



*Iust* (2007), Acrylic and thread on canvas, 102 x 146 cm

## MICHAEL RAEDECKER

# BEAUTY IN RUINS

*Inspired by Churchill and referencing Hitler, Michael Raedecker's unsettling, textured paintings are steeped in the history of art, war and politics. And with his recent pared-back images of ruins, it seems that current world events are seeping in too*

**M**ichael Raedecker is a brave artist. In an art world almost pathologically fearful of craft, he has used thread as a primary element of his work, and united it with another frequently beleaguered material, paint. This use of sewing materials is no idle mannerism, for 44-year-old Raedecker studied fashion in his native Amsterdam before moving to London in the 1990s and joining the Goldsmiths MA painting course (Charles Saatchi, presciently, bought much of his degree show). Ever since, he has marshalled his humble media to create enigmatic, haunting and absorbing works, gaining international acclaim and a Turner Prize nomination in the process. Fittingly, for an artist who updates the historical traditions of painting and tapestry, he mines the art of the past, fusing it with images found in old magazines and charity-shop books, to reinvent established genres in art - still-life, interior, landscape, and portraiture.

Raedecker spoke to Art World at his studio in London's Shoreditch in the East End, just as he was completing the works which formed his recent exhibition at Hauser & Wirth, his first in London for five years. Typically for Raedecker, who makes all his works alone, and thus has a far smaller output than most painters, the exhibition featured only a small number of works.

But equally characteristically, the works themselves pack an enormous punch. A striking new development is Raedecker's use of multiple panels in the larger works. He says he has wanted to make more paintings on a grand scale for some time but, in the past, his process had proved inhibiting. "I need to have a painting hanging in the space so that I'm able to walk around to work with the needle," he says. "It would just take too long, and it wouldn't really benefit the paintings. I would dread making them."

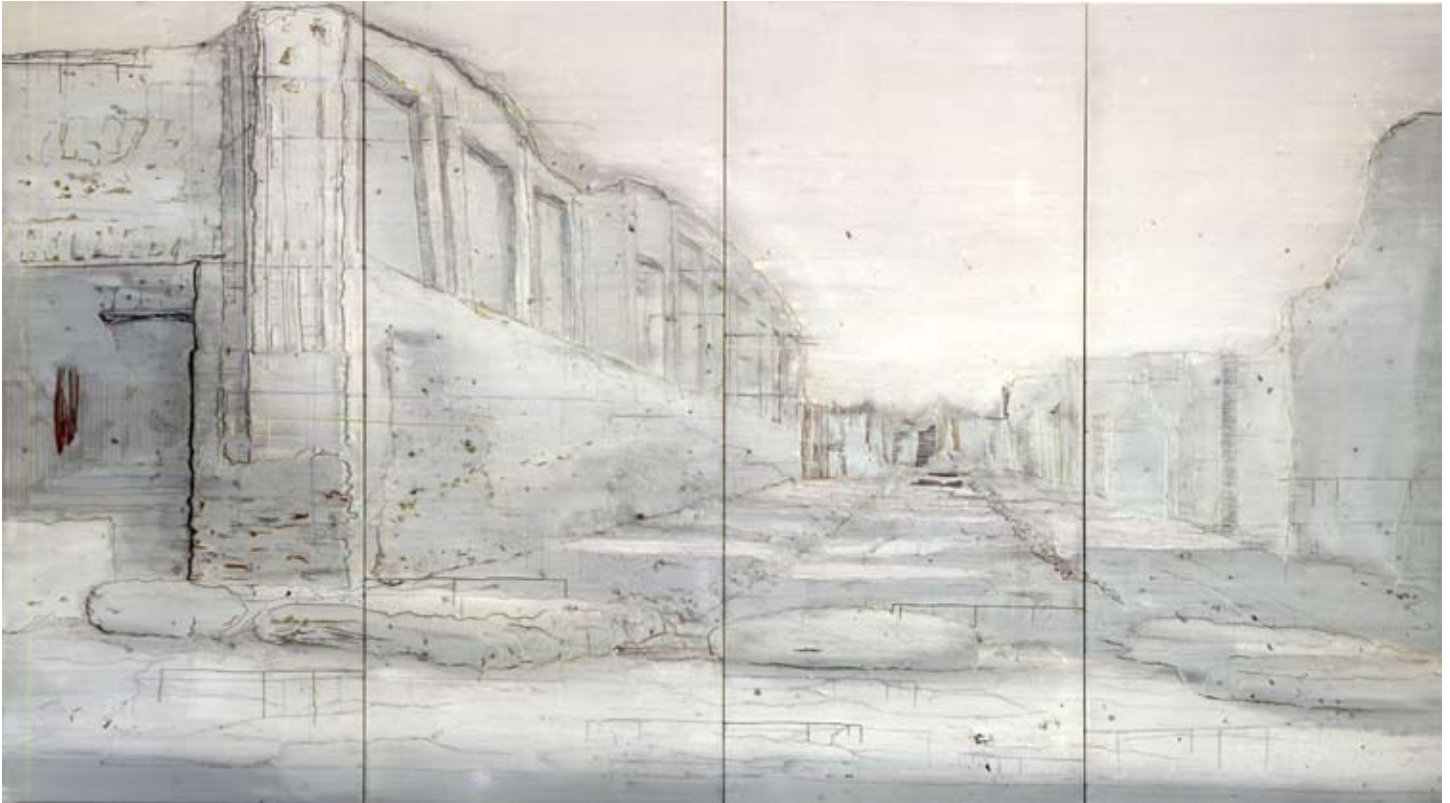
In 2006 he finally found the answer, thanks to a post-war American master. "I was in New York seeing the Met's Robert Rauschenberg Combine Paintings show," he explains. "He had a painting there, a larger work made out of panels that were stuck together, and I thought, 'yes, that's an ideal solution for me'."

