

## Galerie Francesca Pia

**Markus Raetz**  
*Strangers & Lovers*

**Opening Thursday, May 8, 6–9 pm**  
**May 9 – July 5, 2025**

Standing there with a probing gaze, hands in the pockets of his belted, double-breasted coat, collar turned up—he's the type you wouldn't necessarily want to encounter in person. And yet, Markus Raetz's (1941–2020) enigmatic *Schwarzer Mann (Black Man)*<sup>1</sup> (1976/1977) is oddly magnetic. Measuring just 33 cm and carved from limestone, the figure's astonishing level of detail brings to mind the far smaller Japanese netsuke. Starting in 1971, Raetz spent 25 years repeatedly returning to found stones, transforming them into small sculptures with a wide range of motifs. Many of these were created during the artist's travels (to Morocco, Egypt, Italy, Spain, among others) or his extended stays both in and outside Switzerland (Amsterdam, Carona, Ramatuelle).

The figure's oversized sunglasses frame his field of vision and mark out what Raetz considered the most important sense: sight. In this way, the viewer's gaze is drawn directly to one of the artist's central concerns. Vision—and more specifically, the representation of visual perception—was foundational for Raetz, who has often been described in literature as an “investigator of seeing.” His 1974 remark, “To see what is often seen anew by turning one's head,”<sup>2</sup> became something of a credo. In his artistic practice, Raetz fused philosophical reflection with visual inquiry. Having lived and worked in Bern from 1976 onward (while spending spring and autumn each year in Ramatuelle), Raetz left a lasting imprint on Swiss art. Referred to in later years as a “classic of postwar modernism,”<sup>3</sup> he has been one of the most influential figures in contemporary Swiss art since the 1960s. A self-taught artist, Raetz developed a highly distinctive body of work. Initially influenced by concrete art, Op Art, and Pop Art—and shaped by the vibrant Bernese art scene of the time—he gradually embraced conceptual approaches before developing, from the late 1970s onward, a uniquely sculptural practice that merged keen observation, deep knowledge, and a generous dose of humor. At the same time, he continued to draw obsessively and began producing prints during his stay in Amsterdam (1969–1973).

The exhibition *Strangers & Lovers* at Galerie Francesca Pia brings together works by Markus Raetz, some of which have a long exhibition history while others are being shown publicly for the first time from the artist's estate. Alongside geometric forms, the human figure predominates. Spanning the years 1966 to 2008, the exhibition highlights a career marked by tireless invention. None of the works feel truly “strange,” yet the artist's development resists any linear narrative. Raetz's practice unfolded in a spiral—a process of continual, productive return.<sup>4</sup>

True to the artist's understanding of drawing and sculpture not as distinct genres but as parallel expressions of thought, the exhibition presents mobiles, small-scale sculptures, larger plastic works, reliefs, prints, and drawings together. Drawing, for Raetz, held fundamental importance and often served as the seed of later sculptural works. “Drawing is almost always the first step—even for sculptures. Whatever leads to them goes through drawing,” he explained in a 2006 interview upon receiving the Prix Meret Oppenheim.<sup>5</sup> This is exemplified by *Paare (Couples)* (1980), two figures made of piped plaster, their forms “drawn” with a pastry bag. The intimate, embracing figures in his watercolors—evoked with just two brushstrokes—find material echoes in these delicate plaster reliefs. By extending linear sculpture into space, Raetz expands the very concept of drawing—as seen in works like *Golf von Neapel (Gulf of Naples)* (1980), created from two isolated copper wires, or *Drei Quader (Three Cuboids)*

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(2008), a linear sculpture made of fixed wire. The latter belongs to the series of parallelepipeds—casually referred to as “blocks”—that became a recurring motif in Raetz’s later sculptural work. As is typical of his practice, the three-dimensional nature of these linear pieces only fully emerges through the viewer’s movement around them.

This physical engagement—moving past or around a work—is essential to many of Raetz’s pieces, not only large-scale sculptures like *Form in Space* (1991/2017), an aluminum piece featuring the iconic Mickey Mouse head, but also his drawings. In 1983, Raetz created an installation-based drawing series titled *Bewogen Beweging*; its title borrowed from the major retrospective on kinetic art at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1961. According to his instructions, the work can be shown in two different ways—either at the same height along the four walls of a room or at evenly spaced intervals on the wall of a circular staircase. As the viewer moves, the drawn head also appears to move and rotate on its own axis. The eight ink drawings of a rotating head, mounted here in a frame, bear the same title and function in a similar thematic way, although the rotating movement must occur mentally within the viewer’s own mind.

The head—whether drawn or sculpted—is a recurring motif in Raetz’s work, exemplified in *Nach P. d. F. (After P. d. F.)* (2002), an idealized male head based on drawings by Italian painter and theorist Piero della Francesca for his treatise *De prospectiva pingendi*. In the early work *Steckkopf Esther (Plug Head Esther)* (1966), a portrait of artist Esther Altorfer (1936–1988), a friend of Raetz’s in the 1960s Bern art scene, two flat planes intersect at right angles. As one moves around the sculpture, the four distinct views—profile, face, and back of the head—mentally combine into a complete form, merging image and object.

