

## 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 fraternalisms 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?



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

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 on view (three *yet to be titled* and one *not yet titled*) presented a new act as much as new subject matter.

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

## Tony Just

EFREMIDIS GALLERY

The physiology of pain is often liquid. In Anne Carson's 2002 translation of Sappho, *If Not, Winter*, the poet speaks of "my dripping (pain)" as she wishes ill and exile on the man who caused her harm: "May winds and terrors / carry him off." In Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957), Hamm laments "something dripping in my head. . . . A heart in my head. . . . Splash, splash, always on the same spot." Pain spreads and swells, floods the lungs. Pain can overflow.

But if pain is liquid, what of its residue? (Splash, splash, always on the same spot.) Tony Just paints drips and leaks, fugitive marks that eschew governance and direct their own composition. He first tested this method seven years ago, having finished Hans Fallada's 1950 chronicle of anguish, *The Drinker*, in which the narrator, Erwin Sommer, suffers an existential crash, succumbs to addiction, and deliberately contracts tuberculosis as a way of ending his life. But through his riotous capitulation to suffering, Sommer happens upon solace. To drink is to drift "deep into the darkness where there is neither failure nor regret"; to weep is "endless, bitter, and eventually comforting." Release in pain, pain in release.

As if to lengthen the trail of Sommer's tears or call forth their cathartic potential, Just poured wine over a nearby notebook and painted the absent space that opened between the drops. He has sustained this process of creative immersion ever since, dousing the pages of literary texts with ink and gouache and transferring the soggy little accidents onto larger canvases and bare walls. For his recent exhibition "Our inchoate love," which comprised twelve newly produced works, such spontaneous blotches were liberated from dog-eared books and reproduced on canvases as tranquil lavender pools, thick clots of black and underlaid burgundy, waterfalls in yellow and luminous pink. In *Aphrodite giver of blessings* (all works 2020), a tart yellow disk shone like the memory of the sun burned into an eye. Swaths of arylide yellow

Tony Just, *Sweet bitter*, 2020, oil, acrylic, and graphite on canvas, 59 × 78¾".



and gold were painted directly onto the supporting wall: light that could not be tempered, color that would not stop.

Just's titles pay homage to their literary forebears. Carson's Sappho speaks through several, from the tarry pools of *O for Adonis* to the monochrome mist of *My darling one*. A work titled *The witches are here* has its origins in drip paintings made in a book of Henri Matisse etchings, but here referentiality is abandoned, with Just's wayward forms opening themselves to myriad interpretations and configurations. ("Things dissolve and come into focus and then dissolve again," he says in an interview with the exhibition's curator, Tenzing Barshee.) The jagged yellow fissures that break the prevailing black of *Sweet bitter* are at once peals of lightning, a shimmering cove of birches, and the lingering tracks of tears once shed. Just as Fallada's Sommer found clarity via resignation, so too does Just find form via an act of creative demurral. The parameters are simple, the artist notes: "to have as little thought involved as possible." This is expressionism without expression, abstraction freed from intent.

"Every sound we make is a bit of autobiography," writes Carson in a fragment from *Glass, Irony and God* (1995), which introduces the exhibition. "It has a totally private interior yet its trajectory is public." So it is too with every movement, mark, and inchoate intensity; every drop of wine spilled and cleaned, gone but not really. While the initial compositions of Just's bewitching paintings might be consciously distanced from their maker, the works amount to a visual autobiography of bygone gestures told through and preserved by the gentle little marks they left on life: an archive of lived time in yellow and luminous pink.

—Harry Thorne

## COLOGNE

### Henrik Olesen

GALERIE BUCHHOLZ

What a surprise! Born in Denmark and long based in Berlin, Henrik Olesen is well known as a Conceptual artist whose objects, installations, and collages, which often focus on marginalized groups, interrogate the ways in which dominant power structures and social norms shape human identity, language, and the body. This show, however, did not feature collages or installations made up of photos, handwritten notes, pages torn from books, and newspaper clippings, but predominantly comprised paintings in oil and other materials on wood or canvas. Nevertheless, the starting point for Olesen's new works was once

more the body—a subject all the more urgent now, as the coronavirus pandemic has bitterly revealed to us how vulnerable our physical beings remain, notwithstanding all medical progress.

Inspired by the 1928–29 painting *L'homme ouvert (L'autopsie)* (The Open Man [The Autopsy]) by Jean Fautrier, who after World War II became one of the most important representatives of French art informel, Olesen focused on an interior organ, the intestine. Fautrier's painting depicts a naked man in whose open stomach the intestine moves upward like a snake in regular horizontal loops. Near the entrance to the gallery, a printout featuring a photograph of the painting hung on the wall alongside the checklist. In another text, the artist proposed (in English, with a smattering of German) a tripartite, thematic subdivision of the exhibition: "1) the organ (intestines/stomach): digestion, waste, excretion, shit! 2) the plug: *Kreislauf* [circulation], *Kabelsalat* [cable spaghetti], sex! 3) the keyboard: fingertips, work, waste, pollution!"

Olesen replicated Fautrier's image of the looping intestine in multiple canvases, always emphasizing its painterly qualities: the movement and power of the line, the palette, the relationship of differently colored sections to one another, the layering and superimposition of paint. While the intestine's loops, running vertically here and horizontally there, could still be made out in the resulting works, they tended more strongly to abstraction and could be understood as an homage to the formal qualities of Fautrier's painting as much as to its subject matter. Olesen even adopted the French painter's characteristic accumulation of layers of paint in the center of his paintings. Most of the works on view here bore titles such as *intestine, orange; intestine, black, red, vertical; intestine, black, red, horizontal*; and *organs* (all works 2020). Apparently inspired by an activity of the intestine—excretion—were a couple of discolored brown abstract paintings respectively titled *Body of Shit* and *Body of Shit 2*.

Mounted next to the canvases were vertical power strips whose cables, echoing the loops of the intestines, ran down to the ground. These cords suggested circulation or communication—perhaps access to a virtual world? Such an interpretation seemed encouraged by black-silicone casts of computer keyboards set on card stock hanging on the walls of the second gallery. The keyboards appeared damaged, as if corroded by acid, and indeed most of these sequentially numbered works bore the title *Auflösung* (Dissolution). They looked like something the artist might have found in a junkyard.

However, the presence of cables and keyboards established a connection not to the digital world but to the world of painting, where via color, gestural brushstrokes, and the layering of paint the artist was



Henrik Olesen, *intestine, black, red, horizontal*, 2020, oil and mixed media on canvas, 15¾ × 19¾".