In Der nackte Mann auf dem Sportplatz (The Naked Man on the Sports Field) there are two scenes that do without words. We hear only a simple melody, played by Otto Rühlemann on a panpipe. It accentuates the festive atmosphere at a gallery opening—featuring works by the painter Albert Ebert—and the party that follows outdoors. In these scenes, which speak for themselves, everything is composed down to the last detail. As a result, the camera can take a leisurely stroll through the exhibit space, focusing on individuals and paintings that express the unpretentious environment in which the painter lives.

These two scenes were shot in the East German city of Halle on the Saale, where Albert Ebert was born in 1906. Here is where he spent most of his life and where he died in 1976. A 67-year-old Ebert plays the central role in the gallery scene. Already quite ill at the time of filming, he sits beside his wife in the small exhibit space, surrounded by artist friends. In the middle stands the actor Kurt Böwe, who plays sculptor Herbert Kemmel in the film. This character was modeled on the (East) German sculptor Werner Stötzer, who had been friends with Ebert for years. An indication of this is Ebert’s 1969 oil painting, entitled Bei Stötzer im Atelier (In Stötzer’s Studio), in which Stötzer’s 1964 concrete cast Großer Frauentorso (Large Female Torso) can be seen. Ebert painted the picture for his friend and wrote the following dedication on the back: “For my dear friend Master Stötzer, in fond memory. Halle/S. May 30, 1969.”

There was, in fact, an Albert Ebert exhibition in Halle while the film was being shot; it opened on May 11, 1973 in the Galerie im 1. Stock. In this small gallery in the city center, mainly prints were exhibited. Well over two hundred people are said to have come to the opening, and about 5,000 came to admire Ebert’s imaginative and well-crafted works over the next five weeks. By the end every graphic work, including hand-colored ones, had been sold. This avid reception confirmed that the painter was, by then, considered a master of etching and, especially, lithography—on which he had been working intensively for a decade.

Ebert’s oil paintings had already garnered a large circle of admirers by this time. The wall full of miniatures shown in the film was not part of the actual exhibition. Works presented in dense proximity to one another—as the painter preferred, even in his apartment—would not have been safe with the jostling crowds that showed up; so copies of works by Ebert were created for use in the film. The valuable originals that were hung among these copies are presented in close-ups at the end of the scene (see below). In the painting that is shown last—Saalebrücke bei Trotha I (Saale Bridge near Trotha I)—we see a painterly river landscape, which reappears in a second scene as an actual natural backdrop. On the banks of the Saale River, Ebert celebrates his great success with a small circle of friends and family; behind the celebratory group seated at the table, our gaze opens onto a natural idyll and Forstwerder Bridge (locally known as Cat Back Bridge), with which we are already acquainted through Ebert’s imagery.
Albert Ebert: Finding Beauty in Daily Life

The seven original works highlighted in the film, created by Ebert between 1959 and 1969, stand in as examples of his entire body of work as a painter. He took his subjects from his immediate vicinity and his daily life—on bright or cloudy days—from which he could always draw something beautiful. In addition to Halle landscapes and family and studio subjects, his oeuvre includes nudes, floral still lifes and genre scenes. He especially liked the festive atmosphere around Carnival, Christmas and Pentecost, as well as the Lantern and Press Festivals typical of the Halle area. Religious themes also concerned Ebert, who found the meaning of his life in painting.

Ebert decided to become a painter in the hospital, after returning from a Soviet POW camp in 1945. It was there that he created his first painting. On the picture of a budding branch in a clay pitcher, he noted: “Peace on Earth and goodwill toward men.” The angel’s words, from the Christmas story according to Saint Luke, indicated a pathway for him as the year, as well as the times were changing. After the devastation of WWII, Ebert wanted his pictures to bring some joy to people. This was his sole mission as an artist.

A trained mason and day laborer, Ebert did not want to only be a “Sunday painter.” After further attempts, he soon realized that even “free” visual artists need training. So, at the age of forty, he registered to study with Charles Crodel at the Meisterschule für das gestaltende Handwerk—as the well-established Kunstschule Burg Giebichenstein in Halle was then called. Crodel, himself a self-taught painter, had been a professor in Halle before the Nazis came to power; they let him go in 1933. After the war, in 1945, he started teaching in Halle again; later, he taught in Munich and held guest professorships at the University of Louisville (Kentucky) and Pennsylvania State University in the U.S.

Crodel recognized Ebert’s inherent artistic talent and empathetically showed him how pictures should be composed. After three semesters, Ebert had learned a range of painting techniques, which he deepened in a restoration workshop with Kurt Bunge. He persisted doggedly in developing the level of artistic skill he demanded of himself. Beside his craft and his passion for painting, however, it was above all his imagination that later made his pictures the desirable gems they became.

