

as a closed vitrine, and the space within can only be seen from the outside. Opposite each other on the building's two longer sides are two square windows; this is another symmetry that seems to interrupt the building's narrow, almost tubular shape, rendering the interior more visible. The accessible part, entered by a ramp, is minimally furnished, implying that it might be habitable. The inaccessible, vitrine-like part of the house, by contrast, hosts a large stone, similar to the ones that were scattered around outside. The result reflects a transposition of interior and exterior, of natural space and the artificial zone of domesticity, which here gained in sensuous immediacy: The reflective quality of the panes of glass might have made one briefly uncertain as to whether the stone was a reflection or actually inside.

The furnishings in the stylized living area are reduced to the most rudimentary: a kind of camp bed, a translucent yellow curtain, and a lamp (*cul-de-sac*, 2017) designed by the artist and made using a 3-D printer. Other modern conveniences have been assigned to the realm of language: *replaced by words (shower)*, *replaced by words (toilet)*, and *replaced by words (sink)*, all 2017, incorporate short quotations from Ballard's writings, each addressing the object in question, such as, in the first case, WHITE TEETH, LIPS DRAWN IN A SLEEPING SMILE. THE SHOWER RAN IN THE BATHROOM, A SOFT SPATTER LIKE DISTANT RAIN. Flavien had the texts stencil-cut in PVC foil and polypropylene plastic using a font resembling handwriting and hung them in place of the things themselves, thereby creating imaginary objects of a kind by evoking literary image. In this exhibition, everything was both an object and an image of itself, released from its own essence and dissolved into the poetry of space.

—Jens Asthoff

Translated from German by Nathaniel McBride.

Norbert Bisky

KÖNIG GALERIE

Built in a Brutalist style, the former Saint Agnes Church that is now the König Galerie is anything but a neutral gallery space. The hanging paintings on the high walls of its nave can easily, perhaps too easily, bring out any spiritual aspirations the works may harbor. Norbert Bisky wisely—and humbly, even if some of his paintings appear to be the opposite of modest—chose to resist this temptation. The twenty-six works in this show, “Trilemma,” were presented on three double-sided walls of increasing size, designed for the occasion and placed zigzag in the nave. This arrangement seemed to support a growing tension building up toward a big, explosive painting on the third wall. The first work one encountered on entering, *Trilemma Processor*, 2017, shows a young man rubbing his eye—seemingly under pressure, if not overwhelmed. He is surrounded by geometric symbols, including one that resembles the ubiquitous spinning wheel that indicates a web page loading.

The show's title refers to unsolvable matters, equations containing three irreconcilable elements. The artist wanted to touch on the religious idea of the trinity evoked by the gallery's location but replace it with the secular idea of a trilemma—while retaining the question of what or who we can believe in. A work named *Trilemma*, 2017, shows a young man turned away, facing a kind of logo consisting of three overlapping ovals. The symbol floats between the figure in the foreground and dark outer space in the back. From the heart of the trilemma symbol erupts a passage depicting fire, people pressed together, an explosion—catastrophe.

Bisky presents us with conflict, violence, and swirling threat. The images here may not have referred to specific events, yet they reminded

us of moments of terror that have become part of our lives. *Big Trilemma*, 2017, shows figures in free fall between buildings—a scene that, since 9/11, has become part of our collective memory. But in the painting it is unclear whether the people are victims of an attack, or whether at least some of them, well-dressed, are floating in a state of bliss. This ambiguity is typical of Bisky. The world is never all good or bad, and there is always a variable in the equation that can't be solved.

In one of the show's more intimate moments, eighteen small works on paper from between 2015 and 2017 hung salon style on a single wall. One of these, *Madrugada*, 2017, depicted a woman who has hung herself; her head is bowed, her hair covering her face, expressing surrender. This smaller piece—sad, sober, and executed with compassion—counterbalanced the explosive in-your-face effect of some of the larger works on canvas.

To hint at the violence that we feel threatened by nowadays is not an easy thing for an artist. Doing so can easily feel disrespectful to the people who have suffered in such attacks; sometimes it simply seems too rhetorical or gratuitous. There are some painters, though, who manage it. Among them are Michaël Borremans, who has incorporated gestures of religious fanaticism into his works, and Bisky, who has his own bright and flat way of painting, driven by a skeptical, observant appreciation of the world. His colorful, dynamic works seem to celebrate life even while depicting horrible things. An act of terror can happen out of the blue, anytime—and that immediacy comes across in his art. It is all happening right now, in the cruelty and contradictions of existence. The worrying part about this exhibition was that the scenes of destruction depicted in the paintings are probably not as exaggerated as they seem—they are all too real.

