

# ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 2003

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

## MICHAEL RAEDECKER

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

Since he first attracted notice some five years ago, Michael Raedecker has rightfully been admired for his distinctive coupling of homespun materials and the “high” practice of painting. Often he has used thread and yam to “sketch” the contours of the generic modern landscape—say, an empty driveway bordered with well-spaced, overly pruned trees—consistently revealing the formal qualities inherent, if rarely considered, in string (known, of course, to the Renaissance painters who regularly employed it for perspective studies). Layered onto a thick application of paint, Raedecker’s strands—thin and shimmery or fat and fuzzy—elegantly describe spare lines in space, though their unshakable “craftiness” hints at one of modernism’s most repressed elements: the domestic.

In Raedecker’s most recent exhibition, summarily titled “that’s the way it is,” these dissident strains were far more in evidence. He’d swapped an icy, bloodless palette for one of humid hues (salmon pink, coral orange); his subject matter now included still lifes and portraits, genres rarely compatible with aspirations to distance or indifference. Cotton and wool often left line and plane behind for more “decorative” behaviors—here miming bristly facial hair, there simulating weeds that had burrowed through tarmac. The still lifes could have been memento mori—*crab walk*, 2003, includes an intricately stitched cigarette, the eponymous crustacean, and a grinning double-handled vase—while the portraits were queasily rendered, gunked-up imitations of works by Renaissance masters like del Sarto.

It’s hardly novel for an artist to employ textile: as a critical step “within” painting



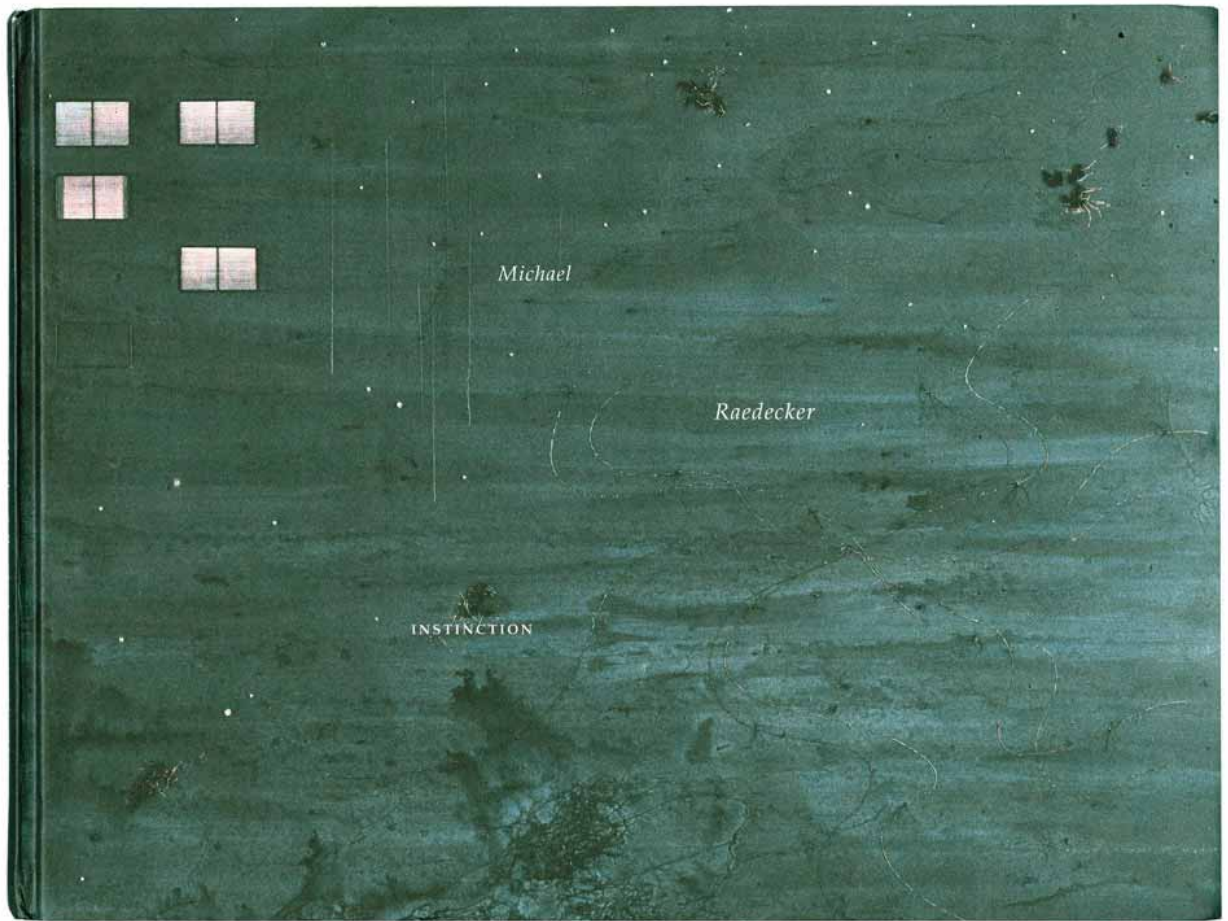
Michael Raedecker, *crab walk*, 2003, acrylic and thread on canvas, 24 1/2 x 37 3/8”.

