

Welcome to the jungle

I explored Eden-Olympia on foot, logging miles along the simulated nature trails that ended abruptly when they were no longer visible from the road. Ornamental pathways led to the electricity substations feeding power into the business park's grid. Surrounded by chain-link fences, they stood in the forest clearings like mysterious and impassive presences. I circled the artificial lakes, with their eerily calm surfaces, or roamed around the vast car parks. The lines of silent vehicles might have belonged to a race who had migrated to the stars.

J. G. Ballard, 'Super-Cannes'¹

*Baby, I've been
breaking glass
in your room again
Listen.*

David Bowie, 'Breaking Glass'²

In his novel *Super-Cannes*, J. G. Ballard describes a residential business park, a certain Eden-Olympia, in which a highly qualified managerial community lives, primarily, it must be said, in order to work, in an exclusive utopian setting on the coast of the Mediterranean. This stylised, if chronically sterile, business development provides its high-flying inhabitants with all the amenities and luxuries they could possibly desire. On the face of it, life in Eden-Olympia is untroubled. The ills that plague the outside world are firmly locked out. There is no crime. Litter is unheard of. The natural world, in this man-made haven, along with its instincts, are seemingly kept at bay by the directives of international business. Eden-Olympia, with its swish office blocks and show-home atmosphere, exudes the specious charm of the glossiest brochure. What is of interest, especially in regards to this novel and the work of the German artist Thomas Scheibitz, is this glaring contradiction between the world as it exists and as man would like it. Scheibitz's practice is a collision of these parallel perspectives of fantasy and fiction, utopia and illusion. He evokes and intersperses exhilaration and doubt at once, from splintered shards and planes of ephemeral colour that intertwine elegantly. For Scheibitz invites us into a world of dichotomy, and shows us the duplicitous character of the world we live in. *Super-Cannes* is also the representation of our world defined by objects and brand names. Similarly, Scheibitz sonorously explores this idea in his sculptures, paintings and photographs, which also contain these manifold references and double strategies.

In the exhibition about *90 elements / TOD IM DSCHUNGEL* (translated as 'Death in the Jungle'), Scheibitz captures these 'shocks' and 'conflicts' with his presentation of recent paintings, photographs, sculptures and a new installation piece in response to the exhibition space at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. His sculptures and paintings as well as his photographs all possess, like Ballard's description of Eden-Olympia, this sense of a well-ordered environment being haunted by something unpredictable and menacing. Scheibitz explores both the malady and euphoria of contemporary culture. If we wish to go further, it might be said that Scheibitz is expressing the

inability of humans, however sophisticated they think they have grown, to shake themselves free from their primeval past. To put it another way, man's nature is not something that has changed simply because he walks through city streets rather than on forest floors. Scheibitz, of course, is not alone in this sentiment. It has been expressed many times before. 'The thousands that throng before our eyes in peaceful intercourse each with the other', as Schopenhauer said, 'can only be regarded as so many tigers and wolves, whose teeth are secured by a strong muzzle.'³

The title of the exhibition, *about 90 elements / TOD IM DSCHUNGEL*, is replete with motifs of instability and flux. The first term in the title of the exhibition, about 90 elements, refers to man's desire to organise the chemical components of the natural world into an accessible tabular form. This was achieved in the latter part of the nineteenth century by the Russian chemist Dimitri Mendeleev. The title makes reference to this table of elements, approximately ninety of which are said to exist in the natural world, and, above all, alludes to man's desire for intelligibility and order. The second part of the title, *TOD IM DSCHUNGEL*, not dissimilar in theme, refers to a documentary film made by Werner Herzog about an indefatigable character, a British aeronautical engineer called Dr. Graham Dorrington. This engineer spent years designing a small, maneuverable balloon that would enable him to float noiselessly above the canopy of the Guyanan forests in the hope that some of the samples that he'd be able to obtain from this otherwise inaccessible habitat would turn out to possess unique medicinal properties. In this film, *The White Diamond* (2004), Dorrington comes across as a character overshadowed by the failure of a past expedition in which his close friend and mentor, the naturalist and cinematographer Dieter Plage, was accidentally killed. The picture Herzog paints of Dorrington is of a monomaniac driven, above all else, by his desire to honour Plage's memory by finally completing this project. The film, for the greater part, is memorable for its image of Dorrington's balloon, the eponymous 'white diamond', floating silently above the treetops. The childlike simplicity of this image, of this oddly shaped man-made machine, the product of years of laborious research, floating above the thick and murderous jungle below, belies the intensity of Dorrington's emotional involvement. The image of this white balloon resonates with the tragic failings of Dorrington's past expedition into the jungle as well as the high hopes he has for the future and, ultimately, his redemption.

