



Thomas Scheibitz: Low Sweetie, 1999, oil on canvas, 66 1/2 by 106 1/2 inches. Contemporary Art Society, London. Photo courtesy Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

Painting in the Present, Tense

BY MARCIA E. VETROCC

When you first encounter the paintings of Thomas Scheibitz, color registers as a powerful but by no means simple force. His wildly hybrid palette marshals the taupe, berry and saffron tones of tasteful fabrics; the straightforward primaries of lawn furniture and gas station signs; the sugary, infantile pastels of Easter candies and kids' pajamas. Utterly contemporary though not explicitly commercial in feeling, Scheibitz's hues are at once candid and contrived, vivid yet processed. Initially ingratiating, intermittently thrilling, these colors grow curiously detached and dusky with sustained viewing, and, in the end, they seem to be without joy.

A comparable equivocation or instability of affect is communicated by

Scheibitz's more complex compositions. Concocted of fragmentary landscape and architectural elements (some of them details pirated from ads and magazine photos of amusement parks), the canvases pulse with zooming prospects, splintering contours and abrupt leaps of scale—a visual dynamics of precision urgency that situates the works somewhere between Expressionism and Japanese cartoons.

Likewise, Scheibitz's occasional forays into nonobjectivity are confident but essentially agnostic: an angular starburst pattern that hovers in a blue field is as likely to conjure a motel sign as to signify an abstract meditation on the celestial. The paintings jolt you into a slew of private and art-historical associations, but Scheibitz would probably decline to

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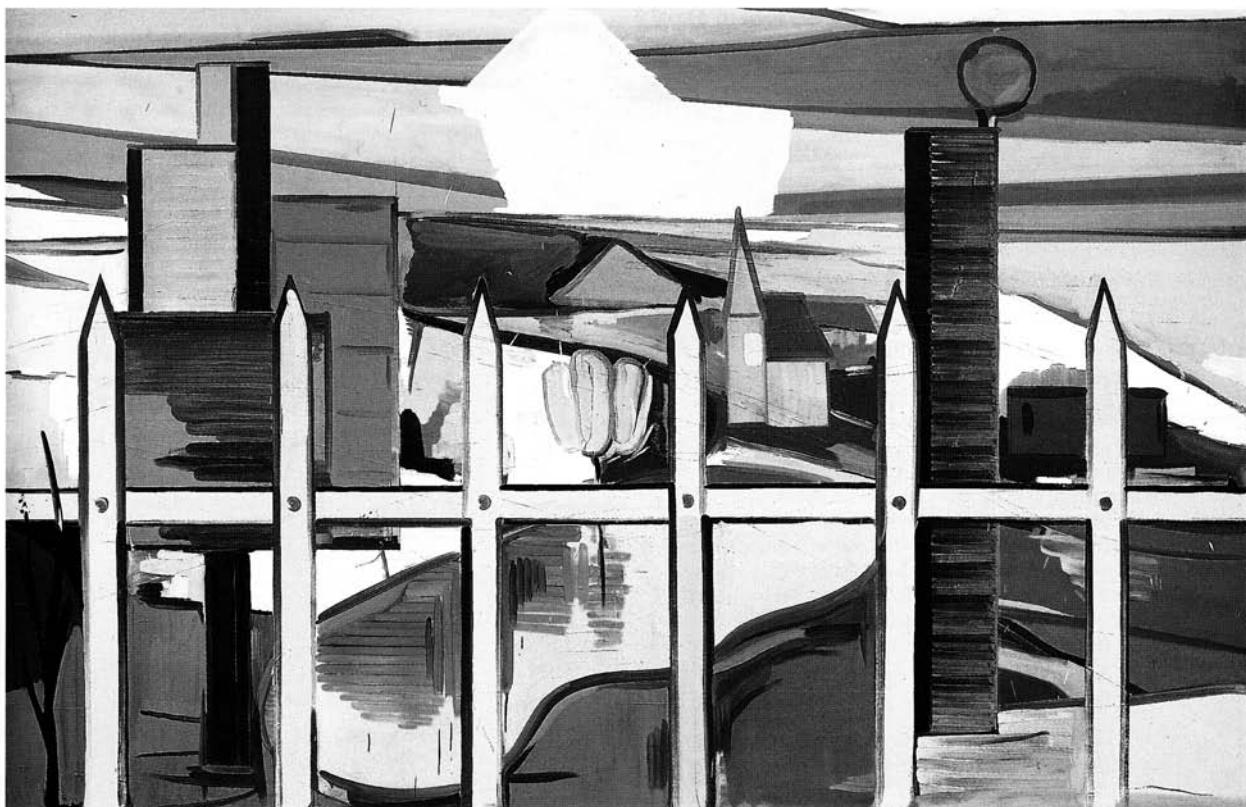
In recent exhibitions on both sides of the Atlantic, emerging German artist Thomas Scheibitz has offered formally enigmatic paintings that feature ripe colors and jolting conundrums of scale.