(like Robert Rauschenberg) or as out-and-out resistance to the historically classed and gendered elitism of the medium (like Rosemarie Trockel’s knit canvases of the ’80s). Still, discussions of Raedecker’s work have typically granted the artist an exemption from the considerations of class and gender that would seem implicit in his materials. “I am on the edge of kitsch, but I don’t want to make kitschy paintings. I don’t want to be that explicit,” Raedecker has stated regarding the cultural associations his paintings invite. One wonders if, for an artist like Trockel or Ghada Amer, more than a simple disclaimer would be required to dissociate such materials from readings beginning and ending on the sewing-room floor.

In Raedecker’s latest work, the tension he’d set up previously between form and content literally unraveled. The paintings were messier, loopier, louder, and less well

behaved. In 1972, Leo Steinberg, himself complicating the form/content dichotomy, coined the term “optical oscillation” to describe what one experienced while standing in front of a good painting, modern or old master. Simply put, a successful canvas stubbornly reminds viewers that it’s two-dimensional while at the same time seductively suggesting a kind of third dimension. Raedecker has always engaged in *material* oscillations, asking thread to behave as pigment and calling on traditionally “low” means to produce “high” ends. Now that the artist has, however unwittingly, fallen squarely onto more postmodern concerns of class and gender, his works no longer oscillate smoothly—indeed, they seem to stutter. Yet it is this imperfect oscillation that, with or without the artist’s consent, makes their new tension even more compelling.

—Johanna Burton



Essay published in Michael Raedecker - Instinction, published in conjunction with the exhibition Michael Raedecker - Instinction, Centro nazionale per le arti contemporanee, Rome, September 25 - November 10, 2002

Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel, Switzerland, February 15 – April 21, 2003

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PAOLO COLOMBO

People often say “writing a film”.  
When will they consider “painting a film”?  
Michelangelo Antonioni <sup>1</sup>

## In memory only, reconsidered passion

The landscapes and interiors of Michael Raedecker’s paintings seem familiar territory: a house surrounded by trees, a spare living room window flanked by curtains opening onto a landscape, a plush wall-to-wall carpet, a building lit from inside and surrounded by darkness. His vision-austere and abstract-is of archetypal houses (they don’t really exist) and of a barren imagined nature. By analogy, and drawing from our own experience, we may think these images closer to movie props than to the actual houses and gardens that we inhabit. In fact, as is the case with *still life*, 2001, these objects and spaces openly declare their fictive nature, but unlike those seen in film, they are not made of light’s ephemeral skin on the silver screen. Instead, in a twist that is characteristic of Raedecker’s expressive disposition, he treads the thin line between the representation of the unreal and the imagined, while undermining his own metaphysical tendencies by giving his canvases a true substance: the texture that he painstakingly creates with threads that penetrate into and extrude

from the canvas, and by the thick pools of congealed paint, that are reminders of the tactile reality and of the labour that make up the artist's pictorial vocabulary.