—Jurriaan Benschop

ZÜRICH

John Russell

KUNSTHALLE ZÜRICH

It might take unnerving times such as these for John Russell's apocalyptic imageboard expressionism not only to shine in all its acute garishness but also to finally stick and enter the canon. That would explain the critical reception of the artist's institutional debut outside Great Britain—which was organized by Daniel Baumann—as being somehow “spectacular” if not patently awesome. “Strength through joy(zzzz)!” one might add to this, *joy* being not exactly connoted neofascistically in this instance, but simply echoing the jovial everyday salutation “Joyz” used by the mutated but mostly contented characters who inhabit the barely futuristic future depicted in Russell's video *Doggo*, 2017, which premiered as part of the exhibition of the same title. That's not to say that Russell's sextet of humongous vinyl prints and the scenarios they contain aren't fascistic in an upended, Bataillean register. Russell has previously referred to this maxed-out anti-aesthetic as “morphogenesis,”



Norbert Bisky, *Trilemma*, 2017, oil on canvas, 94½ × 74¾".

a style that conjures a paradoxical Silicon Valley as personified by boy-blood plasma junkie Peter Thiel. The artist's methodology and the disemboweled cyber-kitsch he makes can be viewed as an untimely sublation of the empty and extortionate sublime of capital's slick image planes into a hard-lit base materialism. This denial is updated by the sheer infinite procrastinations offered by Adobe Creative Suite to anyone wanting to revivify such abject classics as flies, toads, bodily fluids, limbs, and all kinds of dumb and ugly critters and composite freaks that fester on the digitally printed tableaux, such as *Those were insects that were their eyes II*, 2017, or on the phosphorescent acid-donut-sinkhole *Leech*, 2016. (The predicament of scholarly bad-boy art here, of course, still is that the "real" images of war zones out there will always be more fucked up and "deplorable," i.e., regrettably more affective and hence momentous, discursively as much as physically.)

Russell's art conceives of occidental civilization not simply as anti-humanistic but as farcically doomed. Consequently, the sorry society of the spectacle it engenders is evocative here and there of Bosch superimposed onto Turner-esque vistas, with a whiff of eternally bad-bad Dalí, all of it sprinkled with 4chan's /b/ board folk art. Russell's towering DIY compositions may enter or already live as jaw-droppingly ugly art that adds acquired tastelessness to some even flashier penthouse in Miami, thereby contrasting with the more explicitly low production value of the video on view. In form true to Cool Britannia criticality—i.e., the art of the utmost mundanely pathetic—the characters in *Doggo* are not so much mutants as Aesopian caricatures of certain types all too familiar from the regularity offices staffed by the aspiring authorities who are out to assist, irritate, and devitalize you. Characters appear as awkward archetypes: a dick-nosed monkey as an offishly mistrustful institutional warden; a suicidal retiree turned domestic terrorist as a frazzled and frowsy snow bunny named Prysism Lee. *Neuromancer* (1984) meets *East Enders* (1985–); alien algorithmic landscapes are swapped for a dismal London suburbia of crappy architecture, dispiriting hallways, and rank pubs. The tragicomedy of civic decay and class war is pasted over by crackbrained advertising and anodyne distractions, all encapsulated in the licorice mascot on the print *Bernie Bassett Says Death is Coming*, 2017, which greeted the viewer at the entrance to the show. Saving the day and probably many from death by Prysism's bomb plot is a rugged and pious mastiff bloke (or tomboy?)—equipped with tentacled fingers, a lady's coat, and a 1920s flapper headdress that must have been picked up at a charity shop—who copes with the nearing death of his partner, whom he lays to rest in the closing scene, to the strains of Johann Sebastian Bach and Charles Gounod's "Ave Maria." "Humorous salvation!" exults a fly-masked protagonist at some point, while an end of this stasis remains out of sight.

—Daniel Horn

Shirana Shahbazi

PETER KILCHMANN

At first sight, this latest exhibition of Shirana Shahbazi's photography seemed to present merely a highly polished version of the eclectic screen aesthetic that characterizes a lot of contemporary photography. Her work might appear to allude to 1960s Op art, psychedelia, found photography, and documentary, all laid out in a manner so clean as to seem forensic. But a second, slower take showed that there is no system of reference at the center of her work. Not only is the subject matter of her photography somehow incidental, but so are any apparent historical citations. For Shahbazi, photography is an optical art, not an information science—more *photo*, less *graph*. Her photographs are not images (of what is not there); they are not even commentaries on images—rather they are *things*, the mirror polish of their aluminum frames only serving to affirm this reading. Shahbazi's most recent photographs are, above all else, constructed, as unfit for the purposes of representation as the proudest abstraction.

This refusal pushes further one dimension of Shahbazi's work that was already palpable in her 2014 exhibition "Monstera," curated by Fabrice Stroun and Tenzing Barshee at the Kunsthalle Bern. There, she still worked with easily recognized figures, objects, and forms, but with a crispness that drew attention to photography as a studio practice. Precision in photography can lend the work a kind of irony, either by showing the object as so real that the photographic process upstages the thing depicted, or by invoking the conventions of advertising photography, in which the effort put into realism is directly proportional to the required degree of deceit.

Shahbazi's new works feature geometric shapes captured in polished mirrors, they are liquid skeins of color, or figurative forms at play. Some have been taken from constructions made in the studio, using simple contrasting patterns and highly polished mirrors. When recognizable human figures do appear (such as the small girl walking away in *Mädchen laufend 01* [Running Girl], 2017), Shahbazi reminds us that we are



Shirana Shahbazi, *Raum-Streifen-01 (Room-Stripes-01)*, 2017, C-print, 23 7/8 × 19 1/8".



John Russell, *Those were insects that were their eyes II*, 2017, backlit inkjet print on vinyl, 10' 10 3/4" × 55' 9 3/4". Photo: Annik Wetter.