With regards to the exhibition about *90 elements / TOD IM DSCHUNGEL*, the image of Dorrington's balloon somehow sums up man's desire to get to the bottom of things. In other words, to make something as unruly as a jungle give up its secrets to satisfy man's desire for knowledge. The image of this balloon floating above the wilderness perfectly captures, on the one hand, man's innate desire for knowledge and, on the other, the vehement opposition he faces from the natural world. Nature does not pander to man's desire for intelligibility and order. It does not roll obligingly onto its side to reveal the way it works. If anything, it opposes and frustrates each of the steps he wishes to make towards it. Evocative of a scene in Herzog's film, Scheibitz makes his way through the jungle only to be confronted by a mysterious waterfall, one that is steeped in legend and myth. To preserve the enigma of this waterfall, Herzog chose not to reveal what its watery curtain concealed. Myths are often far more alluring than scientific truths. This theme is something that interests Thomas Scheibitz. The double

title of his show wishes to express something of this tension between man's desire to expose nature's secrets and nature's reluctance to spill out its heart.

Like all of Scheibitz's titles, there is a dialogue here between science and art, fact and popular fiction. His work abounds with both contemporary and historical references. Cartoons, Hollywood movies, lifestyle magazines, 15th-century etchings, artists and personalities like Philip Guston, the Melvins, Lester Bangs - all inform his work. Born in Radeberg, Germany, in 1968, Scheibitz, a student of Professor Ralf Kerbach in Dresden, started painting in 1990 and quickly gained international recognition. His early works were wooden reliefs and plywood sculptures, and, surprisingly, a compilation of film trailers. These disparate elements show the idiosyncratic nature of his visual world. He has archives of clippings kept in overstuffed folders. Scheibitz's archive is not a collection of meaningless blips in the cultural miasma but a cross-section of our shattered visual world.

Music, particularly rock music, is integrated into both Scheibitz's work and the way he works in his Berlin studio. This relationship between rock and roll and painting could very well, on the face of it, be seen as something of a cliché, but, as Jörg Heiser has quite rightly said, 'there is an almost uncanny resemblance between the discourse around the status of contemporary painting and rock music. The techno-factions in both art and music have repeatedly buried the canvas and guitar for good, and time and again both have risen from the grave, claiming that their time has not come, that there is still something substantial to say about them.'⁴

In the 21st century, painting is no longer a purely formal project with a cultural and historical framework. The much heralded 'death of painting' has been proclaimed by critics from Yve-Alain Bois to Arthur Danto, who argue that the immediacy of current technologies has eclipsed the act of painting itself. Yet this critical discourse only serves its rebirth. Thomas Scheibitz's work is part of this reclamation as he questions the status of representation and, in doing so, affirms the validity of painting. In *about 90 elements / TOD IM DSCHUNGEL* Scheibitz renders his 'plan' in high-relief by juxtaposing painterly sculptural forms against expansive backdrops, themselves layers of colour and form, to create a dialogue between painting and sculpture.