Raedecker's canvases are placed on the floor of his studio; then they are suspended in mid-air from the ceiling, so that he can push the needle through the front to the back and again to the front of the canvas. Finally they are placed flat on a table, so that the liquid paint he pours on them can condense in thick three-dimensional areas, either giving life to an explosion of light, such as in *radiate*, 2000, or creating the effect of the geological layering and of the solidity of stone, as in *thirteen feelings*, 2002.

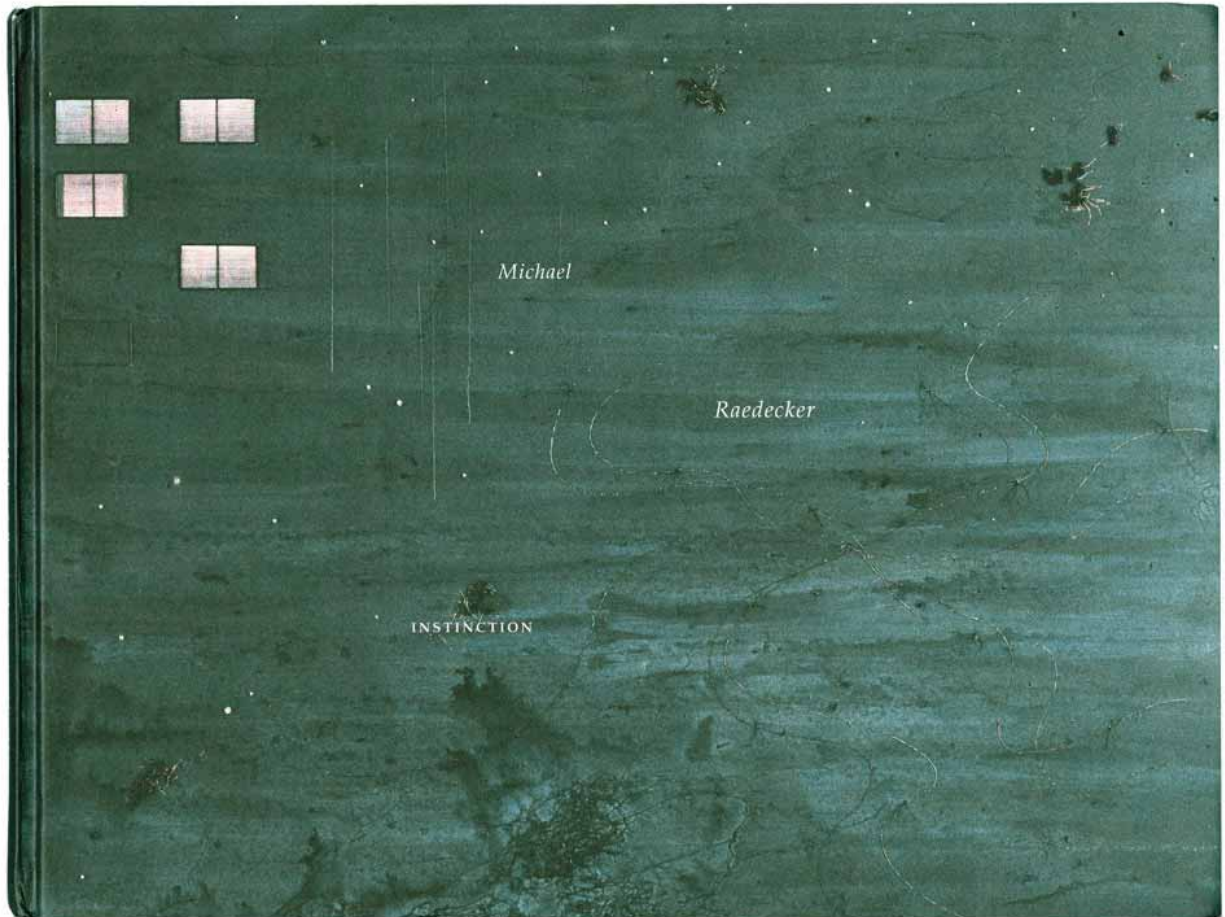
We, the spectators, look at the few objects delineated on the canvas: a close-up of a twig (again, the cinematic metaphor of the movie camera zeroing-in on a detail comes to mind) or a light shining from the window of a house into the sky<sup>22</sup>, rendered with a methodical embroidery of threads that simulate the principle of chiaroscuro—a light line, a dark line—the curtains, the bedspreads, the carpeting, all of which are tautologically represented by yarn. These objects evoke events that have taken place on a stage, of people that have inhabited these landscapes and houses, and yet leave us only with the awareness of their absence.

