

View of "... of bread, wine, cars, security and peace"

Photo: Joritt Aust



Monika Grabuschnigg, *Crash (Simulation)*, 2019–20
Glazed earthenware, dimensions variable

the firmament, though they sometimes hit wind turbulence. This era is made for the heavens with tacitly bold artistic statements, impervious to illustrating demoralisation as a strategy for art's self-immolation. Some make their presence known with theatrics as grating as an Artaud scream. Others are soothing as elevator music and record-players. Some can know elation in the midst of sorrow and a strange vapour. The night vision still works, so note that the star gate of the circled square has been breached. No matter what happens in the bread and circus, in the far reaches of the neural world order, in memory – our days of wine and roses will be forever.

Max Henry

Photo: David Schönnen; courtesy the artist & Carbon 12, Dubai

EVERYTHING UNDER THE SUN

"MONIKA BAER. NEUE BILDER"
NEUER BERLINER KUNSTVEREIN
12 JUNE – 2 AUGUST 2020

Where there's rain, there's sunshine, and sometimes just a little rain and a lot of sunshine, like the weather in Los Angeles. There, the evening sky is painted in a luminescent blue that one sees nowhere else on earth. It's almost a fake beauty, a cliché that follows every mention of the city, a prop behind a prop, something a movie exec dreamed of. Monika Baer's Hannah Höch Prize exhibition at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.) is swathed in LA light, and its breezy, tempting smoothness is written across her newest painted work. What a perfect condition under which to compose a series of four large-format paintings, *yet to be titled* (all works 2020), whose central motif of a flaccid,

nearly toppled tree anchors the surrounding elements, like a good actor on stage who's just about to take a dive.

The two rooms at the n.b.k. are divided between smaller assemblage objects in the front space, and the big paintings in the rear, less capacious gallery. The central figure of *yet to be titled* at times looks like a worn crayon pulled from a box of colours that time, at least the time of painting, forgot. In front of these pink poles is a stone dividing wall that runs the horizontal stretch of the canvas, whose concrete grey hides a palimpsest of worked and reworked sections, filled with gestures half-finished, erased, or simply left there to haunt. Each sky is captured in a similar powder blue, covered with raindrops cascading down on the scene, pulling the composition down and to the left, while the withering sections of tree struggle to be upright. The actors of these enactments are interchangeable, reinforced by the fact that Baer prefers to paint in series, and these four pictures seen together have a cinematic effect, each in a particular stage of coming together, or falling apart. The seams are hard to miss,

especially along the contour of the trees, when the slightest colour variation is effected between figure and sky. There is no horizon line, no orientation point, other than that little stretch of wall that asserts an illusory depth in the composition, which the trees then arrive to frustrate, and pull out of whack.

The repeated elements let the paintings speak as paintings and not mere images, showing off their technical heterogeneity. The trick is to see the surface and composition together. The paintings open themselves to their own making and potential disambiguation. Isn't that painting's continued gambit? To just barely hold things together in one composition, while also showing how those parts could just as easily come apart? What anchors these four canvases is not the overall pictorial quality, but the painting that continually returns the paint – and its application, mixing, and cutting – back into the very ground of the support. In the first of the series, there is a ghostly outline of a face in profile, and the tree stump is coated in paint that runs down the trunk like a slowly melting gelato (hazelnut, I think). Lower still on the stump, there are painted flecks of earth tones – mossy greens and woody browns. The image is deceiving, a stand-in for a carefully built-up surface whose structures are as wild as they are consistently worked. Two of the paintings feature a teardrop shaped foam sculpture that is affixed in the lower portion of the picture (one on the left side, the other on the right). In one, there's primary blue and red, a droopy modernist thing that turns the canvas into a structure that permits additions and revisions.

