



M Formation, 1971/2008,
38 x 70 cm each sheet,
silkscreen on adhesive.
Courtesy Galerie Johann
Widauer, Innsbruck

Thomas Bayrle

I've a Feeling We're Not in Kansas Anymore

Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

6 February – 19 April

According to the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), this large exhibition dedicated to Thomas Bayrle – some 300 works from a period of more than 45 years – is the German artist's first retrospective exhibition ever. If that claim is true, then the event is as commendable as it is astonishing: Bayrle is a singularly accomplished artist, with a searching and obsessive aesthetic – a sort of Busby Berkeley meets the Presocratics – that succeeds in deftly raising myriad issues via the sheer power of images.

Curated by MACBA's chief curator, Chus Martínez, *I've a Feeling We're Not in Kansas Anymore* includes paintings, drawings, photocollages, animated films, books, prints, sculptures, interactive objects, wallpaper – even a few raincoats hung on the wall. From the earliest works to the present, Bayrle has tended to express himself in a Pop-inflected idiom – Chairman Mao, for instance, is a recurring motif, while Norman Mailer makes a startling cameo appearance in a 1970 drawing. At the same time, Bayrle's insistence on metamorphosis and optical legerdemain brings to mind Vasarely, Escher and Arcimboldo. But rather than icons, or even the iconic element latent within the simulacra, in Bayrle's work the meaning of modularity per se becomes the focus, whether that module be a factory-produced textile, a leaf on a plant, a citizen in society, a photocopy of a photograph of a drawing of an automobile, or even a line of that drawing.

In the works themselves a thrilling rush of convergences results – between traditional Asian orthogonal-based perspective techniques and contemporary computer graphics; between the autobahn of Postwar Germany and the capsule hotel of current-day Tokyo; between the pixel and the molecule – culminating in the hallucinatory tour de force *M Formation* (1971/2008). Hence the larger suggestive power of Bayrle's technique: rather than Pop or Op art, rather than a critique of mass culture or an exercise in retinal stimulation, there is a sense of an ontological investigation taking place, a search for the indivisible building block of reality – and given the interconnectedness of all things, the work also seems to posit in its inexorable merging of figure and ground an implicit conclusion that such a search may ultimately be unnecessary.

A fitting emblem of the revisionist effect of the exhibition as a whole is provided by the work *Die 100 Grasse*, a 1971 acrylic based on a published list, extracted from a German financial magazine, of the top 100 artists of the time, each identified by nation and style, and ranked by a price-to-value quotient. In transcribing the magazine's printed list onto the canvas's harsh yellow ground, Bayrle makes slight but carefully orchestrated shifts in the lettering so that a shadowy figure emerges from the statistics: a man with a brush, a bucket and a broom, apparently applying wallpaper, or perhaps a political or advertising poster. The name Thomas Bayrle, as might have been expected, is absent from the magazine's 'top 100'; but at the same time, one senses an element of self-portraiture in the work, so that ultimately the artist has indeed introduced himself, albeit slyly, into the canon – an act of prophesy which this show belatedly serves to fulfil. *George Stolz*