THOMAS EGGERER
MATRIX 148


Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art
Hartford, Connecticut
Reindeer: Perth to the Morris 48.6 for
sailors who want to "fly"
Many of the images that appear in Thomas Eggerer's paintings and drawings are oddly familiar. This is not because they depict momentous events, nor because they take on the look of a particular aspect of visual culture, like, say, contemporary fashion photography. Their familiarity belongs to the prosaic register of surplus images that float past us in an unstoppable flood of daily newspapers, assorted magazines, movies and television programs. Eggerer's eye is drawn to details that become, in his hands, reservoirs of uneasy atmosphere and peculiar feeling. Eggerer's subjects are diverse: helicopters in flight; a tennis lesson; the conductor of an orchestra; a hike in the woods; kids playing in a fountain, or on stairs leading to an apartment building. Clearly, these scenes are not observed directly from life, but from photographs lovingly culled from back issues of National Geographic and the like. There is no claim, in Eggerer's work, to present "authentic" experience, either on the level of naturalistic observation or painterly illusion. His paintings never let us forget their own artificiality. Even the "unfinished" parts of a canvas are artfully painted to such effect. Eggerer, who edits and recombines elements from his sources, has commented that in choosing the figures he attempts to "find the right staff for a painting." This metaphor of work reveals the extent to which the artist calibrates his effects down to the finest detail; each figure plays a precise and critical role.

Thomas Eggerer's paintings and drawings invite us to experience a series of paradoxical relations. His pictures are figurative yet more or less abstract at the same time; his figures are specific individuals yet they remain anonymous; his images appear fragmented and unfinished yet are formally resolved and visually satisfying; his subjects and painting style are relatively unexpressive (lacking grand scale, expressionist gestures or focal actions) yet his works are emotionally resonant.

Consider, for example, *The Tennis Lesson*, 2000, in which a group of children are arrayed on a tennis court. They all appear to be acting independently, swinging their rackets in anticipation of balls we cannot see. Their mutually disconnected yet individually focused placement disregards the logic of the court suggesting, instead, the organizing principle of an unseen coach. (Similarly, in the thematically related paintings of a tennis coach, he is depicted in isolation from his students.) The spatial relationships in this picture are further complicated by the abstract, patterned ground on which the figurative elements float. The exaggerated perspectival space of the court is contradicted by flat, camouflage-like blobs that might also be read as strangely stylized shadows. These tensions between figure and ground, between individual and group and between leader and followers are recurring motifs in Eggerer’s art. As is frequently the case in the group pictures, one figure in particular holds our attention. In the center of the picture, larger than his fellows, stands a boy holding his racket fully extended, precipitously ready to swing forward. The racket is nearly the size of the child, whose wrong-footed stance is decidedly unathletic. His features are expressionless and indistinct, neither soliciting nor receiving a sentimentally empathic response. The atmosphere of *The Tennis Lesson* is even more curious if we consider how antithetical it is to the familiar cliché of carefree images of children learning or playing sports. There is nothing joyful in Eggerer’s carefully restricted palette of cloying colors and flesh tones.

*Hiking Trail*, 2002, another group painting, allows us even less access to the individuality of its members, all of whom we see only from behind or the side as they shelter beneath their raincoats. Here again, the scene is full of contradictions. Finely modulated details of the figures on the trail contrast with the loosely painted and incomplete ground, which dissolves entirely into an untethered plane of drips and abstract marks. This trudging, sodden march is among Eggerer’s brightest compositions, where a pale gray mid ground is enlivened by the line-up of cheerfully colored raincoats under an orange sky. Again, Eggerer plays with flatness and depth. His hikers do not seem to decrease in size as they venture along the receding trail, which itself appears to lead in a circular fashion.
Eggerer also depicts single figures and objects, including a series of helicopters. In *Dauphin*, 2000, the cartoon-like, unfinished profile of the camouflaged helicopter plays off a background of vertical and horizontal elements that suggest the movement of its blades. The helicopter is, however, entirely static, its lumbering mass in seeming contradiction of its airborne location (the artist’s recent drawing of pelicans betrays a similar fascination with improbable flight). *Dauphin* may be interestingly compared to *The Conductor I*, 2002; both signify, in their different ways, a stereotypical masculine prowess. Like the helicopter, the conductor hovers in space, his lower torso having dissolved in a painterly meltdown. His formal attire and iconic gesture are not enough to forestall the risk of a vertiginous implosion. What if the conductor is all alone; what if there is no audience, no orchestra? Could they have melted away like the body of the conductor himself? We begin to see the doubleness with which all of Eggerer’s subjects are imbued. The awkward tennis player’s flailing arms, the lumbering helicopter’s frozen blades, and the isolated conductor’s grasp of empty space are all indications of an attempted mastery that cannot escape the shadow of failure.

Thomas Eggerer’s work does not exploit the traditional humanist model of projective identification, where, for example, a portrait seeks to offer us a “window onto the soul” of its subject. Nevertheless, Eggerer does enable us to identify with the subjective states that his images evoke. Indeed the power of Eggerer’s art lies in its ability to allegorize those anxious feelings and ambivalent emotional responses that often define our experiences in the world: the disturbing sense of individual alienation from the group; the performance anxiety of participation in the public sphere; the artificiality of socially proscribed gender roles; the dynamics of social control, from subtle forms of


surveillance to figures of direct authority. At the same time, Eggerer is attuned to the psychic mechanisms of control and escape, expressed in elusive aspirations to mastery of the self and the world.

