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Berlin Gallery Weekend — review

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The shows at this annual event reward the wider public as well as attracting art collectors



Renata Lucas's 'fontes e sequestros' (2015)

Now in its 11th year, Berlin Gallery Weekend is an important date in the art-buying calendar, but it rewards the public as much as the collectors. Instead of cramped art fair booths there are small, often monographic exhibitions, and since the galleries are concentrated in a few districts it's easy to take in several shows in an afternoon.

One of the highlights, Cyprien Gaillard's film "Nightlife" at Sprüth Magers, would be impossible to show in an art fair booth. Visitors are given 3D glasses on entering the vast gallery. A mottled greenish form looms out of the darkness; the camera moves over its surface, slowly revealing Rodin's "The Thinker" outside the Cleveland Museum of Art at night. Part of its base is missing, blown up by an anti-imperialist group in 1970. The strangeness of the scene is heightened by the music, a sample of Alton Ellis's 1969 rocksteady track "Blackman's Word", looping the phrase "I was born a loser".

The picture cuts to a clump of Hollywood Junipers on a scrubby patch of Los Angeles at night, blowing in an artificial wind so their branches dance to the music — long, floppy limbs that get tangled in barbed wire then shake free. The music grows louder and then becomes quieter again, as if muffled or submerged in water. The setting shifts to a fireworks display at Berlin's 1936 Olympic stadium, the camera rising up to meet the explosions as they fade to ghostly tendrils, a formal echo of the junipers. In the final scene, we're back in Cleveland at night: a helicopter searchlight circles an oak tree in a school courtyard, its bare branches casting rapid shadows over the building.

In "Nightlife", film becomes a sculptural medium. But why do these unlovely night-time places get such high-tech treatment? Gaillard is playing with the supposed hierarchy of artistic subject matter to point to the histories of imperialism and immigration written into his film. The Hollywood Juniper is native not to California but to east Asia. The oak was given to the African-American athlete Jesse Owens, along with his gold medals, at the 1936 Olympics and planted at the Cleveland high school where he trained. "Nightlife" has a haunting power: some visitors watch it several times and leave dazed, humming the refrain from "Blackman's Word".

At nearby gallery Neugerriemschneider, Brazilian artist Renata Lucas is also interested in the ways the past is inscribed on a city. Her "fontes e sequestros" takes the outer rings of three Berlin water fountains from 1888, 1927 and 1984 and creates a new fountain in which they interlink, neatly collapsing their histories. At the Schinkel Pavilion, Neil Beloufa plays with the contradictions of the modern city. In a video projected on to moving Plexiglas sheets, interviewees describe their ideal city. One man boasts of uniform glass towers, "one big city full of people living the same experience". But Beloufa's lo-fi production — the picture becomes unstable as the sheets overlap, creaking along on their rails — gives the lie to the man's ideal. The sham of shiny modern living is revealed in scrappy objects; Beloufa has done this before, but it works well here.

Another young artist often referred to as "post-internet", Daniel Keller's exhibition at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler imagines a relationship between Kai (fictional daughter of Mark Zuckerberg, co-founder of Facebook), Dalston and Bushwick (fictional son and daughter of Ashton Kutcher, actor and tech investor) in a poster and play script. How might the inheritors of Silicon Valley live out their lives? While Gaillard's and Beloufa's work speaks for itself, Keller's concerns — gentrification, democracy, coexistence — need some explanation. The show is conceived as a

whole but feels disjointed.

Navid Nuur, who has exhibitions at Max Hetzler and Plan B, is an artist whose work yields more the more you know — yet his drawings, paintings and ceramics are beautiful, intriguing objects in their own right. It may not be accurate to call them “drawings” because Nuur is interested in the extent to which you can remove the artist’s hand — and ego — from the artwork. “When Meaning gets Marbled” is made using a traditional marbling technique but with graphite instead of coloured ink: a pencil drawing, normally controlled and intentional, becomes a thing of chance.

A number of painting shows at Berlin Gallery Weekend explore this idea of the artist’s hand and what it means to paint in the digital age. At VeneKlasen/Werner, Los Angeles-based artist Elliott Hundley shows a group of paintings nominally depicting actors but which hover between figuration and abstraction. Their busy, patterned surfaces are composed of layers suggesting Hundley’s better-known collages. Neat passages of paint that look like prints are struck through with creamy impasto daubs and squiggles.

Katharina Grosse’s monumental abstract canvases also play with layering, contrasting her signature spray technique with paint washes and dripping in a zingy synthesis of painterly languages — computer graphics, graffiti, tactile paint. The first show to be hung in dealer Johann König’s new space, the vast modernist church of St Agnes, it is a breathtaking marriage of art and place.

Laura Owens continues this exploration of handmade versus machine-made at Capitain Petzel by applying thick lumps of paint to canvases printed with text and cartoon images. Her paintings are installed like freestanding sculptures: their text can be read from the front and back. Like Owens, young Norwegian artist Ida Ekblad plays with the boundary between painting and sculpture. Her works at Max Hetzler use puff paint, playing with a street art aesthetic — a joke that finds full expression in the final room where two “paintings” mimicking brickwork are propped against the white walls.

There is a lot of art about art, but if it all gets too serious, *No Joke*, a group show at Tanya Leighton, provides an antidote. It holds a mirror up to the art world — and to Gallery Weekend itself. Herluf Bidstrup cartoons printed on the walls poke fun at gallery-goers admiring turd-shaped sculptures. And a Mike Kelley drawing reads: “Collector! Buy me at the benefit auction for 50 cent then dump me at Christie’s the next day and buy a second house in St Moritz.”

These are mostly selling shows and Gallery Weekend inevitably draws collectors. But because it is spread across the city, it feels more vibrant, less self-consciously exclusive than an art fair. It’s a model that suits Berlin, a place of artistic production more than a marketplace.

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