While Raetz often omits facial features such as eyes, nose, and mouth, these elements take center stage in two mobiles (*Untitled*, ca. 1996), where they float and shift freely. Viewers are invited to stand still and watch as the kinetic pieces generate a random, ever-changing sequence of expressions—an effect reminiscent of animation. This also applies to a newly presented ensemble of ten aluminum elements—parallelepipeds and tapering silhouettes that seem to extend into depth—visually linked to *Wolke (Cloud)*, a mobile featured in Raetz’s first posthumous museum exhibition at Kunstmuseum Bern (2023/24). As the light catches them in motion, these flat components seem to shift in size and proportion, creating the illusion of volume.

This interplay between two-dimensional surface and three-dimensional form also shapes the viewer’s perception of *Paquet* (2008), a static sculpture placed on a pedestal. Like many of Raetz’s parallelepipeds, it appears volumetric despite its planar construction. With its painted surfaces and its resemblance—in shape, color, and even title—to a pack of Gauloises cigarettes, *Paquet* plays subtly with the illusion of objecthood.

Exactly thirty years earlier, in 1978, Raetz created his well-known corrugated cardboard reliefs. These pieces produce a two-dimensional image through manipulation of a three-dimensional structure. Depending on the angle and lighting, figures such as Elvis Presley or a reclining nude—possibly echoing Raetz’s *Lisi*—come into view. Female nudes and torsos were recurring motifs for Raetz, as was the pin-up—especially during the 1970s, when he used the trope to question the construction of images. With conceptual rigor, Raetz explored the Pop Art pin-up not for its sensual appeal, but as a philosophical inquiry into how seeing is structured. His *Tori* (1968) prints demonstrate this interest. The silkscreen edition was produced in three color variants, as well as in black and white. It was based on a photograph by Balthasar Burkhard of a hand-turned and painted torus that Raetz destroyed in 1977. Here again, by aligning three toruses in a row, Raetz conceptually deepens Pop Art’s central themes—surface, volume, and visual illusion.

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The exhibition's emphasis on works from the 1980s, particularly on paper, is underscored by a further untitled series from 1980. These images show, in ghostly, sequential fashion, a draughtsman—the artist himself?—at work. More than that, they visualize the very process of thought, in a style reminiscent of comic strips. In 2014, Raetz commented that what he most appreciated about cartoons was “their essential reduction—the fact that you can tell a story with just a few lines.”<sup>6</sup> That same idea animates this exhibition, which tells a story about *Strangers & Lovers*, about “this and that,” illusion and reality, surface and space, searching and finding—but above all about what lies in between, the ambiguous and uncertain, demanding a viewer's active gaze. A gaze embodied by the iconic *Feldstechermann* (1988).

– Patricia Bieder

Parallel to the exhibition, the ARTHOUSE PICCADILLY cinema in Zurich will be showing the film about Markus Raetz at irregular intervals until further notice. Screening dates can be found at [arthouse.ch](http://arthouse.ch)

*Markus Raetz* – A film by Iwan Schumacher  
Switzerland, 2007, 75 minutes, color, dialect

- 1 For the sculptural works, see also the 2023 catalogue raisonné published by the Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA), on which the statements in this text are partly based: Franz Müller, *Markus Raetz. The Sculptural Work. Catalogue raisonné*, with contributions by Katharina Ammann, Andrea Arnold, and Patricia Bieder, 2 volumes, Zurich: Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA) / Scheidegger & Spiess, 2023. For the print works: Rainer Michael Mason, *Markus Raetz. The Prints. Catalogue raisonné 1951–2013*, 2 volumes, Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2014.
- 2 Markus Raetz in: “Aufzeichnungen (Notes),” exhibition catalogue *Das Beobachten des Beobachtens (Observing the Observing)*, with contributions by Jürgen Glaesemer, Kunstmuseum Bern, 1977, p. 35.
- 3 Franz Müller, *Markus Raetz: Zeemansblik*, edited by Angelika Affentranger-Kirchrath (Schlüsselwerke der Schweizer Kunst (Key Works of Swiss Art)), Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2025, p. 9.
- 4 Ibid., p. 27.
- 5 Hans-Joachim Müller, “Markus Raetz [Interview],” in: *Prix Meret Oppenheim 2006. Gamboni, Raetz, Schelbert, Suermondt, Winnewisser, Zumthor*, Bern, Federal Office of Culture, 2007, pp. 25–37.
- 6 Helen Lagger, “Ich sehe auch in Holzmaserungen Gestalten (I also see figures in wood grain),” in: *Berner Zeitung*, 10.2.2014, pp. 10–11.