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WINTER PREVIEW:
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ROBERT IRWIN
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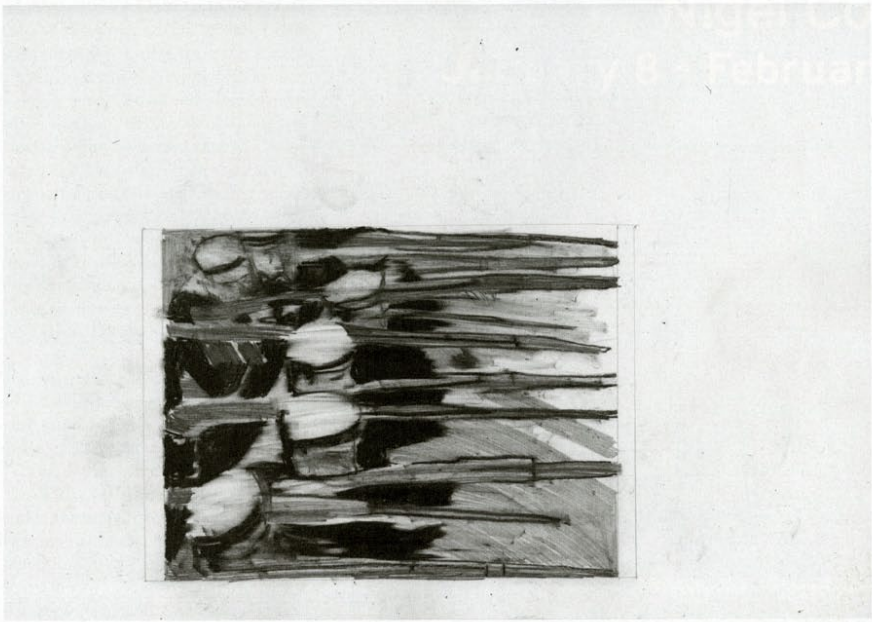
Viewing Distance

BENJAMIN PAUL ON MARC BAUER



Marc Bauer, untitled, 2009, pencil and lithographic chalk on paper, 12⅝ x 17¾". From the series "Monument," 2009.

MARC BAUER'S DRAWINGS constantly call themselves into question. Made largely with pencil, they nevertheless lack contours, renouncing what was long held to be the medium's prime strength: its ability to delineate forms with high precision. The Swiss artist's lines are so out of focus, in fact, that they barely give shape and definition, blending into one another to the point where they are on the verge of dissolving into a mist of gray. With all their blurring and smudging, his drawings instead seem to emulate painting, with its far more opaque surfaces. In this, Bauer plots a new twist in the classical story of drawing versus painting, a striking move in our supposedly postmedium age.

Take, for example, the sailors aiming their guns at an invisible enemy in an untitled work from "Monument," 2009, one of two series inspired by Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin*. (Both series—together titled "MONUMENT," 2009—are on view, with a selection of Bauer's other recent work, at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, Switzerland, until February 6.) The men appear to stand behind a screen of smoke that obfuscates their weapons and transforms their faceless bodies into amorphous smudges of black chalk and graphite. Sometimes it seems as if a veil has been cast over the depicted scene, as in the drawings of a trumpet player on the battleship or of soldiers' boots descending the famous Odessa Steps. While apparently placed on top of the image, this "veil" is actually made by rubbing the paper with a thin, hard eraser. The rubbings create distance by literally taking away from the figures, which they threaten to annihilate in a violent act of iconoclasm.

