

INTERVIEWS

MONIKA BAER

Monika Baer discusses her debut solo exhibition in a US museum

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View of "Monika Baer," 2013.

Monika Baer lives and works in Berlin. Her first US museum solo exhibition runs through January 26, 2014, at the Art Institute of Chicago. The show includes nearly thirty paintings spanning the past twenty-some years of Baer's career, from 1990 to 2013. The exhibition travels to the Williams College Museum of Art in 2014.

I **USUALLY** think about my work in terms of themes and nearly all of my paintings are made in series. Most of the larger ones are a series of four, though I maybe only need three or five and sometimes it's more, as in the so-called "Breast" paintings—of them there are quite a lot. I've been working this way since the 1980s. I'm dealing with small changes within a set frame. I tend to think of these kinds of works cinematically. In this exhibition, which mostly displays singular paintings rather than entire groups, each work stands for a series of works, or frames, which are invisibly behind them.

It's as though a painting could be dismantled and put together again, like there are parts of possible paintings moving through them all. New formal elements come in and others get shed. It's a sort of machinery. Sometimes the painting may look rather pathetic or exalted, but in time that's taken apart again and put together again in another often opposing way. It's a process: from meat to metal, from meat to money, from coins to chains, from chains to glass, from ashes and then back to paint again. Here come the playing cards. What's the little keyhole doing? I employ very common symbols that vulgarize the notion of the high-artness of painting.

I want the pink paintings to be seductive. I want the paint not to be descriptive, but to be the subject of the painting itself. An untitled canvas from 2012 is built up by very pink and creamy paint, like strawberry cream, which is applied thickly, leaving gaps. You want to put a finger into it. You know that kind of cream that you want to touch? At the bottom of the painting there's a little keyhole, a black keyhole of paint right on top of all this, and for me the keyhole slaps that painting out of a region of serious elegance. It's a loaded symbol. It functions through being a cliché, or having the potential of cliché. The representational element I put in a painting—spiderwebs or coins—is able to de-class the painting, or pull it down, which is something I want. I mean, I'm not going to trash it; I just often want this component in a painting.

The real perversity occurs when it's painted in a certain way. To paint these chains is such a drag. I'm not good at painting chains and I have no method with which to paint them, no formula to follow. So I'm actually laboring over each link. The process has a fetishistic aspect—to want to give the depicted object that kind of intense attention.

My interest in constructing scenarios—be it in the studio or in a painting—is about configurations, often as symbolic or metaphoric confined spaces. Usually there's a getaway or an escape painting where things break down or fall apart. That's what I mean about putting together and dismantling. It's all set together in a certain way and then it falls apart, then new elements come in; then it's set together in another mode. It's like trying out different ways of how a painting could be, how it could really be.

— *As told to Jason Foumberg*