

BERLIN

Monika Baer

NEUER BERLINER KUNSTVEREIN

Monika Baer's exhibition "*Neuer Bilder*" (New Images) was solidly split—in attitude as much as in arrangement. In the front gallery of this show, curated by Marius Babias in honor of the artist's receipt of the 2020 Hannah Höch Prize, Baer paid tribute to the legacy of the Berlin Dada collagist. A dutiful militancy was evident in the vaguely tablet-scaled and roughly hewn wall-mounted assemblages made from miscellaneous boxes and treated with paint, print, and hardware, as if her acceptance of the prize had left the artist owing an obligation to her extended family or unchosen motherland. Here, the kitchen knife that Hannah Höch famously wielded in 1919 to confuse and cut through the fraternal isms of her day—chauvinism, sexism, opportunism—was switched out for actual parts of circular-saw blades, some paint-spattered, others pimped out with chrome. A century on, this queered device was conceived to cut, cancel, or champion . . . what or whom?

Four tree trunks—one in each work—of varying skin tones together suggested a classic reference to the seasons, though judging by their flayed morphology, they might as well have been inspired by the stressed ecosystem of Los Angeles, where Baer was until recently based. As the artist herself has stated, she doesn't traffic in painting as chill-out zone. Instead, we are confronted with these cohesively left-leaning stumps barely swaying in far-western skies shot through with flamboyantly polluted atmospheres redolent of fumes—a backdrop that is a recurring visual trademark of Baer's as much as of LA sunsets. In consideration of the canvases' few further guiding variables of street and curbstone, the position of spectatorship insinuated by Baer may well be curbside, run aground, looking up while being lost, in reverie or just in life. One work contained a drop-like protuberance Baer has previously used: strange glyphs inconvenienced with allusion to the pain and joy that both capriciously precipitate onto this scenery. Any symbolism in these works seemed to be merely symptomatic of specific obsessions or conventions. It was, therefore, possible to maintain a reading of these trunks as phallic-to-castrative, not least in light of Griselda Pollock's 1988 landmark essay "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," which served as a kind of sacred text for this exhibition (for which it was translated into German for the first time). Despite the industrious artifice of these quasi-allegorical landscape paintings extrapolated from some dubitable modernity where code controls citizens, the message spelled by these four camouflaged backslashes was as hazy as smog.

—Daniel Horn



In one untitled assemblage (all works 2020) a shining shard of one such blade accessorized a still of actress Adèle Haenel in the role of a genteel yet subversive bachelorette in the 2019 movie *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. On the opposite wall, half a saw blade was fastened onto a press image of Haenel taken earlier this year at the César Awards in Paris, before she walked out to protest yet another prize going to director and convicted sex offender Roman Polanski. The remaining variants of this group of works incorporated clippings of reproductions of works by feminist avant-gardists such as Rosemarie Trockel and Suzanne Valadon, completing the overall picture of strong females challenging a persistently sexed and transactional system: Banished to the side of one box was an easily missed cutout of Harvey Weinstein and his walker. In view of Baer's anything-but-casual painting practice of the past twenty years, these mainstreamed bricolages looked like opportunities taken to let go and be blunt for once. If anything, the pieces' evocation of the stage—complete with self-reflexive hints at recognition and refusal—worked toward breaking down the intriguing skirmish between topicality and topography at play in the disparate cycles of paintings that Baer has become known and lauded for.

In that regard, the four canvases (three *yet to be titled* and one *not yet titled*) presented a new act as much as new subject matter.

Monika Baer, untitled, 2020, paper, acrylic, ink-jet print, saw-blade fragment, and screws on cardboard, 7 x 11 3/4 x 2 1/2".