A dominant motif in several new paintings is a ruin. "When I start a new body of work, in a way I try to stick to a theme. I have never been able to do that, and again I failed," he laughs. "So far I have only done three, but it was a good starting point."

Depictions of ruins have a rich history in art. In the 18th and 19th centuries, countless artists embarked on the Grand Tour, visiting atmospheric and picturesque European sites with Italy, and not least Pompeii, at the core of the experience. Their images became part of the landscape tradition, encapsulating the search for the mysteries of the classical world. Delving into



**nameless** (2007), acrylic and thread on canvas, 285 x 240 x 4.5 cm (2 parts: each 285 x 120 x 4.5 cm)



**insignificance** (2007), acrylic and thread on canvas, 230.5 x 410 x 4.5 cm (4 parts: each 230.5 x 102.5 x 4.5 cm)

history, Raedecker found an ideal subject for his paintings.

“The ruins come from either etchings or paintings, and the ruins depicted are from different eras. What I like about the ruin is the fact that, when I do a painting, it’s always about the amount of information you need to put into an image to make it successful, and the need to simplify your source material. It’s a lot to do with how much you leave out of the image, and I think with a ruin you have something which was once perfect, but now there is lots of information missing.”

A view of Pompeii, called *Insignificance* (above), most directly engages with the history of paintings of ruins, though the source is a rather tame little watercolour by a minor 19th century French painter, Louis-Philippe Boitte. After stretching Boitte’s image on a computer, Raedecker consciously blurred or omitted some of its more identifiable elements. “I did try to disguise it a little bit,” he explains. “In the original, at the far end, you could see Mount Vesuvius, as well as a few other elements that were more clearly Roman.”

His reinterpretation of the work is a powerful physical monument in its own right. A master of atmosphere, he removes the decayed buildings from their heritage site reality, and re-energises them with a potency which unavoidably recalls the news images that emerge daily from Iraq and Afghanistan. Although Raedecker stresses the ambiguity of the images, he acknowledges that his meditations on recent world affairs might “seep through” into the ruin pictures.

“On a subconscious level, it has almost become a cliché, but after 9/11 you walk into your studio and you think, ‘What the fuck am I do

ing? What’s the purpose of all this? What am I trying to do? A lot of artists feel that way, whatever they are doing. We are living in a time when there is a war going on, but what do you do with that, as an artist?”

Another painting in the ruin series, *Trip* (above right), does deal directly with the wreckage of war: not from Iraq, but from France nearly a century ago. Raedecker found a Winston Churchill painting of the ruined cathedral at Arras, which Churchill had based on a work by John Singer Sargent, who was a war artist in World War I. Again, Raedecker’s response is compelling. Against a brooding bluish-grey, he delicately describes the opulent detailing of Corinthian columns, or suggests with intense yellow thread the light hitting the stone. These carefully realised highlights are consciously at odds with the overall ominous feel of the work, a testament to a moment of great violence.

**W**inston Churchill’s art is a surprising reference for a contemporary artist. But it’s not the first time that he has inspired Raedecker. When he switched to fine art from fashion, Raedecker admits that he felt like “a bit of an intruder”, and started to look deeply into the history of art, both recent and distant. “You start to look around and think, ‘Some great things have been done, even today, by fantastic artists. Who the hell am I to think that I can contribute to that?’” His eclectic search eventually led him to Churchill, whose work he used as a basis for the pieces in his degree show - a deliberately provocative

“Of course I knew Winston Churchill, but I didn’t know that he’d been such a keen amateur, and he’d painted for about 50 years. He even wrote an essay on painting, entitled *Painting as a Pastime*. The 80s were very theoretical and it was all about the French philosophers, it all seemed dry. Then reading about Churchill, he sort of said, ‘The sun is shining, take your easel out there and just paint. It’s lovely; go and paint’. I thought, ‘exactly - fuck you! That’s what I am going to do.’”

In those early paintings, Raedecker formed the vocabulary which he has steadily refined ever since: paint washes in muted colours; scumbled, uneven and broken surfaces; and richly varied incidents created in thread, from pencil-like lines to intensely woven, thick clusters. Raedecker employs the thread following an initial, aggressive distressing of the canvas, giving it his characteristic weathered, aged feel. “Whenever I start a canvas, I puncture holes in it, and I have this fake fur, these loose kind of fibres and particles. I paint almost flat and I just throw it on the canvas, so when I paint over it, the fur just kind of moves and settles.”

