

Monika Baer, Thomas Bayrle
Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin
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This exhibition at the Barbara Weiss Gallery brings together paintings, videos and installations created by artists Monika Baer and Thomas Bayrle. Each artist's work differs in sensibility and execution, yet they share some important similarities. Both work with limited imagery to create precise, clear and minimal compositions that rely on the figure-ground relationship as a base for the production of innovative and conceptually strong work.

Monika Baer's work creates a space positioned between the impossible and the imagined. Previously, the artist made paintings covered with thin, veils of paint, that depicted bizarre imagery, that were collage-like with dense narratives. The new paintings at the Barbara Weiss Gallery are more simple and direct, while retaining the strange and painterly qualities of her earlier work. In these paintings the background establishes the atmosphere. It is often a wash, a shallow, sophisticated space within which Baer situates a few fully-rendered objects. These are easily recognizable, everyday items, such as a banknote or playing cards. In *10 Euro* (2005) a bill disinterestedly floats in space. It is presented as a commonplace object and not an all powerful symbol of Capitalism. Yet the symbolic value of money is never questioned in these paintings, they always appear as shiny, beautiful objects. Baer seems to have taken an interest in not only the simple aesthetics of paper money, but also its preciousness. Her paintings are technically accomplished, and easily slip between art movements and styles, but also seem to be foremost about the methodology of painting, about form and composition. For example, in *Tanz* (2007) the seriousness associated with money is reduced to a comical element, where the bill almost resting on a mountainside is left to observe a pair of caricaturized, dancing sausages. Other paintings, such as *Ohne Titel* (100 Dollars) (2007) capture the moment before the moment of change. Here, white emptiness stretches between two opposing objects on the canvas. At the bottom lies a flat, black mound of dirt, rendered with a couple of simple quick gestures, from which, little splashes erupt upwards. From the top hangs a carefully placed American dollar bill, wavering, ready to fall into the midst of the black substance. There is a slight tension between the bill and the dirt. However, a resolution is not necessary, as in the Kierkegaardian moment, everything is possible.

Thomas Bayrle's work examines the relationship between the individual and the collective. His earlier work involves the dizzying repetition of an image or object, which combine to form a larger structure or image. In the two videos and installation in this exhibition, this method produces provocative results, as is exemplified in the video piece: *Rubber Tree* (1993-1994). This video consists of a black and white footage of pedestrians in a city square, superimposed over a silhouette of a plant. The footage is looped, as the crowd continuously forms and disbands. The plant slowly rotates, its leaves folding over, each simultaneously presenting the (scaled-down version of the) same footage. The video is soft and washed out, an effect achieved through the artist's animation of photocopied images. Consequently, its quality is decreased; the people look generic, only their movement remains distinctive. Through repetition, the originally frantic movement becomes codified, becomes predictable, creating visually stunning constellations.

The video *Motorway Intersection* (2006) (co-production with Daniel Kohl) presents a fragmented picture divided into small, irregular polygons. Each polygon contains the same footage of a busy freeway. The road fills the background, stretching out to the corners of each polygon to create a grey membrane, like a thin shell. The cars quickly race by the camera, as if they were a passing glare on a metallic surface. Eventually, the camera zooms out and the pattern of the polygons turns out to be an image of crucified Jesus. It is tempting to interpret this image as the big Other, as the eye, the panopticon scrutinizing the movement of its citizens. The more likely explanation is that the artist casts our attention to the exterior of the collective, an exteriority, which can have a symbolic representation, is perhaps nothingness itself, but which may also be a well-articulated Other, a voice that has little to do with the particular units that make up the whole.

In each work in this exhibition the viewer finds an insulated microcosm, which operates in reference to a nondescript exteriority. In Bayrle's work this exteriority is acknowledged as the symbolic presence, as the topology of the particulars it encompasses. However, there is no account of how the scattered many, with their arbitrary movements, are related to this symbolic presence. In Baer's work the viewer has only access to a piece of a greater narrative. Each painting operates like a quick snapshot, which almost feels staged as if it were set up to present the thinnest slice of an event which soon disappears. One has no indication how this moment came to be, nor any insight to what will happen next, there is only the internal life of the painting. Both artists bring attention to the systems which allow the viewer to approach the work. These systems seem almost necessary to what is purposely left out. In the end, it is the viewer, who is the exteriority to the work and perhaps even its organizing presence.