



DIRTY PICTURES

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Viewed from the proper distance every painting becomes flat. When the picture is reproduced, this flatness remains. In the copy the painting obviously loses its materiality and its scale. But in addition, an entire array of viewing possibilities is reduced and simplified, as it were, to a single view: in contrast to studying paintings in “real life,” their reproduction remains the same no matter how you look at them. Michael Raedecker’s often large-scale paintings also turn into the “beautiful” flat images seen in reproductions when viewed from the right distance. However, his works revolve around what ensues by not looking from the proper distance, that is, by standing too close and hence seeing what happened in the process of making the picture.

In very realistic or illusionistic painting the image stays clear and sharp up to the shortest distance: the image sticks on the canvas; one sees the things portrayed just like one sees real objects in daily life. In many other and practically all modern paintings, the image gradually dissolves as one approaches. The image turns to “matter”: roughly structured patches of paint and color that signify nothing more than just paint and color. Just one step backwards allows miraculous recovery of the image from the magma, a witnessing of how order and meaning

emerge out of the original chaos, and this bestows on the aesthetic experience a mythical depth ... In the first case the artist is a master artisan or illusionist, who hides behind the realistic effect of his skillfully created images, in the second case he operates as an alchemist constructing form and definition from primal elements. Are image-makers extraordinary people?

It has rightly been said that Michael Raedecker’s paintings are “unsettling”: we do not readily comprehend what is actually happening in them nor do they offer us an ideal viewing distance from which we might feel that the image coalesces into an accessible whole. The paint, the various kinds of threads, and the other materials sometimes pasted and painted over, work at cross purposes. At the distance where, for example, the paint still yields an immaterial “image” and forms readable figures, the threads already break away from the whole and turn into “wool” and “hairs” that undermine the image. On closer examination, loose hairs and threads stuck into the paint, along with protruding lumps of paint, evoke miniature landscapes, which then again approximate the complete image first seen in the painting, and so on. The embroidery and plaiting that Raedecker uses to imitate painterly effects never blend into the image evenly. The painting is never consistently “image” and the image never dissolves completely into paint. The image actually stays “messy” at all times; Raedecker’s technique always generates the appearance of sloppy patchwork. The painter in this case is not a conjuror and not a magician, but a craftsman and a bricoleur. Seen from the right distance or in front of the camera the paint-

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MICHAEL RAEDECKER, DIM, 2001, acrylic and thread on canvas, 28 x 31 1/8".



MICHAEL RAEDECKER, *OPERATOR (AFTER GIORGIONE)*, 2002, acrylic and thread on canvas, 35 7/16 x 29 1/2".

ing obviously does become “image”; yet, from (too) nearby the visual information transmits contradictory messages and the picture proves to be half made of noise. The paintings are like worn-out vinyl LPs, with a scarcely discernible voice or melody amidst the many hisses and scratches, being played to an audience accustomed to a flawless and clean rendition.

Raedecker’s strategy can also be read in the details of his images. In *MIRAGE* (1999) there are two tiny tree trunks to the left. And to the left again of these trunks a shadow line runs straight upwards, alongside the stem; this way, the tree-thread slightly detaches itself from the picture plane, yet simultaneously it treats the painting itself as a plane on which the shadow is cast. However, at the foot of the trunks the shadow of the stems starts sloping to the right, deep into the “landscape” of the image. Hence, the literal reading of the thread on the plane and the reading of the image as a surreal landscape are both evoked and yet mutually opposing. How could one look at such an image and not feel unsettled?

Raedecker’s paintings evoke a recognizable basic imagery,

taken from the tradition of painting or popular visual culture. His images are never entirely strange or original—they seem familiar, easy to label and to classify. Thus, most of his pictures to date show landscapes and interiors. A number of landscapes clearly allude to the oriental landscape tradition: a few lines and some threads pasted into the pale, primer-like ground suffice to evoke depth in the desiccated paint soil. There are various surrealistic landscapes, deep spaces with no horizon or sky, over which nameless shapes, marked by sharp shadows, are spread out. Since the objects elude identification, the scale of the depiction remains uncertain: Is it microscopic, is it cosmic? Surrealism is often just around the corner: the way in which the shapes are placed in the empty spaces and the confrontation of woolly, almost immaterial figures and objects with solid and yet’ amorphous ones are reminiscent of Magritte in his early work and even more so of Tanguy. Particularly innovative are some landscapes in which the world is folded or rolled up or forms a ring enclosing a vortex or hole. Raedecker’s interiors—in fact the interiors of a type of house he also uses for his suburban exteriors—

do not refer to a traditional painting theme or genre, yet they are very recognizable: It is the suburban home of the B-movie or police series, shot at the moment when the telephone starts ringing or the first car pulls up, and the story begins. In addition to these landscapes and domestic scenes, Raedecker also painted a few extremely spatial still lifes and a few portraits. In all these pictures the spectators will easily recognize the genre and be able to name what they see. However, at the same time it is evident that such naming or such references are secondary and do not reveal what is really happening in Raedecker's work.

Raedecker does not paint stories or situations but places. These places are like small boxes or cases. When we discover a lovely box we want to open it even if we know that it is empty; we want to see the bare interior, to smell it and give free rein to our dreams before closing it and turning it upside down in search of a sign or a name. To me that is the way in which Raedecker's paintings work: They seem to be made in order to put something in them, to save something preciously small and intimate, but they feel empty somehow. They are storage locations, the topoi of the classical *ars memoriae*. This even applies to the still lifes: The depicted objects naturally behave like actors who know they are being watched and address the viewers. But the spatiality of the pictures is more powerful than the single objects in them; the objects-actors do not perform on a stage but in a landscape, and the spectator's gaze passes through them into the depths.

The two portraits recently made by Raedecker radically reverse the spatiality and landscape setting of his earlier works. His mode of working remains the same inasmuch as there is initial recognition: "Ah, Giorgione!" However, instead of portraying sitters of his own, he remodels classical portraits using his own techniques. The choice of a painting by Giorgione as his source image is obviously not motivated by the sentimental desire to make a faithful, "true" picture of a face, but rather by the wish to revise the genre of the portrait. Not even Giorgione himself was primarily interested in rendering a face when he painted his *PORTRAIT OF A GENTLEMAN* (ca. 1510), now in the National Gallery in Washington. The Renaissance painter turns the head of his model in partial profile so that the "hole" of the left eye becomes central to the face and heightens the piercing impact of the gaze, hence imparting it with Deleuze's words-*visageite* or faceness. Giorgione experiments with the pose of the fist and the eyes as a means to strengthen the artificial nature of the portrait (frontality, juxtaposition, presence ...). It is exactly this "hole" of the eye and gaze that serves as the point of departure and even takes the focal position in Raedecker's *OPERATOR (AFTER GIORGIONE)* (2002). These portraits are not spatial or poetical like "spaces" or like the small empty boxes, and unlike conventional portraits they do not arouse "human interest" in faces. They are laboratory tests demonstrating the existence of the pure, immoral, meaningless force of the image.

(Translation: Jo Pollet)



MICHAEL RAEDECKER, *BLIND SPOT*, 2000, acrylic and thread on canvas, 46 x 34".