In 1951, after Ebert married his second wife—a pretty and much younger woman, a hairdresser named Else—he increasingly began to create artworks out of his own insights. He took his subjects from his immediate environment and his own biography. This paradigm shift also manifested in his adoption of small formats, which he usually designed with the frame attached, as is usual in icon painting. With his poetic miniatures, he could neither serve the GDR’s official commitment to Socialist Realism, nor interface with the formal language of classic modern art. A loner and a maverick, he had to rely on himself and was not always taken seriously by other painters, who considered him a “naïve” painter.

Although Ebert worked full-time as an artist until 1954, he only managed to sell his pictures for a pittance, through barter or in exchange for clothing. His income was insufficient to support a family of four—his son Tobias was born in 1952, daughter Verena two years later. In 1954, he resumed working as a laborer in construction and stoked the furnace in the Burg Giebichenstein art school basement. He was big and strong and worked hard all day; at night, while his wife and children slept, he worked on the finely glazed miniatures into which his daydreams flowed.

In advance of the documenta 1 exhibition in Kassel in 1955, which was to include works by well-known naïve painters, some influential artist friends thought of Ebert. Charles Crodel, who had been born in Marseille, compared Ebert’s work in this period to that of the French painter Henri Rousseau, who was represented in the exhibit. The comparison only yields a generic proximity, however; the method employed, as well as the choices of color and subject of the two artists could not be more different.

In the late 1950s, public commentaries made by close artist friends contributed to a change in Ebert’s living conditions. Sculptors Waldemar Grzimek and Gustav Seitz, both on the board of the GDR Visual Artists’ Association, called for financial support for the artist. From 1956, when Ebert turned fifty, until 1961, he received a monthly stipend from the East German CDU party that allowed him to focus full-time on painting once more.

By 1957, Ebert was able to provide fifty representative oil paintings, which were shown in a solo exhibit in the Berliner Zeitung’s exhibition pavilion. People who were there say that all works sold. In addition to artist friends, buyers included

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1 Christian Democratic Union was an East German political party.
members of an important circle of Berlin intellectuals, including art historians and authors, such as Christa and Gerhard Wolf. The latter had already done a lot to spread the word about Ebert’s work.²

Ebert’s unique career culminated in museum exhibitions and purchases. He was no longer able to attend his last solo exhibition, which featured about three hundred oil paintings, drawings and prints and took place in the Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg (now the Kunstmuseum Moritzburg) in Halle in 1976.³ Before the exhibit traveled to the Kupferstich-Kabinett in the Staatliche Sammlungen Dresden, it had drawn 30,000 visitors—a record for the Halle museum.

After his death, Ebert’s circle of admirers grew steadily, in part thanks to his prints. As the resonance of posthumous exhibitions and climbing auction prices indicate, these too eschewed ideological proscriptions. Above all, however, it is Albert Ebert’s small-format oil paintings that have become icons of painting from former East Germany.

Translated by Skyler J. Arndt-Briggs

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Original oil paintings by Albert Ebert highlighted in the film

*Pastor im Bordell (Pastor in the Brothel)* — 1966, oil on wood, 143 x 204 mm (173 x 234 mm), Stiftung der Saalesparkasse. (WV Litt 66-24)

*Tanzabend (Dance Evening)* — 1969-71, oil on tempered hardboard, oval 251 x 214 mm, Stiftung der Saalesparkasse. (WV Litt 69-9)

*Mädchenakt (Nude Girl)* — 1961, oil on tempered hardboard, 95 x 66 mm (138 x 104 mm), Stiftung der Saalesparkasse. (WV Litt 61-42)

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² Albert Ebert died on August 21, 1976, six days after the opening of the exhibition.
Markttag im Festschmuck (Festive Market Day) — 1961, oil on tempered hardboard, 270 x 340 mm, location unknown, formerly Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg Halle (Saale). (WV Litt 61-30)

Der vierte Advent (Fourth Advent Sunday) — 1963, oil on wood, 235 x 317 mm (315 x 400 mm), private owner. (WV Litt 63-45)

Pressefest (Press Festival) — 1959-60, oil on tempered hardboard, 440 x 580 mm (500 x 640 mm), Kunstmuseum Moritzburg Halle (Saale). (WV Litt 59-52)

Saalebrücke bei Trotha I (Saale Bridge near Trotha I) — 1960, oil on wood, 315 x 405 mm (370 x 450 mm), Stadtmuseum Halle. (WV Litt 60-44)

All photos in the article are screen shots taken from the film The Naked Man on the Sports Field.