

Thomas Bayrle *All-in-One*

*Institut d'Art Contemporain, Villeurbanne 21 March – 11 May*

It is fitting that this touring retrospective of the work of Thomas Bayrle should stop off in a suburb of Lyons, birthplace to the Jacquard loom. The German artist, now seventy-six, worked for several years in a textile factory during the 1950s, recognising in the warp and weft of material an image of the social relations between people. Half a century later, as Bayrle himself recognised in a recent talk at London's ICA, it's impossible not to see in that an uncanny presentiment of the founding metaphor of the World Wide Web. (The word for weave in the artist's native German, for example, is *weben*.) The corporate logos of the Internet browsers Chrome, Internet Explorer and Firefox even make an appearance in one of the most recent works on show, projected onto the body of Jesus in one of 14 computer-aided designs for *The Stations of the Cross* (2013). But for the most part, this exhibition, which stretches back to the early 1960s via more than 200 works, finds Bayrle more interested in pursuing other icons, from Mammon to Mao.

The large photographic collage on canvas *Himmelfahrt* (*Heaven-Bound*, 1988) presents Coppo and Salerno di Marcovaldo's 1274 image of the crucifixion from Pistoia Cathedral in Tuscany, here composed entirely of different distortions of a single bird's-eye view onto a stretch of autobahn. With a duplicity typical

of Bayrle's work, the title captures both the utopian promise of motorways and their homicidal potential. The circulation of traffic becomes the circulation of holy blood. It's such a striking image that Bayrle returned to it 20 years later, this time as a video, made in collaboration with Daniel Kohl. In this film, *Autobahnkreuz* (2006–7), as the image scans across multiple bulging video feeds of the same stretch of road, we are immediately reminded of the banks of monitor screens that fill up a CCTV control room. As the view pulls back to reveal the Marcovaldos' image, Christ's face looking down upon us becomes a picture of surveillance and discipline, his frankly disappointed expression that of a traffic cop who finally – as the loop comes to an end – becomes indistinguishable from the endless fisheye videos he stands watch over.

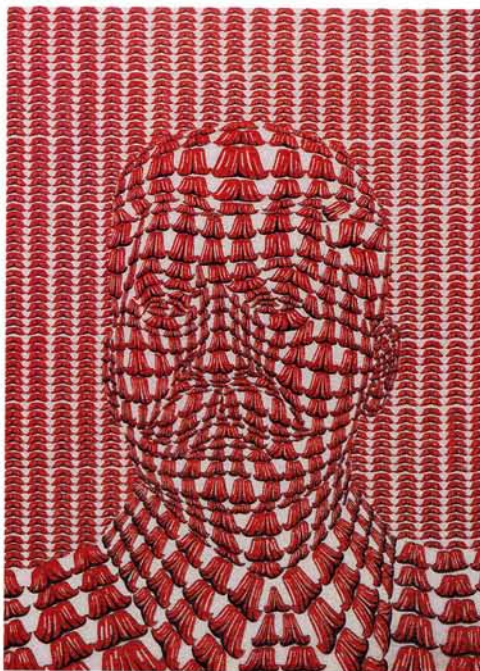
The figure of the highway winds its way around the galleries like a red thread, becoming here a dollar sign in cardboard and Plexiglas (*\$*, 1980), there an image of hell as imagined by Piranesi after reading J.G. Ballard (*Gotischer Schinken*, 1980–4). This last is the only oil-on-canvas in the show and the work is notable for the absence of any human subjects – this is an inferno strictly for the machines. But even engines have a hope of salvation, hence the obese windscreen wipers (*Prega per Noi*, 2012)

and pendulating Porsche engines, readymade sculptures extracted from their vehicles, plonked on pedestals and soundtracked by Catholic rosary prayers (*Rosary*, 2012) to be found a few rooms further on.

These last were inspired by a trip to a small country church full of old women piously fingering beads. It was the sense of *quantity* that struck Bayrle, as he noted at the ICA, that ten prayers could somehow count for more than three, and this is really at the core of everything he does. In the small garden enclosed by the Institut d'Art stands Bayrle's famous *Watering Can* (1996) composed of dozens of ordinary green plastic watering cans. Facing the sculpture is something the artist did not place there, but that seems apposite nonetheless: a shipping container.

Efficient, stackable and radically oblivious to its own contents, a container is capable of bearing any commodity – be it household goods, weapons, people or contemporary art – and reducing it to a pure vector of trade. Like Bayrle's image of *Stalin* (1970), made entirely by the repetition of the general secretary's moustache, contemporary capitalism is threaded and composed by the multiplication of these interchangeable steel boxes. It is the icon that reveals the nature of the whole, the all-in-one.

Robert Barry



*Stalin (Red Version)*, 1970, silkscreen print on paper, 85 × 60 cm. Courtesy the artist