join in. For all the formal extroversion of the compositions and the passages of impetuous-looking paintmanship, the work is cagey, circumspect, skeptical.

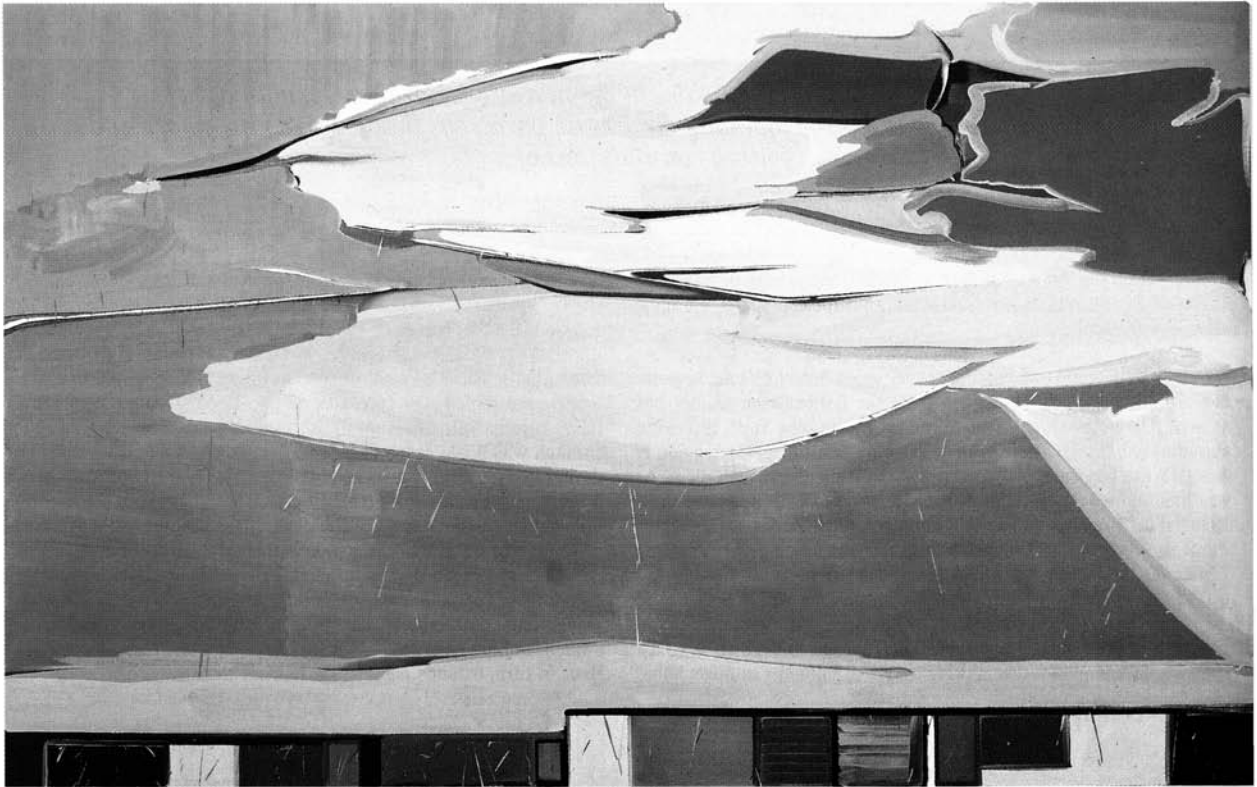
It won't be possible to talk much longer about Scheibitz's art in terms of true first impressions. Since 1995, the Berlin-based painter has shown in galleries throughout Germany and in New York. His debut museum solo, "Low Sweetie," ran at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) last summer. Across town, at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, he was among 56 artists—and at age 31, one of the youngest—to be included in "Examining Pictures," an international survey cocurated by Francesco Bonami, of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, and Whitechapel's Judith Nesbitt. A heterodox celebration of painting's resilience and diversity, the multigenerational roster placed Scheibitz in the company of Philip Guston, John Baldessari, Robert Ryman, Gerhard Richter, Marlene Dumas, Gary Hume, Luc Tuymans and others. Also last summer, he was included in a three-person exhibition, "In Augenhöhe" (At Eye Level), at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein.

