Thomas Bayrle
GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE

Thomas Bayrle is part of a generation of German artists who in the 1960s explored the inherent dissonance of postwar culture in a divided nation, fashioning a particular brand of Pop that cast a darker, more ambivalent glance toward the language of mass production and consumption than that of their American peers. Drawing in part on his experience with Jacquard looms while working in a textile factory in the late '50s, Bayrle took the serial principle to an extreme, developing his signature "superforms," mosaiclike compositions collaged from a single, miniaturized motif endlessly repeated.

Though never as widely visible as that of his contemporaries Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, Bayrle's work has become increasingly prominent in recent years, in large part because of the ways in which his approach seems to anticipate a media landscape defined by the multiplication and manipulation of images. "Thomas Bayrle: Complete Films 1979–2007" at Gavin Brown's Enterprise highlighted his lesser-known work in film, video, and digital animation, not only emphasizing his prescient engagement with the idea of limitless visual

profusions but also situating him as a new-media pioneer in his early adoption of computers in the '80s.

At the center of the exhibition was a large-scale wall projection looping seven of Bayrle's film and video works. Even as the technologies at his disposal became increasingly sophisticated, Bayrle's central themes have remained essentially consistent, with the works here repeatedly invoking the masses and their prime movers: Christianity, ideology, the Autobahn. In the exhibition's earliest work, *AUTO*, 1979–80, what appears to be a vertiginous bird's-eye view of cars on a highway—in fact, it's toy cars on a cardboard model made by the artist—is multiplied to the point of abstraction, while the most recent video on view, *Autobahn-Kreuz*, 2006–2007, slowly pans out, over the course of twenty-two minutes, to reveal the swaying, attenuated form of a Gothic crucifix formed from footage of cars and trucks speeding down a nondescript section of the Autobahn. Other works reflect a concern with technology's incursion into the biological realm, such as the vaguely unsettling *B)ALT*, 1997, in which images of the artist's face morph into the form of his infant grandson and vice versa, and *Dolly Animation*, 1998, a meditation on the first cloned mammal that opens, somewhat heavy-handedly, with an image of a priest.

The consonance between Bayrle's use of dizzying image proliferation as a structural principle and, say, the gridded array of a Google Image Search results page was driven home by the inclusion of four recent paintings from the artist's "Caravaggio Series," 2015, flanking the video projection. In these canvases, warped, interlocking illustrations of iPhones form the "module" for compositions based on Caravaggio's *Inspiration of St. Matthew*; some works even display the original painting on their screens. By now, this point about our near-religious devotion to gadgets and the ways in which they mediate our experience of the world seems so obvious that it hardly needs stating outright. (Then again, maybe not: upon entering the gallery, I reflexively—or should I say ritualistically—took out my own iPhone and posted a picture to Instagram.)

Visually impressive though they may be, the superform works here ironically lost some of their impact in aggregate, with each reiterating similar ideas and processes. The works I found most impressive were a set of two smaller, subtler, black-and-white 16-mm film projections on a side wall, *Autobahn-Kopf*, 1988/1989, and *Gummibaum*, 1993/1994, stop-motion animations in which the artist manipulated still images of cars and crowds, transforming them into hybrids of the machinelike and the organic. In the former, stills from filmed footage of the Autobahn were printed on latex and then contorted into the shape of a human head, while the latter turns hundreds of photocopied images depicting distant, overhead views of children on a playground into a rotating rubber plant. Suggesting both automation and mass surveillance, these analog works, in their exploration of the relationship between social systems and the body politic, also seemed the most contemporary.

—*Rachel Wetzler*

Thomas Bayrle,
Gummibaum,
1993/1994, video,
black-and-white,
sound, 6 minutes.