What makes Thomas Eggerer’s art both pleasurable and compelling is the way his thematic concerns are expressed through the formal attributes of his painting. As we are disturbed by “incomplete” areas, strange colors and contradictory spaces, we are also enthralled by the devices that give Eggerer’s pictures a satisfying coherence – all the more so because of their counter-intuitive nature. There is often a lightness and musicality to be found, from the theme-and-variation color play of Hiking Trail to the rhythmic and transparent chromatic punctuation of National Park, 2002. Complexities of architecture, perspective and pattern are skillfully negotiated in works such as The Fountain, 2002, and The Stairs, 2002. Yet, the ironic humor and lightness of painterly touch that Eggerer brings to bear only sharpen the acerbic after-taste of his work. Above all, Eggerer’s formal solutions avoid the obvious as he develops the possibility of a critically engaged painting based on a sophisticated blend of historically informed ambition, disarming technical skill, highly developed sensibility and subtle visual wit.

Nicholas Baume
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art
THOMAS EGGERER
Born in Munich, Germany in 1963
Lives and works in Los Angeles, California.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2002
Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, Germany

2001
Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles, CA

2000
Galerie Daniel Buchholz (Art Cologne), Cologne, Germany

1999
Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, Germany

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2002
“Painting on the Move,” Kunsthalle Basel, Basel, Switzerland, curated by Peter Pakesch (catalogue)

2001
“Thomas Eggerer, Jochen Klein, Amelie von Wulffen,” Ascan Crone
Gallery, Hamburg, Germany
“Snapshot: New Art from Los Angeles,” UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA

1999
Galerie, INIT-Halle, Berlin, Germany
Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, Germany

1998
Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne, Germany

1996
“Three Rivers Art Festival,” curated by Mary Jane Jacobs (with Group Material)
“Ikea,” Printed Matter, New York (with Jochen Klein)

1995
“Market,” Kunstverein München, curated by Helmut Draxler (with Group Material)

1994
“Oh Boy, It’s a Girl! – Feminism in Art,” curated by Hedwig Saxenhuber and Astrid Wege (with Jochen Klein)
“Utopia of Design,” Kunstverein München (part of a collaborative group curated exhibition)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

2002
Tumlir, Jan, “Snapshot” (review), Artforum, October 2002, p. 155
Pagel, David, “To Live and Create in Los Angeles,” Los Angeles Times, Calendar, July 29, 2002, pp. 4, 5, 73
2001
Richard, Frances, "crisp," (review)
Artforum.com, January 10, 2001

1999
Frangenberg, Frank, "Thomas Eggerer
- Galerie Buchholz, Köln,"
Kunstforum, September 1998, p. 147
Wege, Astrid, "Erkundungen im
Ungewissen," Texte zur Kunst,
September 1998, pp. 321-325

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Air, 1999. Acrylic on canvas,
27.5 x 22.6 in. Private Collection.

Trio, 2000. Acrylic on linen, 38 x 59 in.
Private collection of Rosette Delug,
Beverly Hills, CA.

The Tennis Lesson, 2000. Acrylic on
canvas, 30 x 44 in. Michael and Judy
Ovitz Collection, Los Angeles.

Dauphin, 2000. Acrylic on canvas,
24 x 30 in. Alan Power, Los Angeles.

The Coach (M), 2001. Acrylic on linen,
27 x 24 in. Courtesy Richard Telles and
Robert Lade, Los Angeles.

Softball, 2001. Acrylic, pencil on paper,
30 x 40 in. Private collection of
Rosette Delug, Beverly Hills, CA.

Ambassador, 2001. Acrylic on canvas,
24 x 36 in. Thomas Borgmann, Cologne.

National Park, 2002. Acrylic on canvas,
48 x 60 in. Collection Christian and
Sabine DuMont-Schütte, Cologne.

Hiking Trail, 2002. Acrylic on canvas,
43 x 61 in. Boros Collection.

The Fountain, 2002. Acrylic on canvas,
40 x 64 in. Thomas Borgmann, Cologne.

The Conductor I, 2002. Acrylic on can-
vas, 27 x 24.8 in. Collection Christian
and Sabine DuMont-Schütte, Cologne.

The Conductor II, 2002. Acrylic on
canvas, 27 x 24.8 in. Collection
Stephan and Marion König, Cologne.

Sea Birds, 2002. Acrylic and pencil on
paper, 41 x 61 in. Collection Alex
Israel, Los Angeles.

The Stairs, 2002. Acrylic on canvas,
54 x 58 in. Courtesy the artist and
Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles.

MATRIX LECTURE

2 p.m., Sunday, October 6, 2002
Thomas Eggerer delivers an informal
artist's talk in The Hartford Courant
Room.

GALLERY TALK

12 noon, Tuesday, October 8, 2002
"Thomas Eggerer: The Space of
Painting"
Joanna Marsh, Assistant Curator of
Contemporary Art

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