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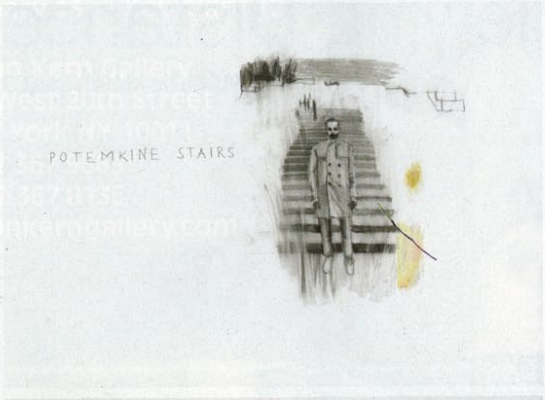
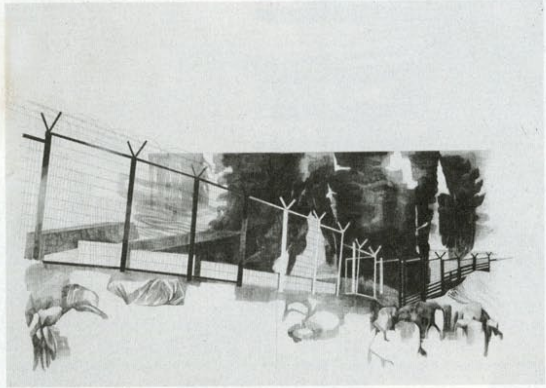
Bauer intensifies the resulting sfumato by drawing new lines on top of the smudgy areas, before partially erasing those in turn and adding further layers. He thus transforms the original shapes into ghosts, hidden under multiple semitransparent coats that smear into one another. This style of drawing may be compared to oil glazing, in which thin layers of translucent paint are placed on opaque underpainting—creating a kind of glow as the colors beneath the glaze seem to emanate from the ground. But whereas glazing increases the naturalistic potential of painting by enabling a rich color scale and subtle shading and reflections, Bauer's use of the technique has the opposite effect. Rather than refining the naturalistic appearance of his monochrome compositions, Bauer's "glazing" blurs forms and outlines so that they lose any detail or plasticity.

Bauer, that is to say, subverts the traditional distinction between drawing and painting established by the *disegno-colorito* debate in Renaissance Italy—a history so lucid that it still lurks beneath our contemporary attitudes toward medium and process, whether we know it or not. Advocates of colorito, the Venetian Titian prime among them, claimed that the main goal of the visual arts was the imitation of nature. They argued that since there were only colors and no contours in nature, painting—especially via the mimetic abilities of glazing—was superior to drawing. Yet the priority of mimesis was precisely what the Florentine circle around Michelangelo rejected. For these theoreticians of disegno, invention loomed large. They aimed to elevate the social status of the visual artist, to align him with intellectual labor as opposed to the manual work with which painters and sculptors had hitherto been associated. Drawing was seen as the analytic medium par excellence, because the individual lines remained visible and revealed the hand of the artist who made them. It was a form of visual thinking: The performative pencil lines allowed viewers to reconstruct the artist's intellectual and creative process. As it seemed to unfold in front of a viewer's eyes, moreover, drawing was held to occur in the present tense. It was never complete, as one could always imagine continuing the process by filling in the empty areas on the paper. Painting, however, disavowed the artist and concealed the process of invention underneath thick layers of impenetrable paint, applied across the whole surface. According to the logic of disegno, a painting was always complete and therefore only ever existed in the past perfect.

By contrast, Bauer's drawings—which are frequently based on black-and-white films or photographs—linger in the past tense. They often fill out at least a hand-drawn "frame" on the paper, if not the entire sheet, manifestly rejecting the transparency of disegno. Yet Bauer turns the terms of this old debate upside down not in order to cynically declare a postmedium





Top: **Marc Bauer, *Potemkine Stairs*, 2009,** pencil and lithographic chalk on paper, 12⅝ x 17¾". From the series "Roman—Odessa," 2009. Bottom: **Marc Bauer, *Heiligendamm*, 2010,** pencil on paper, 40 x 56⅝". From the series "*Herr und Knecht*" (Master and Servant), 2010.

condition but rather to engage in a dialectical process, which—precisely by at once acknowledging and upending drawing's presentness and immediacy—only increases viewers' sensation of distance from the represented scene. In *Potemkine Stairs* (a work from the companion series to "Monument," "Roman—Odessa," which records impressions of present-day Odessa), the background consists only of a few lines barely sketching out what could be buildings. Even the feet of the man in the foreground are so roughly drawn, without shadows or foreshortening, that he hardly seems to stand on the ground. It's true that the picture merely represents a stage in Bauer's process, a moment in the continuous movement of his pencil, even if one can hardly reconstruct the phases of the image's production. And yet *Potemkine Stairs* doesn't await its completion. It is left forever unfinished, abandoned in a remote past that appears all the more removed through its refusal to adopt those characteristics recognized as intrinsic to drawing ever since the theories of the Renaissance.