His focus on the relationship between function and ideal form in the contemporary world can be seen in his fascination with the 'The Glass Chain' or 'Crystal Chain', also known as the 'Utopian Correspondence'. This was a chain of correspondence between architects initiated by Bruno Taut that formed the basis of Expressionist architecture in Germany. 'Light seeks to penetrate the whole cosmos,' the poet Paul Scheerbart said of Taut's Glass House of 1914, 'and is alive in crystal.' The exuberant Expressionist projects quite consciously allude to an esoteric iconography, which is a quality that can be said to permeate the works of Thomas Scheibitz. A further link, and a coincidental one, is found in Scheibitz's sculpture *A place in the sun* (2007, p. 112), which could be said to be beautifully shaped into a letter 'M'. The graceful, classical arches and sun-bleached tones are reminiscent of Bruno Taut's work

Grotesque Region (1918, p. 198). Scheibitz came across this work and noticed the echo in the bottom right of the work, which clearly displays the architecture and colourings of his own *A place in the sun*. Here one clearly sees how history acts as an osmosis exchange. That Thomas Scheibitz has grasped a form that already existed in Taut, 's work creates an unspoken affinity.

Thomas Scheibitz has been greatly influenced by the late Blinky Palermo (1943 - 1977). 'For me what was particularly striking and unusual, perhaps because it is an area that is rarely covered by contemporary artists,' Scheibitz says of Palermo's work, 'was the translation (as I call it) of things such as times of the day, calendar days or cardinal points, things that appear to be quite fundamental or simple things. Palermo's work displays a strong inner necessity, whereby the pleasure of regarding a girlfriend who is drawn sitting on the edge of the bed, or of making a large-format picture out of lengths of cloth, is simultaneously revealed as a pictorial concept.'⁶ Palermo's work, from what Scheibitz has to say about it, clearly strikes a chord. First, the work of both artists defies, rather appropriately, easy categorisation. What links Scheibitz and Palermo is a similarly expressive style. If one looks a little more closely at the affinity between the works of these two artists, Scheibitz can certainly be said to share Palermo's desire to throw the world into question, particularly the ways in which man has seen fit to measure it.

Palermo's approach can be said to display a process of reduction whereby every allusion to human figure and form vanishes and, as a result, all that is left are fields of stark colour. The aim of his work was to arrive at a point where a sequence or chord of colours gets, as it were, to the root point or the elemental basis of the visual forms he wished to express. Palermo's work *Points of the Compass I* (1976, p. 198) shows four separate works that are all related in their colour and composition. This minimal work makes reference to the four corners of the world and, more importantly, the ways in which its inhabitants orientate themselves upon its surface. If we compare Palermo's work to Scheibitz's painting *90 Elements* (2007, fig. 11), we can see that there is a resemblance between the two inasmuch as both artists wish to express something of the enormity of the world, its boundlessness, in an abstracted microcosm. Scheibitz's painting does this wonderfully well with a series of minimal, highly geometrical, cube-like formations that have a sense of movement and fluidity. Both Palermo and Scheibitz delight in conveying the underlying principles of the world that, in turn, reveal something of the terror and beauty that lies beneath. Both artists utilise the resonance of reduction, which serves to heighten the tension of the painting.

'Palermo described imagined figures or forms,' Scheibitz says, 'as being derived from objects as "prototypes", a term I have been using for a long time for the "blank objects" created in my sculptures and for the individual details (detailed forms) of a pictorial composition.'⁷ Scheibitz also makes reference to a remark by Fred Jahn that he found in a book about Palermo. Jahn said of Palermo that 'he gave colour to forms in the way one gives names to people.' Both Palermo and Scheibitz ultimately identify with the investigative and analytical nature of abstraction. Theodore Adorno once said that 'abstraction' is 'the tool of enlightenment' and it can be said that

Thomas Scheibitz's works refer to man's knowledge of the world and its workings in an abstracted form.

Playing with words and making associations of all kinds is a restless game for Thomas Scheibitz. He draws out parallels, often mesmerising, between a disparate collection of objects and things. Paying as little heed as he does to the distinctions that ordinarily pull these things apart, Scheibitz's work has a particular monistic quality. Architecture, elements of fauna and vegetation, and, for that matter, landscapes all speak a common language. They express something of one another. This world of his, this liquid-like vision of everyday life, creates a fresh and startling vision of reality. His poetic use of language, so evident in the titles of his works, alludes to both their composition and theme.