Scheibitz's uncanny blend of exhilaration and doubt is in full bloom in the nine paintings (all 1999) that made up "Low Sweetie," and particularly in those that harness the grandeur of the large canvas to subjects of uncertain scale and significance. In *Casting*, a clutch of lofty slablike forms that might otherwise connote an urban skyline is infiltrated by a modest red-roofed structure with an appended steeple. The steeple's point rhymes with the spindly white pickets of a foreground fence through which the scene is viewed. The fence, a recurrent Scheibitz device, invokes a corny domesticity while nodding to a host of modernist stratagems for establishing the frontality of the picture plane. It's a toss-up whether the buildings are the diminutive structures of a miniature golf course or the towers of the wide world beyond the backyard.

A more spectacular—and spectacularly ambiguous—vista stretches before us in the painting *Low Sweetie* (so titled after a movie whose slangy name and oddball narrative appealed to Scheibitz). Choppy swatches of flat color lead down and across a broad plain to a blue sea that, in turn, extends out and up to meet the straw-colored sky. The snaking red stripe that makes its way into the distance resembles a



Casting, 1999, oil on canvas, 68% by 106% inches. Private collection, New York. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, Bonakdar Jancou, New York.



Sky, 1999, oil on canvas, 67 by 106 inches. Collection David Goldhill, Los Angeles.

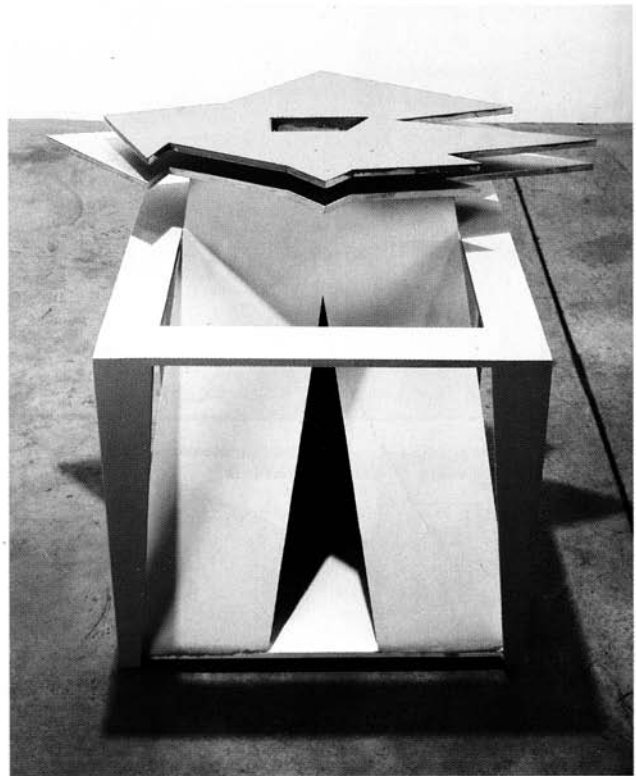
Right, Russell Building, 1999, fiberboard, latex paint, 28 1/2 by 29 1/2 by 36 inches. Collection Kenneth L. Freed, Boston.

filmed stream of auto taillights. A mustard-colored form collapses like a punctured hot-air balloon at the far right, just below a pair of triangles that—if we are to trust the indicators of sweeping space—are as majestic as the pyramids of Giza.