The first room containing five mounted boxes, each with an image and section of a saw blade, require a different looking: careful and close, too, but always at a thing in space. Tiny painted volumetric forms populate a ground of similar colour – red, black, off-white

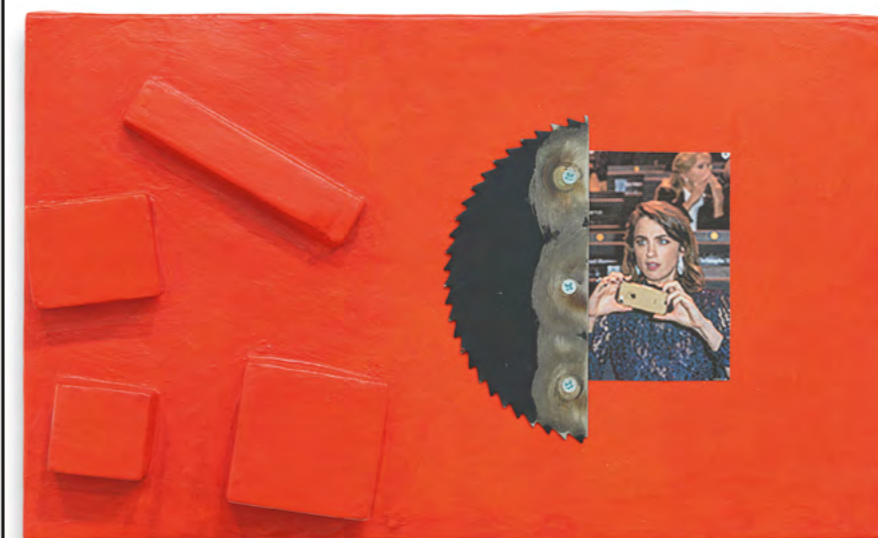


Photo: Jens Ziehe

Monika Baer, *Untitled*, 2020
Paper, acrylic, inkjet print, saw blade fragment, screws on cardboard; image: Adèle Haenel at the César Awards
18 x 30 x 6.4 cm



View of “Monika Baer. Neue Bilder”

– whose purity of hue is a bright contrast to the lighter palette of the large paintings in the adjoining space. In Baer’s assemblage, there’s apparently a method to each, and a potential correspondence of significances: images, mostly of women (real and fictional) lie on the ground of these boxes, never far from the teeth of the saw blade. Their smallness is powerful and direct. Some of the blades offer mirrored surfaces, in which the conditions of photography and looking are pulled out of the individual images, out into a loop with whomever happens to be standing there. Their activation of self-aware looking is soft, a contrast to the otherwise hard metal surfaces of the blade sections. The image cuts, like the lines of the boxes and cropped photos, and cuts again with the jagged edges of the blades. Taking in these assemblages as a

whole makes it nearly impossible to witness their subtle effects, and their thin-gliness casts the paintings in the back room in a completely different light. In one of the most detailed trees in *yet to be titled*, there are small pieces of bark that have peeled off and appear to open like a fan or book. This section could be a kind of cryptogram for the works as a whole in the show – a surface within more and more surfaces – whose flapping in the wind seems to pull against the weight of the falling tree. Here, dark shading and illusionistic depth are a welcome contrast to the painted surface. No one sees a sky, or a tree that is almost falling, all at once. What one sees instead is a motion and movement arrested, caught in the hairs of a brush and paint. These tree stumps are nothing if not a mirror for our own bilateral symmetry as humans, where

we perceive the world through upright, binocular vision. Looking up at the sky is the only respite for this kind of visual orientation, and in Baer’s skies, there’s always a sagging tree, or an industrial metal fragment, that manages to get in the way. It’s a special kind of light that has no sun, just its radiant, overblown effects. That’s a good place to hide the technical skill in working up a surface just enough that it will start to show its cracks. There is no beginning or end here, just a restless swaying, an invitation to turn, and move, and stare. It is the best sensuality an inanimate thing (painting, assemblage) can offer, and this animation of viewing and inspection is reason enough to take Baer’s invitation to look at the sky, to peer through the edges of blades, watch the trees as they start toppling.

Colin Lang



yet to be titled, 2020, oil on canvas, 216 x 145 cm

Courtesy the artist; Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin; Greene Naftali, New York