

Mark Prince, "Berlin: André Butzer," **Art in America**, September 2009, pp. 160-161

André Butzer:
Untitled, 2008, oil on
canvas, 8½ by 11
feet; at Max Hetzler.



BERLIN
ANDRÉ BUTZER
MAX HETZLER AND
GUIDO W. BAUDACH

André Butzer once remarked in an interview that the profession of art critic should be eradicated, and his work appropriately defies interpretation with a furious apocalyptic energy. Painting can be image, motif, referent and narrative, but it is also always a flat surface on which dumb material has accreted. Butzer takes painting as a manual application of viscous oil paint to an extreme, but his work contradicts any categorical position. This is no Rymanesque exploration of process: it is always animated by the idea of the portrait. Around 2004, the disquieting cartoon figures that formed the resident consciousness of his work—with their buttoned-up greatcoats, barrel chests, floppy ears and huge, fearful eyes—were joined by monochrome dark gray fields of densely worked impasto, as though, like an author switching from a third- to first-person narrative, the painter's manipulation of material had taken on the onus of what was being portrayed. There was a sense of moving closer in.

Two series of paintings, on view concurrently in different commercial galleries, plot two steps on a line that might run from those earlier gray monochromes to a full-

color maximalist abstraction. At Hetzler, Butzer doodles sparse patterns of candy color, squeezed straight from the tube, over canvases covered with an overall background of gray paint. Across town, in Baudach's massive loft space, painterly gesture has overwhelmed the surfaces in a sensuous tangle of color, the daylight from the high windows exposing the tactile materiality of the paint like sculptural relief. The paintings at Hetzler have a skeletal, diagrammatic quality that is fleshed out in the rich pictorial fields at Baudach. In this sense, the two venues represented a journey from the meta-abstract to the contingencies of perception, which reflects the dialectical tensions that run throughout Butzer's paintings.

There is an element of parody at work. In the Hetzler show, the linear trails of oil tend toward generic forms of geometric abstraction—circle, triangle, right angle—while the thrown globules of white and the interjections of rapid brushwork, commonplaces of action painting, are isolated on the gray grounds as though between quotation marks. Similarly, at Baudach, the uniform density of painterly incident might be read as a cynically virtuoso cataloguing of expressionistic method. And yet Butzer refuses to be pinned down, either to macho preening or to its conversion to critical irony. His geometric forms are made to buckle and wobble into specificity. Clichés, which a more circumspect artist would maneuver around on tiptoe, are fuel for an all-consuming irreverent humor. The paintings are performative, with Butzer's persona as mark-maker

assuming the grotesque character that his absurdist figures previously embodied. With their soberly gray backgrounds gradually overwhelmed by riotous activity, they are shameless affirmations.

—Mark Prince