The distance in this image is created not only by the blurring of glazinglike techniques but also, paradoxically—and, for Bauer, rarely—by the use of color. Color usually gives warmth and life to the dead lines of drawing and so increases a sense of presence. The two colored patches Bauer has drawn on the right side of the image, however, serve no mimetic function but are merely abstract signs, just like the green, blue, and purple line that crosses them and continues into the stairs in defiance of the rules of perspective. Placed on top of the drawing in this way, the colors disrupt the composition as if from the outside, further adding to the distance that the blurring already generates from within.

Bauer's drawings may be entrenched in the past, but they never drift into the cushy realm of nostalgia. Completely unsentimental, they instead keep an eye on present concerns. "Roman—Odessa" includes Bauer's copies of two of Eisenstein's own homoerotic sketches, while the drawings of cannons in "Monument" look alternately like phalli and penetrated orifices. Eisenstein was married and never openly stated his homosexuality, so by pointing to his suppressed desire, Bauer suggests that even in his utopian revolutionary epic the filmmaker had to compromise his notion of a fully liberated humanity. The last images in "Roman—Odessa," meanwhile, suggest that little has changed in contemporary Ukraine. They bring together representations of the family man Roman, who secretly frequents gay bars, with official statements about the "phenomenon" of homosexuality and drawings that cite the dismissive comments of disillusioned Ukrainians about Eisenstein's film (e.g., "This movie is important for the Western people, not for us, who cares about the revolution—there is no trace of it") and their reactions to the replacement of a monument to the sailors' revolt in central Odessa with a sculpture of Catherine the Great. In this way, Bauer not only aligns Eisenstein's self-denial with the ongoing repression of gay culture in Ukraine but also links it to the suppression of the Russian Revolution in public memory.

Two new projects similarly forge connections across time. The twenty drawings that make up *Narrenschiff* (Ship of Fools), 2010, relate Sebastian Brant's 1494 satire of the Catholic Church to the Israeli capture of the Turkish ship trying to break the Gaza blockade this past July; while the series "*Herr und Knecht*" (Master and Servant), 2010, posits a connection between the protective barrier built for the 2007 G-8 meeting in Heiligendamm on Germany's Baltic coast and Renaissance designs of ideal fortified cities. "*Herr und Knecht*" also features written contributions from the Swiss philosopher Christine Abbt, who frequently collaborates with Bauer. Combining contemporary news snippets with statements by the likes of Georg Büchner and Denis Diderot, these texts cite past examples of similar mechanisms of social control and thus corroborate Bauer's transhistorical associations.

In his desire to contextualize and interpret history, Bauer differs from Gerhard Richter, with whom his work otherwise has obvious affinities. The sfumato in Richter's paintings evokes a sense of remove that fully accords with the past-perfect condition of his favored medium, as asserted in the disegno-colorito debate. Richter denies any personal or political involvement even in the case of his famously fraught subjects, from his uncle in Nazi uniform to the Baader-Meinhof Group. According to Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, the German painter ultimately questions art's "access to and capacity for representing historical experience." For Richter, one might say, the task of art in our post-ideological age is to depict historical facts in a disengaged fashion. For Bauer, by contrast, history and politics haven't ceased to be pressing concerns. The wounds haven't healed. How the past haunts the present is the topic of another collaboration with Abbt, made up of the drawings "*Gegen mein Gehirn*" (Against My Brain) and the texts *Diskurs des Ungesprochenen* (Discourse of the Unsaid), both 2007. In their respective media, Bauer and Abbt take up Paul Celan's 1967 visit with Martin Heidegger, imagining how the Jewish poet, whose parents died in a concentration camp, would have felt in the house of the former Nazi philosopher. Because hardly anything is known about the encounter, they were forced to invent history.

As a result of Bauer's stubborn refusal to accept that the past is ultimately out of reach, many of his drawings—in this series and in other works—have an air of desperation and anger. He draws comparisons, offers commentary, and points to the lack of historical progress. Yet by paradoxically turning his medium against itself, using it in a way that produces distance rather than immediacy, Bauer mitigates, even undermines, the urgency of his political agenda. It is as if, against their better judgment, these hazy drawings are hopelessly caught: between the disturbing impact of an unprocessed, lingering past and the realization of their own futility. □

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