

BARCELONA

Thomas Bayrle

MUSEU D'ART CONTEMPORANI DE BARCELONA

"I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore" was, surprisingly, the first retrospective of the work of Thomas Bayrle, but it was worth the wait. The only question is why it took so long. Curated by Chus Martínez,

this exhibition was exhaustive enough to make up for lost time, including more than 250 works from 1964 to the present. Though this oeuvre makes use of an array of supports and formats (silk screens, collages, acrylics, sculptures, 16-mm films, wallpapers, and more), it is wholly coherent, due to a certain stubbornness and discipline that could fool us into forgetting that Bayrle's work offers an ironic encoium of the enjoyment that lies hidden within any seemingly rational system of production. In effect, the pace of machines paradoxically gives rise to an irrational, unsustainable, obsessive, and obscene form of production for mass consumption, but that same pace is capable of making the experience of the assembly line into something inanelly choreographic, aesthetically curious, and, by extension, formally interesting and socially revealing. Like an echo of Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), Bayrle's work shows that aesthetic strategies of survival within capitalist alienation not only entail keen criticism but a sort of therapeutic resistance.

There's not much room for originality here. Repetition is the axis around which Bayrle's work revolves, and although many other commentators have noted this, I myself can only repeat the observation. There are cities built by addition, recurring grids of highways, and habitational units (such as *Rapport [Stadt-Tapete]* [Rapport (City Wallpaper)], 1997–2008); a vast array of portraits (from Mao and Lenin to Fiat magnate Gianni Agnelli, by way of Mozart and Venezuelan terrorist-hero Carlos) bound by the serialization of a single graphic motif; sex scenes with repeating gestures and movements (*Feuer im Weizen* [Fire in Wheat], 1970); enormous choreographies of consumption (whether of material products or commercialized political ideals) staged by tiny bodies duplicated to the very edge of the frame (*Vasarely*, 1966); collections of cans used to form a giant-scale can of condensed milk (*Glücksklee*, 1969); small men brushing their teeth with military speed to get that winning shine (*Super Colgate*, 1965). In many of these works, the obedient repetition of the same tiny, identical, and anecdotal shapes yields "super-forms" (to use the artist's term) that reveal the workings of complex systems of any magnitude. The crushing logic of a production system that manages industrial objects, landscapes, languages, desires, and ideals in exactly the same way revolves around that curt organic dialectic between the part and its multiplication into a whole. All that systemic operations need in order to make anything into something else is an automated production pace. In other words, the accumulation of methodical workforces and chains of production lead not to a better world, but rather to a spiral of amusing and quaint logotypes that camouflage the absurdity of growth.

—Martí Peran

Translated from Spanish by Jane Brodie.

Thomas Bayrle,
Kartoffelzähler
(Potato Counters),
1968, wallpaper
on colored paper,
32% x 21 1/4".