Saatchi bought the works from Raedecker’s MA exhibition in 1997. It is a famously dubious honour, as many have had the collector’s favour similarly bestowed on them, only to struggle to escape this early pressure. However, for Raedecker, a postgraduate emerging into the real world, the cash Saatchi paid for his paintings was a lifeline. “He was kind of important to me in the beginning,” Raedecker admits, “and with the money, I could rent a studio and continue to work.” He admits that Saatchi’s interest created a broader consciousness of his work: “Maybe it seems that his place is less

work: “Maybe it seems that his place is less important now, but at the time I think it did mean that people would look again, or were curious about who he bought, so it did help to get some exposure.”

Raedecker soon attracted attention in his native Holland and his first solo museum exhibition at the Stedelijk Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven helped earn him a place on the Turner Prize shortlist in 2000, alongside Glenn Brown, Tomoko Takahashi and Wolfgang Tillmans. Raedecker says he knew instantly that Tillmans would win, which allowed him quietly to concentrate on making new works for the show at Tate Britain. Raedecker and Brown have had studios in the same building for a number of years, first in Bermondsey and

now in the East End. Brown is an important ally for Raedecker and the Dutchman even provided the title *Deep Throat* for one of Brown’s recent paintings.

The naming of Raedecker’s works is one of the most crucial aspects in the unsettling world that they present. His titles are frequently jarring, “contradictory to what you see”, as he puts it. His flower paintings have particularly evocative names, among them *Pornography*, *Toxic* (facing page, inset) and *Propaganda*. When we meet, Raedecker is considering calling the latest example *Syphilis*. He frequently plays with the moral and sexual connotations of flowers in art history, citing both the Dutch tradition of flower painting and the work of Georgia O’Keeffe. An erotic quality is clearly present in his flower pieces, but the more you look at them, the more abiding is their atmosphere of death.

“We have something that’s growing and we cut it off, we put it in a vase,” he says. “In a way, of course, we don’t want to think about it, because it’s about that

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*“Gerhard Richter never did anything about [Hitler], and Luc Tuymans has never touched upon him. Am I stupid enough to think that I can?”*

when they look beautiful. But quite quickly, in a couple of days, the water starts to stink and they are dying.” Raedecker’s flowers carefully capture both the initial seduction, and the inevitable rot.

The stench of death pervades what are undoubtedly his most provocative images - two portraits of Hitler made in 2005 from an archive photo. “All of a sudden I had this idea of doing a portrait of Hitler. I said immediately, ‘Forget it, you can’t do that - it’s ridiculous, why would you do that?’ But then, you can’t let go, you start to play with it and try to explain what is interesting. Maybe it’s interesting because you’re not supposed to do it.”

Again, Raedecker was mindful of historical precedent. “I did feel responsible about how I was going to treat this subject matter,” he says, “which is why I dismissed it at the beginning. I thought that Gerhard Richter never did anything about it, and Luc Tuymans has never touched upon him. Am I stupid to think that I can? I thought to be satirical or cynical is too easy. Of course, I started to look around me and see who had done anything with Hitler and I think the most recent example that I could find was Maurizio Cattelan’s Praying Hitler - it’s a miniature, and it’s a bit of a caricature. I wanted to make it heavy and dark. In the colour of his face, it’s like he’s dead.”

The Hitler portraits are deeply disquieting. Most unsettling is the care with which Raedecker describes the face - the delicate embroidery around the eyes, the gentle, rippled stitching on the brow. He felt that his medium was as apt as any for this bizarre exercise: “Somehow it almost seemed it was more permissible, it would give it slightly more innocence, while at the same time being totally perverse.”

**S**ome of the more impressive effects Raedecker achieves with thread - such as his trompe l’oeil paint drips or pencil lines - are only detectable close up. His work is slow-burning, but once you are drawn into his world, it captivates you. “One of the functions is to show the slowness of the medium,” he explains. “Painting is a very slow medium today, but then using it with thread slows it down again.”

He is cautious not to let his increasing accomplishment get in the way. “I think skill could be your biggest enemy,” he says. “If you become better and better at what you are doing, it can just become slick and dead.” One way he avoids this is to make his work sparer, more austere: “It’s usually better to have less than more.”

Tipping Point (above), which depicts a washing line, is compelling evidence of this more minimal quality. Reworking an image found in what he describes as a “silly hippie book”, Clothes Lines USA, Raedecker imbues the billowing sheets with an elegant ghostliness that belies the image’s source. The painting has the feel of a faded and blemished black and white photograph.

Raedecker is clearly excited at the new possibilities in his work, and passionate about painting itself. He is conscious of the frequent declarations of his medium’s outdatedness, its irrelevance, and the theories behind those arguments, but sees them as a challenge to him and his fellow artists.

“We have all these results, these scientific results. Well, let’s start again, let’s see what we can do with these conclusions. We have to react to that, we have to move on. And that’s what we are doing.”