

ARTFORUM

Eberhard Havekost

ANTON KERN GALLERY

The slick, sinister paintings of Eberhard Havekost have begun to show their age, which is a wonderful thing, since they now help put the present in sharper relief. Born in Germany and based between Düsseldorf and Berlin, Havekost has shown regularly in New York and in Europe since the late 1990s. The twenty-five works in this exhibition, his first in New York since 2012, took us on a languid tour of the postindustrial world. The thematic constellation was compelling but also familiar: rusted factory ruins, muted signification; objects coming into focus, noise resolving as information; bar codes and screens; destruction and consumption; the mediation of reality and representation's abyssal depths.

Havekost's limited palette, clean brushwork, and technique of painting from found images demonstrate his indebtedness to Gerhard Richter. His paintings plead for a kind of forensic inspection, asking us to unlock hidden truths about our culture, society, and phantasmagoric image-world. Havekost's penchant for quasi-photographic cropping is particularly evident in the tightly framed *Begehren*, B15, 2015, which has the dimensions of a billboard. It depicts a model's pink, lipstick-besmirched lips, just barely parted—the sine qua non of commodified desire. But the machinery of pleasure can only lead toward doom, and *Transformers*, B14, 2014, displaying the smashed end of a wrecked BMW, made this destination clear. With an evil Ballardian flourish, the work shows the buoyant seductions of capitalism celebrated in, say, James Rosenquist's *I Love You with My Ford*, 1961, finally consummated in the dark, abstract tangle of a dented grille. Hot.

Many of the artworks on view dabble with abstraction, and they do it in a deadpan, affectless way. *Gegenstand*, B14, 2014, and *Spray*, B13, 2013, are ambiguously representational: Each is the kind of painting that wants us to ask whether we're looking at a generic gestural abstraction or a one-to-one photorealistic rendering of crudely painted industrial sheet metal. In other works, the artist lays on ribbons of color in a thick impasto, not as a form of expression, it seems, but as a performance of painting's own internal distortion, its static and noise. It is this movement between abstraction and representation that led art historian Jordan Kantor to cite Havekost's work as exemplary of the



"Tuymans Effect," a set of painterly practices, typified by the work of Belgian artist Luc Tuymans, that emerged in the late '90s and early '00s and breathed new life into a medium cowed by the legacy of postmodernism. Along with their tendency to draw from photographic sources, the group of artists Kantor named, which also included Wilhelm Sasnal and Magnus Plessen, sought to impart a sense of "incompleteness" to their work, yet they did so not via deskilling, as had, say, Albert Oehlen some ten years earlier, but by shifting, fluidly and expertly, between various pictorial modes and painterly idioms.

Kantor's diagnosis was prescient, of course; today, these artistic approaches are so common as to be banal. Indeed, what really makes Havekost's work show its age, is not its embeddedness in this art-historical moment, but its overall affect of detachment—its hermetic sense of remove. The image his paintings conjure is that of the painter, alone in his studio, watching the world disinterestedly through a television screen. He leans back, observes, and presents us with the enigmas he finds. For many younger artists, it isn't possible to find that kind of distance—the screen is much closer, literally under one's thumb. It pokes and prods and demands attention. It is a window, a portal, and a tactile thing, and information travels both ways. It's hard to stand apart—to coolly, portentously reflect—when you're already lost inside.

—Lloyd Wise