Scheibitz has the ability to look at historical works with a fresh eye. The painter and printmaker Hercules Segers (c. 1589 - 1633) has had an important influence on his artistic practice. Segers achieved fame with his 'printed paintings'. In Segers' work *Ruin of a Monastery* (c. 1610, p. 198) we see a seemingly straightforward image of a monastery; however, it is the way in which this image was reproduced that is of particular interest. Segers produced the same image twice, firstly using the familiar technique of intaglio printing and then - as a 'negative' image, so to speak - white on black. Segers was far ahead of his times as far as printing processes were concerned, and this first use of 'reverse printing' enabled him to create different impressions depending on the technique used. It is similar to the 'day-for-night' technique used in filmmaking, when night shots are filmed during the day with a special filter. Parallels between Segers and Scheibitz are, however, not restricted to the calculated functionalisation of monochrome image areas; it is above all the topos of the imaginary landscape - one that is not located in reality - that characterises both artists' work to a large extent.

The American awareness, for want of a better expression, that filtrates Thomas Scheibitz's German sensibility can be seen in his use of colour. It has been noted that such forms as the flower and the star and, importantly, scenes from local events, formed part of the visual language of Andy Warhol. His impersonal frozen perspective, in which beauty and abstraction are crystallised, is pure pop culture. There is also a boldness of sheer scale in Scheibitz's work which is synonymous with the traits of another American painter, Alex Katz. Both Scheibitz and Katz create a *mise-en-scène* within their works. They both have an unabashed sense of Hollywood movies and, in turn, a sense of the psychological anxieties that often accompany their maintenance. Both artists can also be said to fight for a visual dominance in their works. Scheibitz constructs a highly stylised visual set-up, combining landscapes and portraits, to provoke a certain ambivalence that encompasses both fear and desire. He presents to us the predicament of being unable to discern what is real from what is not. He stands on the edge of banality and the surreal.

about 90 elements / TOD IM DSCHUNGEL investigates the enigmatic character of the world which we inhabit. In it, Scheibitz prescribes a relationship between science

and art, one that ‘continues to be a door of creative opportunity that is pushed open time and time again.’⁹

Gilles Deleuze once described a unity of the world: ‘Even compressed, folded and enveloped, elements are powers that enlarge and distend the world. It hardly suffices to speak of a succession of limits or of frames, for every frame marks a direction of space that coexists with the others and each form is linked to unlimited space in all directions at once. It is a broad and floating world, at least on its base, a scene or an immense plateau.’ Thomas Scheibitz unveils to us the folds and fissures of the world, a glimpse of a utopia. As he welcomes us to the jungle, we are spectators caught uneasily within an illusory world like the inhabitants of Ballard’s *Eden-Olympia*. Just as David Bowie breaks the glass in one of his songs, Thomas Scheibitz invites us to look at the shards as they fall all around us and create an alchemy of consciousness.

Rachael Thomas

- 1 J. G. Ballard, *Super-Cannes* (London: Flamingo, 2001).
- 2 David Bowie, ‘Breaking Glass’, from the 1977 album *Low*.
- 3 Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1998), p. 129.
- 4 Jörg Heiser, in *Painting at the Edge of the World*, exh. cat. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Walker Art Center, 2001).
- 5 Paul Scheerbart, ‘Aphorisms for the Glass House’, from a letter to Bruno Taut (10 February 1914), reprinted in ‘Glashausbriefe’, *Frühlicht*, supplement to *Stadtbaukunst Alter und Neuer Zeit*, no. 3 (1920), pp. 45-48.
- 6 Thomas Scheibitz, interview in the artist’s studio, Berlin, 2007.
- 7 Thomas Scheibitz, interview in the artist’s studio, Berlin, 2007.
- 8 Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 13.
- 9 Thomas Scheibitz, interview in the artist’s studio, Berlin, 2007.
- 10 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold* (London and New York: Continuum, 1993), p. 142.