RaebervonStenglin

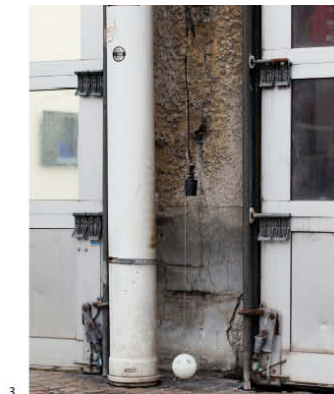   I
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SWITZERLAND

Thomas Julier

RAEBERVONSTENGLIN, ZURICH

A few years ago, a group of young curators began setting up independent spaces across Zurich, and now a number of artists have followed suite. Thomas Julier is part of that movement, which is marked by collaborations and exhibitions. Julier has produced work with fellow artist Cédric Eisenring and musician and artist Paolo Thorsen-Nagel, among others, and he also runs the Zurich off-space Taylor Macklin alongside Adam Cruces, Gina Folly, Michèle Graf and Selina Grüter.

Meanwhile, Julier also makes his own work; 'The Nocturnal Appearance of Various Species of Furry Animals from the Neighbourhood' is his second solo exhibition at RaebervonStenglin. The material stuff of contemporary digital media is the focus of his ongoing study. He looks at the surfaces – both moving and still – that host digital images in order to find out how media production and translation affect their reception. This show comprises three bodies of work: four prints, all entitled RGBK (all works 2016); two film loops on broken monitors; and the show's eponymous animal investigation. The silkscreen prints are the latest iteration (produced here for the first time on canvas) of an ongoing series of images rephotographed from an electronic RGBK billboard outside the Brooklyn Academy of Music that advertises events taking place inside. These listings are scarcely legible in Julier's close-ups; instead, he homes in on the grain of the billboard image, separating the colour ingredients to produce a moiré pattern of red, green, blue and black marks. The few facial features that do come through on one canvas, thanks to a crisp black and white original image – a nostril, eye and eyebrow – echo Roy Lichtenstein's aping of Ben-Day dot printing and augur the next technological obsolescence.

More recent media seemed bound to fail, too, judging from Julier's flat-screen diptych Stuff and the single-screen work Yonder. Each of the large constituent LCD monitors has received a sharp blow, leaving a point of impact on the surface and a spider web-like fracture of the image playing behind it. The content of the films can only be made out on the edges furthest from the blow site. Stuff is a dizzying cycle of brands, filmed from the still and moving electronic advertisements in Times Square. The products that are most deeply ingrained in our consciousnesses are recognizable, while the rest remain vaguely familiar – if only the whole thing would just, for a second, stop moving. It's as if Julier's ambivalence about the beauty of the technological corruption of these images has prompted him to use physical force to resist its tractor beam.

If these works assume a simple relationship between a relatively passive, human viewer and aggressive media imagery, then the final pieces in the show change that dynamic by engaging other species in the production of images. The Nocturnal Appearance of Various Species of Furry Animals from the Neighbourhood consists of a white spherical container filled with bait dangling outside the gallery entrance. A camera above it transmits footage to a monitor and recorder inside the gallery, which are triggered by any movement or use of the feeder. The gallery fronts onto a busy carpark, so no self-respecting vermin are likely to avail themselves of the food during gallery hours, but two other works, both entitled Nightlife, include images from similar camera-and-ball arrangements that successfully lured animals. One is a technical drawing of the same food container printed on a resin ground and framed by dozens of small depictions of video stills taken from a camera triggered by a cat. The second Nightlife also makes use of animal footage but, this time, the stills frame the flattened cardboard box in which the camera was delivered to the artist. The exhibition's title suggests something cuddly and cute, but there is no empathetic cross-species exchange here. Julier's somewhat cold experiment with surveillance and technological colonization simply instrumentalizes animals to generate something like reverse anthropomorphism, an opportunity to consider how we human viewers respond to the media images we live with, as if we were lab rats being fed stimuli.

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