

Cay Bahnmiller

Galerie Barbara Weiss Trautwein & Herleth, Berlin 17 February – 15 April

Cay Bahnmiller didn't make it easy on anyone, herself included. The Michigan-born artist, who died in 2007 in her early fifties, apparently shut down one of her solo shows on its opening day, and she evidently had problems finishing her works, for all that indecision is what made them good. The 30-plus wall-based works in this show – small, usually painted onto layered collages of found printed material, frequently undated – are less paintings than emotive encrustations: testaments to second (and third and fourth) thoughts and abundant inner disquiet. *Untitled* (undated), which dangles casually from a nail, seemingly rewinds to her childhood: worked into its bristling surface are vintage colour illustrations of children dancing by the seaside, torn-out biro drawings of houses and pages of text ripped from books (sample text: 'I could not keep your hands in my own...'), all tied together by dark, uneasy daubs of paint. The whole suggests an unreclaimable and fragmentary

past, while a scrawled-upon scrap of paper clothes-pegged to the leftward edge suggests Bahnmiller was grounding herself in an outsider position: 'Sucksess', it reads, quoting Bob Dylan.

Bahnmiller spent her working life in Detroit, and the former industrial city's rusting landscape found analogues in her curled-edge, decrepit aesthetic. But there's a strongly personal sense in the work, thanks to her working consistently on old illustrations, restaurant menus, black-and-white photographs, etc, that things were better before: maybe in Germany and Argentina, where she spent some of her childhood, and undoubtedly before 1993, when the handout informs us, she suffered a violent assault that made her work more inward-looking. That grim biographical fact shadows works like 1997's *Untitled*, which features slashing blue and black paint strokes – some of which resolve into the artist's own Germanic surname, like a reassertion of selfhood – over

an ancient, yellowed, crumpled map of the city of Heidelberg.

Mostly, Bahnmiller comes over as both fiercely determined and not made for success, or at least not for production-line practice. One work, titled *Artist's Book* (c. 2003), is an antique book of modernist paintings, open at a page-spread, and features an exhibition invite of hers roughly taped over a Matisse reproduction; another book, of the same title and date, sits next to it, closed, the word 'NEIN' handpainted on its cover. 'The final construction and process often results from negation', she wrote of her art. (No shit.) Of course, our current artworld won't allow an artist to negate themselves forever, particularly when they're not around. One can't necessarily say that this show – piercing as it is, strongly suggesting that its maker was the real deal – is what Bahnmiller would have wanted. But most likely she would have, at least, half-wanted it. *Martin Herbert*



Untitled (La Griglia stationary), no date, acrylic, latex and adhesive tape on paper, 17 × 12 cm. Courtesy the estate of Cay Bahnmiller; Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin; and What Pipeline, Detroit