Like in the films of Antonioni, such as *L'Avventura*, 1960 or *L'Eclisse*, 1962, objects and places acquire an emblematic value, associated with a place of memory—a place therefore that has been first selectively recalled and then abstracted—that suggests past relationships and a drama that has unfolded, leaving a taste of emptiness and a sense of somber foreboding. Like in the work of the Italian filmmaker, whose scenes are also frequently framed by windows, (in Antonioni's vocabulary, glass stands for the invisible barrier that separates us from the others), in Raedecker's paintings the suggestion of our impossibility to communicate is ever present. In this context, memory—that is, the recalling of one's emotional and psychological states, as they were affected by past events—acquires the value of a viable existential solution. Besides texture and light, the third element that characterizes the surface of a painting, i.e. color, is crucial to the iconography of the artist. Similarly to Antonioni's yellow and pink hues of *Deserto Rosso*, 1964, Raedecker's grays, mauves and beiges are not the mere qualifiers of an atmosphere, but they pervade the canvas and become, in fact, personages themselves: active agents of the pathos of the image depicted.

In Raedecker's paintings, a narrative without characters unfolds, marked by a feeling of solitude and of contained turmoil. His canvases work inside of us as mirrors of our past: they are spare and uninhabited portraits of the empty rooms and of the landscapes that we, *ses semblables*, *ses frères*, have found, made barren and then left behind.

There is no sentiment in Raedecker's paintings, but the mere acknowledgement of a fact: that of the transience of things, of their deaf silence and the endurance that it takes to record it. There is a sense of acceptance of life's indifference and a patient way of recollecting its places and sites. Raedecker wrestles with time, images and thoughts and in the end gives us the semblance of an emptiness loaded with meaning.

One last thought to his work, and in particular to *hollow hill*, 1999. If it had a voice, it would resonate as in this quatrain: "Sometimes I fear memory  
In its concave grottoes and palaces  
(Said Saint Augustine) there are so many things.  
Hell and Heaven lie there." 3



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Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel, Switzerland, February 15 – April 21, 2003

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PHILIPP KAISER

## The near **and** the remote

“Neurotic men,” Sigmund Freud writes 1919 in his essay *The Uncanny*, “sometimes relate that they find female genitals unsettling. This uncanny place, however, is the entrance to the former home of the child, the locality in which everyone once, and initially, resided.”<sup>1</sup> The uncanny (in German *unheimlich*) or unhomy contains the term ‘home’. To Freud “horny” is meant in the sense of familiar and cosy, as well as also secretive and clandestine. Thus the sole difference between horny and unhomy is the prefix, which Freud calls a “mark of repression”. That the known and the familiarly horny can be uncanny and unhomy was already then a noted phenomenon and flares up once again in Michael Raedecker’s painting *is this it*, 2001 with its obvious affinity to Courbet’s *L’Origine du Monde*. At the same time the explicit context of *is this it-i.e.*, its colour areas-risks decomposing and flip-flopping into a volcanic landscape.

