

# Monika Baer/Thomas Bayrle

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Any attempt to critically deal with this exhibition's surprising juxtaposition of works by Monika Baer and Thomas Bayrle must first take into account the clear differences between their aesthetic positions: Since the early '90s, Baer has been developing a thoroughly heterogeneous artistic practice in paintings, drawings, and collages that combines atmospherically evocative techniques of abstraction with figurative elements that have an almost surrealistic effect; the idiosyncratic results are characterized by a linking of the clear-cut with the amorphous and of the visceral with the conceptual, thereby reflecting on the conventions of painting by questioning the dichotomy between kitsch and critical negativity, for instance. Bayrle, on the other hand, has since the late '60s confronted the visual (marketing) strategies of pop culture and politics in a body of work notable for its formal consistency. To this end, he condenses well-known consumer objects culled from mass culture with agitprop icons to create so-called "superforms" in drawing, prints, and film. These compositions, which have become the artist's trademark, are based on the repetition of a single image as subordinated, pixel-like units to create ironic, dystopian portraits of anonymous subjectivity in a world dominated by industrial production and out-of-control consumerism. The show established a plausible connection between Baer and Bayrle, revealing how both artists succeed in setting in motion a dialectic between, on the one hand, the quotidian object deprived of aesthetic properties through its commercial accessibility and, on the other, the aesthetic relevance it nonetheless enjoys.

In the gallery's side rooms, a 16-mm film and a video by Bayrle (both made in collaboration with Daniel Kohl) were projected as loops. The film *Gummibaum* (Rubber Tree), 1993–94, with its alternating black-and-white images—a compilation of photocopies—of a



Monika Baer, *Tanz (Dance)*, 2007, oil on canvas, 16 1/4 x 19 1/4".

(Highway Junction), 2006–2007, in which an image of Christ on the cross is composed of some four hundred separate polygonal fragments of moving highway traffic, a motif employed obsessively in Bayrle's work. Ultimately, this piece is all too easily reduced to the pun of its title (a junction between two highways is called an "Autobahn cross" in German), referring to the stereotype of the "religious" relationship Germans have with their cars. In addition, the film's technical polish results in a certain homogeneity and predictability.

Bayrle covered the walls of the gallery's main room with wallpaper, dating from 1967, that displays a serial pattern of black men's shoes against a yellow ground. This served as a backdrop for twelve small and medium-size paintings by Baer in which actual coins are joined by painted banknotes, playing cards, and startling slices of sausage, producing a constellation of motifs rich in theoretical and art-historical resonances, from Duchamp's speculative assessment of the work of art through Picabia's late paintings featuring circular tokens to Warhol's dollar-bill pictures. These paintings, whose mode is strongly emblematic, display a complex spectrum of references pertaining to the revaluation and devaluation of the quotidian object in modern art—though, to be sure, those references are quickly destabilized in the context of this intentionally heterogeneous painterly project.

In the end, the show, which appeared to have been assembled somewhat hastily, lacked a well-developed conceptual framework. While the Baer/Bayrle combination was effective from a formal standpoint, it remained unclear whether the exhibition was offering a critique of the artistic sublimation of everyday life or merely an "odd coupling" within the program of a well-established gallery.

—André Rottmann

Translated from German by Susan Bernofsky.

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