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Reviews of new German painting and Kiely Jenkins

“New Expressions”

P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center

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This show, curated by Jack Cowart, and now on a vast promotional tour of the U.S., continues the instant tradition of meaningless equivalency. As sudden forefathers of the “wild painters” of Berlin and the Mülheimer Freiheit, two self-important art teachers, Georg Baselitz and Markus Lüpertz, join forces with two angst-ridden cartoonists from Berlin, Jörg Immendorff and A.R. Penck, while Anselm Kiefer, the loner in the forest, is added for spice. What disservice the show does in terms of contemporary history, however, is made up for by the chance it offers us to actually see a spread of work by these by now semi-mythic figures, and so to make some preliminary judgments on the quality of individual achievements.

Baselitz and Lüpertz are both academic artists. The first works from the figure, usually the figure in isolation in the studio, the second works from still life. Neither seems very interested in the particularity of his subject(s), tending to generalize, hiding inattention behind the devices of disproportionate style. Originally Baselitz seems to have favored a brushy impressionism that over the years has grown mannered, in a rather coarse expressionism. He obviously hoped at one time that scale might make his work more impressive, but found he could only rescue himself by turning the work upside down. Lüpertz chose a cooler mode, a late Cubist motif, which he meant to somehow reheat. This works reasonably well on a small scale, but when blown up and bedeviled with military insignia it becomes a little pretentious and quite stupidly dangerous. Both painters, in fact, have an unthinking and unforgivable predilection for peppering their work with heroicized references to fascism.

I've already called Immendorff and Penck cartoonists, and I mean this in a descriptive, not a pejorative sense. Immendorff's major source of inspiration is comic-book art—the jagged figures and compressed, overactive space of his compositions suggest as much, and early drawings from 1968 on show here (a polar bear on a red star, a running man in flames on a blue star) clinch it. Penck's crowded hieroglyphics may have a more ancient lineage, but they too are essentially in a tradition of graphic, easily understood narratives. The problem (or the point?) is that neither artist seems to have a narrative to tell. Penck's suggestion of some primordial myth has yet to be developed past its initial, very striking presentation; one painting here from 1969 easily bests most of his more recent work. Immendorff's "*Café Deutschland*" series is mostly impressive, but marred by an undemocratic cynicism which seems to glorify a military apotheosis while deploring the noisy inefficiency of parliamentary government. He has every right to be incensed over the partition of his native land, but the remedy he seems to favor has an unsavory past.

Which brings us to the *Sehnsucht* (yearning) of Kiefer, the student of Beuys, who was the first artist to reanimate the Teutonic myths of blood and earth. Kiefer relishes probing the dark regions of the German soul, and flaunting his discoveries with an almost Wagnerian flair. The imagery he resuscitates is that of a landscape in which ideas are preferred to facts, leadership to consensus—the troubled landscape of German romanticism, nationalism, and Nazism. The work grips us so because the artist presents his subject with such sympathetic force, yet manages to mask his intention toward his inspiration. Does he romanticize blood and sacrifice, as Beuys has done, or ridicule the fear of night, as did Kurt Schwitters as he built his Merzbau, or as Max Ernst did as he bricolaged his rainy forests? All that is certain is that *Johannisnacht* (Midsummer's night, 1981), a big square painting of tarry black on lumpy burlap, a black bled through with reds and ochers and spattered with white, remained the only truly convincing work here.

[Kiely Jenkins](#)

Fun Gallery

To approach this gallery after the German show was to move from an attempted sublime to the most deliberately ridiculous. Kiely Jenkins' deranged dioramas and sick taxidermy are simply a lot of fun. Sure, they have a rather obvious "message" about life in the big city, but the point is

made with such obvious relish that it doesn't seem heavy-handed in the least. Indeed, the pleasure of the work lies in the lightness of the touch that spreads that very obviousness. Jenkins' trophies take Christy Rupp's wholesome urban ecologies and sour them with a frat-house humor, a smarty-pants mixture of clichés from comic books and second-rate horror movies. Rupp's wire and papier-mâché animals (even her rats) always look healthy and well adjusted, but Jenkins' critters are hysterically maladjusted, cripples and weirdos who inhabit the romantic twilight of late-night bars and 24-hour diners. And the shoddy, dusty dioramas of a deserted cityscape both record that scene and participate in it, looking as they do like the forgotten decor of a forgotten bar.

In an East Village scene even more dominated by pastiche, parody, and repetition than Soho, Jenkins' dopey absurdities provide an element of relief.

—[Thomas Lawson](#)

the making of the film *Entr'acte*, 1924. The condensation of space and the quasi-narrative quality of these works, together with the melodramatic pulp-fiction scenarios of the 40s, suggest that the artist had sensed cinema as the primary metaphor of 20th-century reality: one wonders why he did not pursue film as a medium. Perhaps, ironically, it was his own attachment to the auratic myth of painting that precluded him from following this path.

JOSEPH NECHVATAL

Joseph Nechvatal, like Picabia, traces figures from Renaissance art, a strategy of quotation that is fast becoming so repetitive as to render it a meaningless gesture except insofar as it indicates the impoverished language of a reality unable to represent itself other than by a doubling back to the myths and icons of the past. Nechvatal does attempt to forestall this closure by also incorporating into his drawing images of American media icons and objects of modern technology. We are guided, therefore, into a reading of power and exploitation, impotence and alienation, that nevertheless is still too literal to overcome a stereotypical humanism.

Where the work begins to transcend its sociological subject matter is in certain features of its execution, which go some way toward recognizing that we need a new spatial model to represent our location (or dislocation) in a late-capitalist-mediated world. The images, variable in scale, are given visual coherence through being embedded in a dense matrix of graphite smudges, lines, repeated and abstract motifs ("Linoleum was a major influence on my work," Nechvatal has said) like so many emptied carcasses caught in a science-fiction web. As we scan the picture we are confronted with neither a traditional single focal point, nor a Modernist multiplicity of equivalents, but the appearance and disappearance of discontinuous forms in an indeterminate space which begins to function as a metaphor for time as so many disjunctive fragments of experience, and space as de-centered and without tangible coordinates. The sense of distance created by the uniformity of traced lines is emphasized by the presentation of the drawings as photographs—homogenized surfaces. What remains disappointing and inexplicable is the artist's addition of colored stripes and washes, which

seem too arbitrary to function as more than conventional formalistic devices.
—JEAN FISHER

"New Expressions," P.S.1: KIELY JENKINS, Fun Gallery:

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—THOMAS LAWSON

RON NAGLE, Charles Cowles Gallery; DONALD LIPSKI, Germans Van Eck Gallery:

RON NAGLE

Besides really big pictures, will the