The uncanny is repeatedly manifest in Michael Raedecker’s work via the basic tone of his painting that laments a loss, one we may see as nostalgic. If, then, the uncanny is the result of a repression of the familiar, it must also have something to do with memory and childhood. Uninhabited landscapes with solitary houses, avenues and windblown trees inevitably call up in the viewer a feeling of the familiar: modernist architecture, yawning garage doors, abandoned wooden homes, and drive-ways surface as leitmotifs. This thematic repertoire is fed from the collective memory of film, advertising and illustrated magazines from the 50s and 60s. It was the time of the artist’s own socialization,



which he perhaps looks back on with wistfulness. At the same time these stereotypes of popular and commercial picture production (such as the middle-class single home including an uneventful life) enhance a virtuoso play on concepts of time. The brightly lit and mysterious garage entrance in *ins and outs*, 2000 heralds an imminent event with the means of science fiction, while in *zone*, 2000, night banishes day and evokes a narrative dimension. What is notable is that Raedecker first makes up a storyboard in order to arrive at his final images.

The narration-underlined by the installation-like manner in which Michael Raedecker hangs his paintings-and the soberly memorable images of a remote and nostalgic dream time transform the landscapes into a melancholic, eternal delirium. They are venues of the uncanny, both near and far, past-memory and future. They are venues of a story with no beginning or end.

Moreover, the layer of time concepts broaden and link the means of presentation with the present. Not a single line is painted. Michael Raedecker picks out all the lineation on the mostly grayish, brown-tinted, washed-out, monochrome backgrounds with thread; he embroiders the lines onto the canvas with string and wool. Here and there shoots of color grow from the pores of the canvas into grass. The lineation freed from all subjective emotions, however, still refers partly to tree and bush, but wool, needlework and thread likewise try to imitate their subject. The trees do not merely represent trees, but claim to actually be growing out of the picture. The woven threads blend into paint and canvas, and it almost seems as if nature has in fact usurped art. The present is thus the result of a growth process that goes on before our eyes. As though the works wanted to grow old along with artist and viewer, and as though their lush encroachment had taken on a life of its own. Picking out the pictures with thread and needle corresponds to weaving the story, which for the viewer can lead to its outcome. Painting as well as embroidering are acts that compromise the world's relentless flux. The suspicion could arise that this way of seeing his art aims at describing Michael Raedecker's painting as analytical and at seeking its starting point and gratification in a self-referentiality of some kind or other. But like with a coin, our eyes are directed either to the latent reflection of the means or to the ensnarement of the viewer. Illusionism-the means by which spatiality can at all come about-is just as seductive and irresistible as the achievements of the mass media. The light and dark, the centralized perspective and the foreshortened constructions in *ins and outs*, 2000 generate an out-and-out vortex in which the media as such is easily sidelined. Landscapes are therefore not only projection screens for the imagination in a metaphorical sense but, owing to their size seem physically accessible. The proximity of Michael Raedecker's painting to cinema finds expression in the often fantastic viewpoints (which likewise incorporate romantic and Dutch art traditions), the wide-angle shots and blow-ups.

The sensual potential of the pictorial is in no way in competition with the legitimate ballast of painting. On the contrary, it is the affirmative that constantly attracts our attention by permanently courting the viewer. All the means that are available to painting (scorned in the time of modernism) are utilized to allow a specific atmospheric dimension to germinate, which can only really be experienced in direct confrontation with the paintings. Embedded in a leaden grey vacuum, Raedecker's painting achieves a kind of *sensitive* realism. *Sensitive* in the sense of internal and intuitive, which conveys the thematic and pure material fragility of all his works. The flimsiness of these inner worlds up to the repression of the horny-familiar and its tilt into the unhomy-unfamiliar is what accompanies us from picture to picture, as though a permanent reverberation inhabited the exhibition room.