

# Monika Baer

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Monika Baer, *Überlieferung verpflichtet*, 2014, acrylic and oil on canvas, 98 3/8 × 86 5/8".

**THE GERMAN WORD FOR “BOTTLE”**—*flasche*—is slang for “loser” or “wimp.” And the bottles in Monika Baer’s new paintings recently on view at Greene Naftali in New York look defeated indeed. Some lie flat, while others, though standing upright, are almost empty, ready to be discarded. Like the figures in Baer’s “Mozart paintings,” 1996–97, the bottles directly engage the viewer with a valedictory stance, as if taking a bow before an imagined audience.

It would be wrong to credit the undeniable appeal of these paintings to the stunning rendering of the bottles alone. As in her previous work, Baer uses the hyperrealism of objects as a counterpoint in an elaborate vocabulary of nonrepresentational graphemes and painted interventions: gestural washes, linear drawings, abrasions, scribbles, a cut. Shadow helps to provide a sense of depth, but any spatial illusion is thwarted by the ghostly expanses of semitransparent white that cover the rest of the paintings. As in her earlier work, Baer draws our attention to the limitations of the picture plane. By keeping the center empty and concentrating the pictorial incident near the margins—in one case arranging a bottle so that it is bisected, or “cropped,” by the painting’s edge—she activates the imaginary space outside the frame.

At Greene Naftali, a series of complementary black paintings were exhibited in tandem with the bottle paintings. Their surfaces seem hermetic at first but soon offer glimpses of underpainted color and other elements. Amid these barely disguised layers, the stencils Baer used to render the bottle labels make a ghostlike return: White logotypes for various alcohol brands float elegantly in black expanses, unattached to any object, curling at times as if clinging to an invisible bottle, intimating the surreal illusion of an inky depth.

Piles of thick white oil paint eat into the black fields, destabilizing the canvases’ rectilinear integrity. In one work, Baer affixes a piece of mirror to the canvas (in a gesture she has performed before), attaching it so that it reaches over the canvas’s edge and gently exceeds its physical boundaries. The most striking features of these paintings, however, are the peculiar vertical formations of candy-colored paint applied straight from the tube; they seem to have rained down on the pictures like shit from passing birds. These “droppings” appear in singular lines or in clusters like abject protuberances. Elsewhere, lumps of viscous black pigment cling to the surface like tar-stains that would only get bigger if one tried to rub them off.

In spite of the pleasure we might derive from Baer’s subversive humor, her flouting of “good” taste is never simply joyful provocation. The paintings are in fact governed by a strict economy: Composed of distinct, variable elements, they are structured like sentences. (There is even a mirrored-glass exclamation point!) Their heterogeneous grammar thrives on the tension between opposites: between flatness and relief, color and noncolor, object and painted object, figure and ground.

As evidenced by her manifold distancing and objectifying operations, Baer mistrusts the authority implied by an expressive “I.” Indeed, her work developed initially in reaction to the fetish for gesture and immediacy that dominated German painting in the 1980s while she was studying at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. As a student, Baer was much more attracted to the rigor and clarity of ’70s Minimalism and Conceptualism, present in Düsseldorf mainly via Konrad Fischer Galerie, and to the de-authored work of the Pictures generation.

Yet Baer’s commitment to the medium of painting, to its material aspects and affective potential, is unironic. She has never participated in any kind of endgame rhetoric. Her work is not about negation. Nor is it about affirmation. Negation is, rather, the starting

point of a complex and opulent process.

It is no surprise, then, that Baer often opts for such hypercharged subject matter: chains, spiderwebs, vampires, alcohol. This iconography enforces an ambivalent absorption: While these paintings may be entangling or intoxicating, their vibe is never transcendent; it is always impure—haunted by specters of entrapment and death.

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