

Dominik Steiner: A Life of Ease and Plenty

June 19 until July 31, 2010, Cruise & Callas, Berlin

First, a disclaimer. As well as the usual gallery text for an artist, this is a personal view of the work of Dominik Steiner, freely given. Although I am of course promoting the work of a friend, and am paying it tribute, it is also an attempt to describe the work as truthfully as I would do in any context.

In this gallery, you'll find a sofa, consisting of a welded metal frame, chipboard panels, and the hide of a bull. Describing it to me as it was being made, and seeing the question coming, Steiner said to me, "I guess you'll need to bring your own cushions." He has a funny idea of comfort, and an uncomfortable idea of beauty. This holds true wherever you look.

Steiner is making and remaking a world. Everything is refashioned on his own terms. This is not expression, not "this is me", but rather "this is mine, this is how I do it." The references, the images, the media with all their traditions – all are subjected to a direct process of appropriation whereby they are questioned and transformed, in ways that vary from the ultra-conscious to the surprising to the frankly naive. This naïveté, not to be confused with ignorance, is a strength, as it holds no assumptions, and accepts no givens.

In the same way that the sofa is not quite a sofa, the paintings are not exactly the paintings they may appear to be. A meandering line clearly reminiscent of two other masters - one Spanish, one German - is sprayed on with an aerosol, oddly combining directness, spontaneity and a comically awkward, aggressive bent with its reference points and strictly conceived method of application. The usual procedures and precepts of painting are held at some distance. The artist is working at a level above the one you look at with your eyes. The most basic stripe paintings use a painterly gesture that has more conviction than the most avowed expressionist, but it is used in a composition that originated in the physical folding of the canvas according to a scheme that is both systematic and arbitrary. The effect of the work is from all, and none, of these aspects.

At their clearest, the works have a compression of idea, image and execution that is dense, immediate, unexpected and convincing without being explicable. That strikes me as poetic, and this condensation of qualities can be found across various media and genres. Unstretched canvases, not here, hit you with a finality that encompasses aggression with sensitivity, presence with reserve, and elegance with dirt. Elsewhere, in the show, it can be found in the brevity of messed-up execution of a large romantic cloudscape, and in the paradox of a scale reproduction of two bare, rusty signposts that purport to be life-size and in perspective at the same time, which is not strictly possible. The same image both flatly imitates the rust of the metal in the foremost figure, and in the second hints at a double that might, but does not, function as a projected shadow of the first. What is arrived at is unanswerable, and often amusingly so, though the humour here is perhaps as strange as the beauty.

The world that is being made is more than the sum of the artist's procedures, and both encompasses and begins to transcend what it takes in. Including as it does the whole matters of abstract painting, the artist's hand, sculpture, furniture, readymades, image-reproduction and the relationship of art to its past, this is rather a lot. It is not a programme, it is still open, multi-faceted and growing. It always pays to keep one eye on the painting to the left or right. What you see is not what you see, it is in some ways a shadow of something much larger.

Richard Neal