But complete confidence in the measure of this panorama is forestalled by an obtrusive trio of pallid and misshapen flowers that spring up in the immediate foreground. Here, as in other paintings by Scheibitz, flowers are the animate presences in compositions that feature no human figures. Indeed, Scheibitz avoids the figure, though he has created a few composite human heads out of abstract shapes and strokes that come to order as a visage, rather like the gourds and pears in a work by Arcimboldo. And he also paints snowmen. Sullied and compromised in aspect, they are more akin to the tatty stuffed toys of Mike Kelley than to the reductive iconic snowmen of Gary Hume.

Perhaps the most disquieting of Scheibitz's figure surrogates is the short ovoid-headed sign planted on a stick in front of the fence and manically multicolored facade of *Kinderhotel 99*, another big painting at the ICA. A sort of wordless welcome to the nursery behind it, the grimacing lavender smiley face, triple-eyed like a Picasso, exudes suspect cheer. A darker companion head has slipped off its pike and fallen sideways to the ground. Children, beware.

Last fall Scheibitz came to the U.S. for a three-month residency in Columbus, Ohio, sister city to his native Dresden. The fruits of that stay filled his second exhibition, called "Final Gold," at New York's Bonakdar Jancou Gallery, which had presented his first solo show outside Germany just a year before. The seven paintings, a Scheibitz



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sampler, included a rather dour nonobjective piece that seems to be a patch from one of the artist's own landscapes, a darkly comical head with pendant white ears and a doorknob nose, and two imposing compositions, *Set* and *Sky*, the former tough and tightly plotted, the latter uncharacteristically serene, even atmospheric.

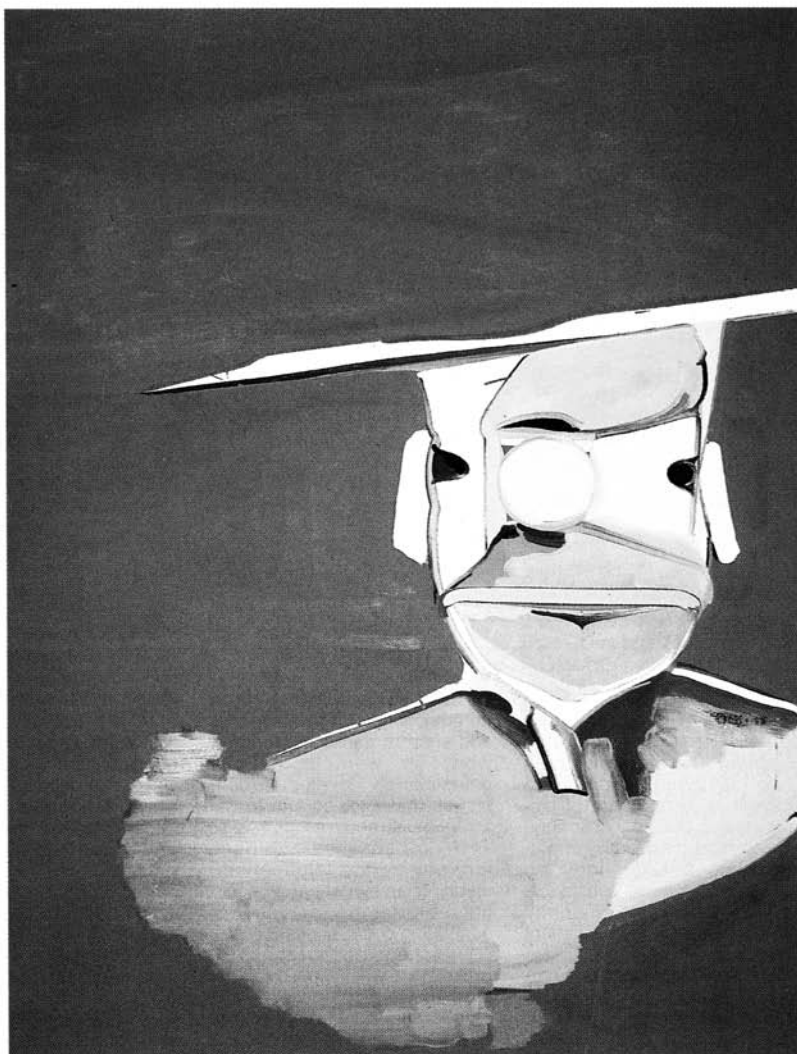
Also on hand were a pair of sculptures, cut from sheets of particle board, that literalize Scheibitz's constructive process of form-building. A wall relief was fabricated from angular and vaguely Arp-like shapes wrapped in linen- and mocha-colored fabrics. The edges and corners are blunted by the cloth sleeves, which introduce a puzzling component of craft. In *Russell Building*, a 28½-inch-high floor piece painted gray and white, a set of tapering elements creates a roughly cubic frame that houses a wedge shape with a triangular aperture. The templelike structure is surmounted by flat horizontal elements, one silver and one gray, whose sharp contours and arrow-tipped protrusions suggest Jovian thunderbolts, or perhaps just a good Midwestern storm breaking over the local savings and loan. Conspicuously monochrome amid the lineup of intense painting, the objects seemed mildly didactic as they demonstrated the art of composition in three dimensions and, perhaps inadvertently, brought to mind the hoary prohibition against color in sculpture.

