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Thomas Bayrle retrospective at Baltic, Gateshead

By Jackie Wullschlager

Until last year, when he papered the public spaces of Frieze Art Fair with his “Sloping Loafers” and “Laughing Cow” montages, 76-year-old Thomas Bayrle was barely known outside his native Germany. But the fresh, immersive installations got people talking, and most were surprised to discover that the traffic-light coloured shoes and the bovine logos from the processed cheese brand were half a century old. If their identikit grinning forms appeared to critique the mindless stamping hordes at the art fair, that is because Bayrle has always been something of a prophet.

Thomas Bayrle: All-in-One, a superb first UK retrospective at Baltic, Gateshead, opens with hundreds of identical condensed milk cans shaped into one man-sized milk can in the sculpture “Glückskele-Dose” (1969). This stands against a frieze of collaged images of pouting models (“Baby”, “Cowgirl”) composed from laughing cow motifs – red ones for pouting lips, gold for blonde hair. Mimicking digital technology decades before it was invented, Bayrle showed such pieces in the 1960s alongside handcrafted wooden kinetic sculptures which at first sight suggest light-hearted mockery of a German consumer revival but often have lethal messages.

“Ajax” (1966), a tableau in the shape of a huge bottle of cleaning liquid, depicts scores of doll-size, carefully painted, individualised wooden *Hausfrauen* who, when activated by a button, all burst into a frenzy of sweeping and scrubbing. It is Lady Macbeth washing her hands in the dolls’ house – a twin metaphor, in pop’s bright, cheerful language of consumer appropriation, for Nazi ethnic cleansing and postwar insistence on brushing those crimes under the carpet.

German pop is different from the Anglo-American version, which lives in easy complicity with its capitalist sources. Born in Berlin in 1937 and growing up on the cold war frontier, Bayrle worked out early that “visually the communist mass parades, the gigantic dimensions of these living pageants, had much in common with the huge masses that milled around the shopping malls in the capitalist countries”. Thus he made “Ajax” and another branded kinetic piece, “Super Colgate” (1965), alongside “Mao and the Gymnasts” (1966), where numerous tiny wooden gymnast-marionettes in rows transform, at the flick of a switch, into the shape of the red star of communism: individual figures with no autonomy becoming ornaments to the larger figure of Mao, depicted at the foot of the sculpture.

Formally, most of Bayrle’s art turns on one trick. He creates a monumental image, called a “superform”, either from hundreds of collaged miniature identical versions of itself – tiny beer glasses, say, forming an enormous glass of frothing Pils in the silkscreen print “A Beer, Please!” (1972) – or from a single element that parodies the larger icon, as in a portrait of Stalin built up from the motif of his moustache. Thin, hand-drawn lines give volume to the superform, which appears to bounce out of the all-over pattern. As in Warhol, the serial effect undermines notions of authorship and the expressivity of gestural painting.

But the mood is darker. Where Warhol celebrates the banality of popular culture and the machine, Bayrle has the post-Nazi suspicion of any Volk movement, and an anti-materialist stance. Fetishising a consumer object such as his signature cheese logo, endlessly repeated until it threatens to disappear in a sea of abstraction, he warns that limitless material desire risks material annihilation.

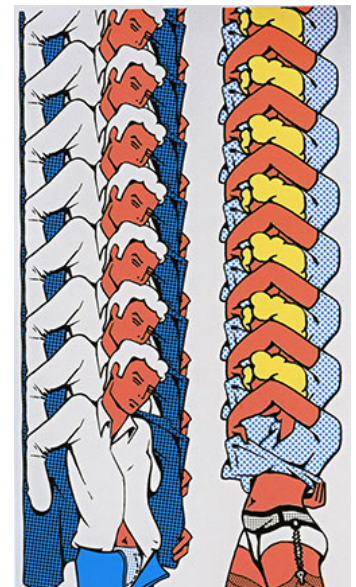
Bayrle’s grand yet playful vision, with its op-art dazzle and games of scale, premonitions of pixelation and digital composites, is marvellously served by Baltic’s towering industrial spaces, which reference the building’s origins as a 1950s flour mill. Bayrle’s first job was in a textile factory in the 1950s, and his fascination with relationships between mass and unit dates from an epiphany there.

“Standing in the weaving factory, day after day, hour after hour, I sank deep into this undergrowth of warp and weft,” he recalled in a 2009 Frieze magazine profile. “I kind of melted away ... immersed in the endless reinforcement of millions of crossovers and crossunders ... The finished product – the fabric – represented the totality, a whole: a society or a collective. A single thread represented something like individuality. That is where I got the idea that the social fabric is made up of individuals who are woven together but cannot move.”

In the 1970s, Bayrle’s variations on woven grid structures in monochromatic grey, monotonous yet rhythmic, chimed with minimalism. Silkscreened lines of an accounts ledger define the contours of a (bankrupt?) family group in “Savings Book” (1972); photo-collaged grid elements of a city in the



‘Madonna Mercedes’ (1989)



series “Carlos” (1977) form the features of the terrorist Carlos the Jackal. Bayrle’s cold grid cityscapes “City by the Sea” and “City of the Forest” call to mind both Gerhard Richter’s blurred grisaille “Stadt” paintings of the period, and the electronic, robotic music of German band Kraftwerk, who had their breakthrough hit “Autobahn” in 1974.

Two works from 1980, the cardboard relief “\$”, a motorway, lined with plastic toy cars, looped into a dollar sign, and a grisaille painting “Gothic Crap”, where spaghetti junctions spiral into the patterns of a gothic cathedral, mark the start of Bayrle’s obsession with the Autobahn as motif and symbol. Structuralist ideas – that human thought and perception are conditioned by relationships to overarching social/intellectual structures – coalesce here with Bayrle’s weaving heritage. The 21st-century resonance is of being overwhelmed by traffic on the information superhighway: images and ideas flowing past as incessantly as cars on a motorway.

Among many intricately woven models of interlocking Autobahn sections is “Barefoot Doctor” (2004), where a silkscreen print of a Chinese doctor sent to work in the fields under Mao is superimposed with a cardboard/wooden motorway grid – emblem of how Chinese resilience has created today’s economic miracle. Alongside, dangling from Baltic’s ceiling, is the enormous pasteboard and wood “Sars Formation” (2005), shaped like the molecule of the virus.

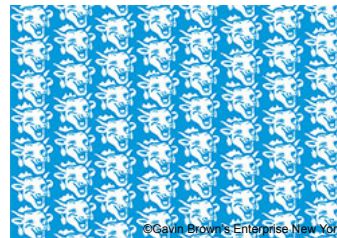
Are we germs or giants? Is Bayrle pessimist or optimist? I asked him at the show’s opening. “49 to 51 per cent, which makes it all right,” he replied. In the video “Motorway Junction” (2006), a gothic crucifix hangs over and merges with a motorway. Bayrle questions the dangerous power of belief but his oeuvre is that of a believer – in change and resistance, which, he reckons, “is something that cannot be articulated in a straightforward manner ... because you will be destroyed immediately”.

Instead, as Baltic elegantly demonstrates, by harnessing fantasy to the conceptual, Bayrle constructs an unexpected Gulliver environment of visual satire and protest. “The world,” he says, “is not a fixed image. It is always necessary to blow up the universe of things, or to reduce it to a grain of sand or into molecule clouds, in order to reconstruct it in the imagination.”

Thomas Bayrle: All-in-One’, Baltic, Gateshead, to February 23 balticmill.com



‘One or the other’ (1970)



‘La Vache qui rit’ (1967)