

MODERNPAINTERS

MAY 2013

NEW YORK

A.R. Penck

Michael Werner // January 10 – March 8

By Paul Laster

BORN RALF WINKLER in Dresden in 1939, Penck managed to smuggle his canvases out of the German Democratic Republic in 1969 for his first solo show in Cologne, which was organized by Michael Werner. It was the beginning of a relationship between Penck and the gallery that has continued uninterrupted since. With



System—Problem—abstract, 2010.
Acrylic on canvas, 63 x 51 ¼ inches.

hundreds of important gallery, museum, and biennial exhibitions to his name, Penck returns to Werner's intimate New York space with a lively selection of paintings from the past few years.

The largest canvas in the show, *Dreigeteiltes Problem* (Tripartite Problem), 2011, is a pictograph with letters, arrows, and geometric forms surrounding three of Penck's signature male stick figures. Using thick brushstrokes and a primary palette of red, green, blue, and black on a lightly washed field, Penck creates an enigmatic yet jazzy image of a man caught in a complex environment. Similarly, *Zwischen zwei Welten* (Between Two Worlds), also 2011, floats three male stick figures in a cosmos of symbols and shapes, rendered in black on a stark white ground, as though they're adrift in a purely philosophical domain.

Eröffnung (Opening) and *Vorstoß* (Advance), both 2010, present red and black letters and forms arranged on small white canvases in the referential manner of El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich, respectively. Meanwhile, *Landschaft—Tag* (Landscape—Day) and *Landschaft—abseits* (Landscape—remote), both 2011, turn the world upside down, with the sun piercing an expressionistic landscape of rapidly painted shapes in the former and darkness encroaching on a rat-infested layered realm in the other.

Constructing an artistic universe to express existential concerns, Penck in this exhibition returns to the iconic vocabulary that he has developed over time with the same primitive directness that labeled him a rebel in his youth.