Back in high chromatic gear, *Set* reprises the picket fence as a diagonal element separating a large and importunate "flower"—really a mass woven of thick purple strokes and encircled by spiky red petals—from a flimsy-looking residence that is set back behind the gravelike cavities of two drained swimming pools and framed by a low mountain as verdant as AstroTurf. The storied coziness of the Alpine cabin and the transcendent crystalline *Berg* of early Expressionist landscape painting have devolved into cold suburban comfort. The resurgent illusionism has been set up for defeat by the depth-collapsing commonplaces of modernism: the edges of objects establish a surface-hugging lattice of triangles and quadrilaterals, the foreground flower's purple reappears in the upper left corner of the distant sky.

The tense puzzlework of Scheibitz's large paintings eases up markedly in *Sky*. The gentle, uncongested composition reads as an aerial view of a low, planar coastline articulated by causeways and sandspits. We are told that the genesis of the work lies in Japanese prints, which the artist admired during a trip to the Far East a few years ago. Yet absent the firm black outlines and saturated colors characteristic of Japanese woodblocks, a viewer is more apt to perceive a Diebenkorn touch in Scheibitz's use of color-as-edge in tandem with irregular zones of sunny, powdery hues.

The uncharacteristic relaxation of form and subject in *Sky* is not completely untroubled. A ribbon of varicolored blocks runs across the lower border of the canvas. The host of associations it unleashes—freight cars, basic units of De Stijl design, a strip mall, the color-test spectrum in the photo of an art work, the icon belt at the bottom of an Apple computer screen—have nothing to do with the light-suffused abstract marinescape above, though they do underscore its tenderness. The hybrid visual experience remains Scheibitz's specialty, even when his mettlesome sensibility takes a seaside holiday. □

"Low Sweetie" was at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts [June 4-July 11, 1999]. "In Augenhöhe" appeared at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein [July 10-Aug. 22, 1999]. "Final Gold" was on view at Bonakdar Jancou Gallery in New York [Dec. 3, 1999-Jan. 15, 2000]. "Examining Pictures" opened at the Whitechapel Gallery in London [May 7-June 27, 1999]. It traveled to Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art [July 24-Sept. 19, 1999] and continues at the UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art [Feb. 6-Apr. 2, 2000].



Untitled (No. 242), 1999, oil on canvas, 56 by 42 inches.
Collection Kenneth L. Freed.