Thomas Scheibitz: a painter worth wrestling with

Inspired by everything from watermelons to novelty golf tees, it's no wonder the German artist's work – on show at Baltic – is hard to get to grips with. But it makes him all the more invigorating

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theguardian.com, Tuesday 30 July 2013 13.03 BST
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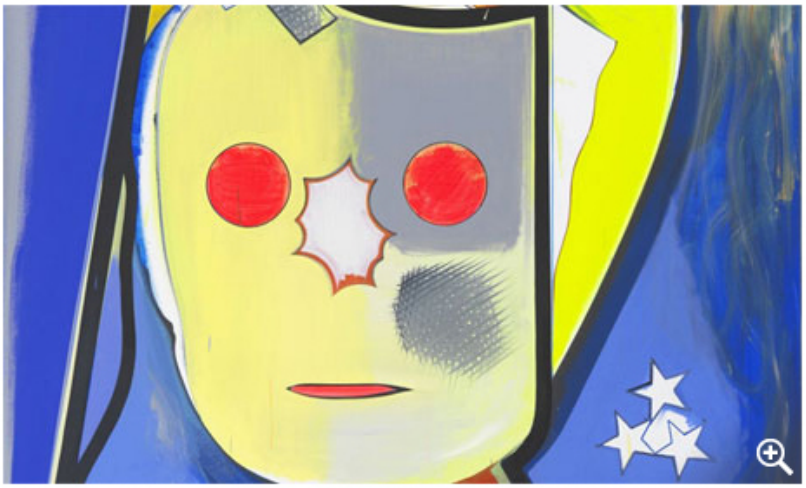

This painting will self-destruct ... a detail of Thomas Scheibitz's Henry Stand. Photograph: Jens Ziehe/Photographie

Is that a man, a building or a robot made from cardboard boxes? I grow more confused by the minute looking at the paintings and sculptures of Thomas Scheibitz. In a painting called Mosaik, a man with a cross-hatched head appears to wear a Philippe Starck teapot as a hat. But something has gone wrong with the spout, though I might have misperceived the whole thing. Not a teapot, then. Start again.

Scheibitz's paintings are often difficult to read, though most contain human presences, and many are titled as if they are portraits: Portrait Tracy Berglund; Henry Stand; Ret Marut. The names sound as invented as the shapes that make and unmake the figures in the paintings. Look long enough and Tracy Berglund appears to resolve into a female figure in a long skirt and grey jacket, holding a slice of watermelon. Or it could be cheese. Or a megaphone.

Everything looks deliberate and calculated, but at some point things stop making sense – or rather, start making a kind of sense that is all Scheibitz's own. Flat planes drift into emptiness; distracted brushstrokes wander away like someone getting lost on a walk. Perspectives warp, geometries fall apart. The spaces between things become more insistent than the things themselves. These are very unreasonable paintings.

That's part of the pleasure. Scheibitz's work has been called "conceptual painting". I have always thought painting is a conceptual as well as a physical activity. Using fragments of graphic symbols, compound forms and motifs whose origins are often impossible to trace, the artist arrives at a kind of figuration that is at odds with itself. "I can't invent anything and I can't use what I find as it is," he recently told one interviewer. He also told me, as we looked around his show, that everything connects to everything else.

Part of Scheibitz's collection of source materials are laid out on tables at Baltic – not that they're much help. Here is a gift pack of multicoloured Harrods golf tees, then two patterned cigarette lighters, some dice, a walnut and several stones with naturally occurring right angles. How odd. And now, he has painted various objects yellow: a plaster tortoise, a paintbrush stiff with pigment, a toy car. Among all these things, traces of the shapes and contours in his paintings might be found, like lines of a song or a bit of a tune that goes round your head. There are dozens of these objects. How they are translated into elements in his paintings is anybody's guess.

The overall impression is that nothing is random. There are affinities here. Scheibitz has a good eye for an ambiguous but characterful shape. One "portrait", called John Held, is painted on a small, asymmetrically carved gravestone that sits on a plinth. It looks a bit like a face but has no features. Sometimes Scheibitz paints on spheres, which are hung from the ceiling. What I like about these pieces is that you can never see the whole thing, and have to keep going round and round, like a dog chasing its tail.

The son of a stonemason, Scheibitz trained for five years as a toolmaker in the old East Germany, before becoming an artist. The way planes fold, shapes turn and odd shapes emerge, like the off-cuts of other forms, have a kind of man-machine sensibility.

Perspectives and geometries fall apart ... Thomas Scheibitz's One-Time Pad. Photograph: Jens Ziehe/Photographie

Scheibitz likes to paint in a sort of secret code, or with a plan only he knows. That is why the Baltic show, which travelled from Frankfurt, is called One-Time Pad. A one-time pad is the spy's best friend and the code-breaker's worst nightmare – an almost impregnable way to send secret messages.

What does it all mean? Scheibitz's art fills two floor of Baltic and is the artist's largest show in Britain. His paintings are not made to be deciphered. You think you've got the key, then he changes the locks. But at least he doesn't go on about feeling or the edge the way my art school tutors used to. I always thought they spoke a secret code, too, one I wasn't in on. There are edges everywhere in Scheibitz's art. The way areas and shapes butt against one another is more than merely technical – there are hard edges, soft edges, squiggly edges wandering like drunken cyclists over the lanes, edges that are crisp and sharp (but always hand-drawn), fluffy edges, and edges cancelled out as if by a bad-tempered draughtsman with a marker pen. Clean colour suddenly turns mucky; a lasso of spray paint crosses an orange void – just because it can.

All of this is invigorating and eccentric. These are paintings that seem to want to destroy themselves as you look. But they don't. They wrestle with us, as much as we with them. Their vitality is palpable.