a strapping blond British officer on vacation in the Romanian uplands unwittingly approaches: "When he quixotically decided to travel the rutted cart-tracks by bicycle, he saw all the humor of it: 'on two wheels in the land of the vampires.' So laughing, he sets out on his adventure." The Tobias brothers, too, describe a world in which the mystical and rational undermine one another, where nightmarish visions are swirled with the bright light of mid-day. Even the most menacing figures in "C," their bodies made of type, their eyes perfect O's, manage to look goofy as well as haunting.

These kinds of bizarre juxtaposition—the deadly and silly, the ghostly and geometric, the folksy and modern—make the brothers' practice seem expansive, fresh, and totally peculiar, even at a time when the macabre has become trendy and T-shirts emblazoned with winged skulls are selling for \$11.87 at Wal-Mart. In fashion, lurid imagery may function as an ironic, largely empty anachronism, but for the Tobias brothers it's part of an intensely personal, cryptic vocabulary firmly tethered to identity and history. Still, having relocated to Germany at the age of twelve, their claim to Transylvanian culture is intriguingly vague. On one hand they're legitimate heirs to the fascinating lore of their homeland; on the other, separated from it by chronological and physical distance, they're like tourists themselves, come like many before to mine or mime its mysteries.



(TOP TO BOTTOM) GERT & UWE TOBIAS, INSTALLATION DETAIL, "C," 2004-06, FRAMED TYPEWRITER DRAWING, MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER. COURTESY LIGHTBOX, LOS ANGELES. RYAN TAPER, GUIMARD'S ANNEXATION OF ANTONIONI'S MIRAGE: LANDSCAPE EXCERPT FROM LARRISIAE POINT WITH DESERT FOX DEN, PYGMY OWL NEST, SAGUARO CACTUS AND THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE PALAIS ROYAL METRO STATION, 2006, WOOD, THERMOSET PLASTIC, POLYESTER RESIN, POLYURETHANE FOAM, 10 x 12 x 5 FT. COURTESY MARK MOORE GALLERY, SANTA MONICA.