

Galerie EIGEN+ART, left; Anton Kern Gallery, above

Tim Eitel's solitary figure isolated against the horizon, 2002, left; Eberhard Havekost's video still "Sniper," 1998, above, and an untitled work by Thomas Scheibitz, 2002, below.

# The eternal reinvention of painting

## Young German artists won't be outdone by electronic media

By David Galloway

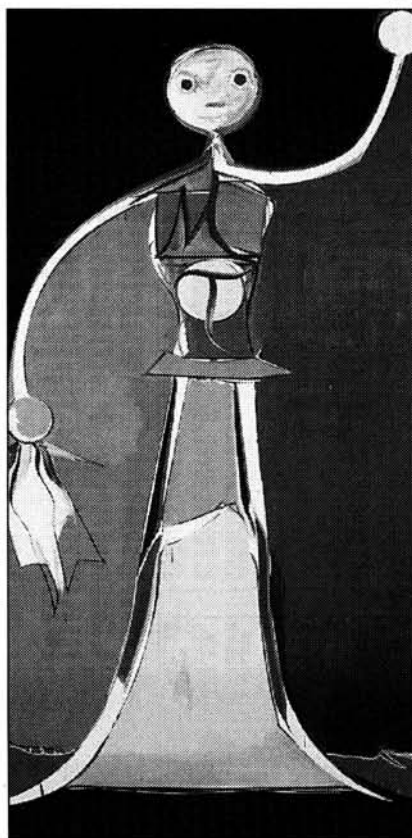
### FRANKFURT

Ever since the camera first threatened to usurp the image maker's craft, Jeremiahs have regularly intoned the funeral dirge of painting. And artists have just as regularly wagged their brushes in defiance. In the course of time they would evolve a Panopticon of alternate strategies — from geometric abstraction to action painting, Art Informel to minimalism — but never entirely abandon the figurative idiom that seemed most threatened by the new media.

Indeed, a bravura survey of "German Painting 2003" at the Frankfurt Kunstverein (through April 13) makes abundantly clear that the new media may actually feed the painterly fantasy. On view are more than 160 works by 61 artists, most of whom were born after the "revolutionary" year of 1968. Their coming of age was accompanied by a post-modern image-bombardment that might well have prompted them to seek the antidote of abstraction. Instead, many co-opted the fleeting electronic image and lent it the tactile substance of painting. Eberhard Havekost, for example, employs video stills to commemorate anonymous but oddly familiar icons — models and snipers — which seem projected onto the canvas in blurred, shimmering light.

One of the show's most virtuoso exhibits is a narrow room with brown walls which the 35-year-old Berlin artist Antje Majewski has densely filled with photorealistic, sepia-tinted images of Russian prisoners in their crowded prison cells. The claustrophobic space underscores the content of the paintings themselves, while the viewer can never gain sufficient distance from a canvas to register the entire scene. Instead, the eyes are drawn to individual brushstrokes and dabs of muted color: that is, to the process of painting itself.

That perceptual phenomenon is also central to the vast, mural-like work by Corinne Wasmuht which dominates the first floor of the Kunstverein and acts as an overture to the entire presentation. At first glance it seems an abstract weave of limpid, watery tones of blue, interspersed by luminous streaks of red,



Olbrecht collection

yellow and white. What then suddenly emerges from the retinal play of "Gate 11" is a commonplace airport interior, punctuated by concrete columns, strips of neon and overlapping reflections in glass, metal and plastic. And then it becomes clear as well that the artist has created a sort of lyrical reprise on the pixel structure of electronic imagery.

Elsewhere, as in the crowd scenes portrayed by Frank Bauer, the approach is more literal, even journalistic. Leipzig-based Tim

Eitel pushes the undercooled tone to its polar extremity, offering solitary figures isolated against the horizon or within the uncompromising geometries of pseudo-Bauhaus architecture. Indeed, the theme of isolation is recurrent here, as it is in "Melancholy," a haunting genre scene by Johannes Kahrs. Reminiscent of Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks," it shows two women seated at the counter in a dimly lighted café, marooned within darkness.

"German Painting 2003" is filled with fragmented narratives, with improbable juxtapositions, with nostalgia for childhood and adolescence, a yearning for integrity. Rarely are the themes overtly political, though Andreas Hofer's "Into the Unknown America," with a Grim Reaper stretching a swollen hand across the canvas, is a chilling exception.

Given the generational profile of the Frankfurt show, it is logical that key themes and motifs recur here, yet each painter retains a distinct individuality. Stylistically the works on view range from gestural to hard-edge, from the fantastic to the documentary, from comic-like to old-masterly. The pluralism is itself significant for the art of our time, but it also underscores the unexhausted resources of the figurative mode.

In the second half of the last century, that mode often seemed tainted by totalitarianism. As literally dozens of current exhibitions demonstrate, the stigma once attached to realism seems to have been overcome.

At Frankfurt's Schirn Kunsthalle, a short stroll from the Kunstverein, a show entitled "Dear Painter, Paint Me ..." (through April 6) explores the modern roots of postmodern realism from Francis Picabia to the ingenious German fantasist Neo Rauch. And "Painting Pictures," a survey scheduled to open on March 1 at the Kunstmuseum in Wolfsburg (through June 29) explores the interaction of painting and new media in 100 works by 34 international artists. Plainly, the funeral dirge for painting is not yet ripe for performance.

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