

Koen van den Broek: Figge von Rosen Galerie

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One of the peculiar qualities of the built environment is that, despite its utter intricacy and diversity, it always contains the germ of pictorial abstraction. Depending on viewing angle, proximity, or clarity, images of buildings and streets can advance the abstract qualities of their inherent surfaces, structures, grids, and patterns. Thus the ubiquity of architecture and the urban landscape as both an artistic subject and a visual source for both painting and photography.

For about a decade, Belgian artist Koen van den Broek has rigorously taken up the challenge posed by this phenomenon. The starting point for his paintings is a vast personal archive of photographs taken during his many trips through North America. Van den Broek does not picture the city as a lived entity but as a material fact, devoid of human presence. Furthermore, he looks not so much around as downward: to the surface of the street and to its many features, both functional and formal, such as curbs, borders, gutters, pavement, and cracks. All of these elements make up the vast infrastructure for human traffic, which, whether experienced from afar or up close, has a distinct graphical nature. This has been the subject of van den Broek's expressive painting since the late 1990s. The four recent works that the artist presented in the lower space at the back of Figge von Rosen continue to exemplify the modes in which van den Broek has worked, from realistic depiction (Junction [peddles], 2007) and perspectival vista (Hillsboro #1 and Hillsboro #2, 2008) to abstract composition (Melrose Ave #3, 2008). They set up an enthralling play between realism and abstraction, between distinct depictions of real locales and formal compositions of lines and planes, as images alternately seem to emerge or to recede back into abstraction.

But the front of the gallery contained twelve works that stem from a radically new turn within the artist's practice. Van den Broek did not paint these works after his photographs of urban realities, but after images that resulted from a joint project with the American artist John Baldessari. The project, which is being shown this fall at the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht, consists of painterly interventions by van den Broek in a series of photographs (mostly of film sets) selected by Baldessari. Van den Broek reinserted this experiment within his habitual painterly practice. He probed the pictorial nature of the collaboratively produced works, yet he did not, in fact, repeat his partner's celebrated strategy of blotting out certain parts of the photographs. Instead, van den Broek frankly pasted his own formal repertoire of motifs and shapes upon them. The ensuing interplay between photographic image and painterly mark makes for a series of vivid and colorful compositions--with Base, 2008, Office, 2008, and Two Rockets, 2008, as undeniable highlights--and generates an intricate back-and-forth movement between realism and abstraction, all the more so as these have not been painted after photographs of real spaces but after fabricated images. They demonstrate that our reality is nothing but an alibi for the artificial reality embodied by every artwork.