

# frieze

## Eberhard Havekost

*Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany*

Walking through the densely hung galleries of Eberhard Havekost's exhibition 'Harmonie: Paintings 1998–2005', a line from Peter Sellers' deadpan classic *Being There* (1980) kept springing to mind: 'I like to watch.' Although it is perhaps unfair to see the detached realism of Havekost's paintings in the same light as the TV-addicted Sellers character's autistic take on reality, this view was somewhat sanctioned by Havekost's quote in the exhibition catalogue: 'Even what I personally experience is lent distance by assuming the character of media-generated reality.'

The 70-odd paintings collected here display an ongoing concern with the limitations of perception. These may be determined by the paintings' photographic sources (radical cropping, extreme close-up, steep perspectives, evening-out of foreground and background) or by the materiality of the painting itself. (Colours are flat, brushstrokes are even and undifferentiated, surfaces stubbornly refuse to concede any illusionistic depth or account for a variety of textures or the discreteness of adjacent objects.) A painting such as *Kühlregal rot* (Cooling Shelf Red, 2003), one of the first works in the show, is a lesson in perceptual limitations. A section of skyscraper seen from below recedes steeply to the top of the canvas, bordered on one side by a sliver of sky and on the other by an ambiguous dark reflective surface. The steel and glass façade, the screens inside the windows in a liverwurst palette ranging from muddy pink to beige, and the areas beside the building are all rendered with a spatial and textural equivalence. The painting, with its geometric arrangement, veers towards

abstraction, but its shadows and perspectival consistency keep it just about tethered to realistic depiction.

Havekost's brand of realism is clearly about photography's relation to perception as well as depiction. But his translation from photo to canvas involves a suppression, blurring or erasure of specific details and legible visual information. From the earliest works in the show (two pairs of small-scale canvases, *Dresden 1*, 1998, and *Dresden 2*, 1999, showing blank mirrors, computer screens and obscured or cropped-out portraits) to the most recent (based on his road trip through the western USA, culminating in the show's final painting, *Ende*, 2005 – two wordless yellow traffic warning signs attached to a craggy red rock face), curiosity is continually rebuffed by evasion. Faces are turned away, shielded by glasses or goggles, or are shown in such extreme close-up that they become indistinct. Havekost's reluctance to give anything away is clear in *Privat 1* (2001), a series of 18 paintings that ostensibly show details of the artist's domestic environment but are reduced to extreme incidental banality, as if the camera had been pointed absently around the kitchen to use up the shots at the end of a roll. Faced with this relentless banality evocative of nothing beyond its own dreariness, I found myself longing for Wolfgang Tillmans' joyful appreciation of the domestic still life or the charged, *noir*-ish edge of Luc Tuymans' icebox paintings or even a deadpan Gerhard Richter toilet roll. Richter described the process of painting from photographs as being about making the banal 'more than just banal', but the problem with Havekost's paintings is that the banal just becomes more banal.

His project is a strictly analytical one; a rigid insistence on the literalness of the painted surface and refusal to admit a narrative extension beyond the picture frame. Even in his most politically engaged works the drama is played out in terms of the painted surface. *Stage* (2004) is a portrait of an army officer, one side of his face hideously scarred as if physically decorated by the events that garnered the medals adorning his uniform. In *Patchwork* (2005) two soldiers in a tank almost disappear within the camouflage colours that spread across the canvas. Havekost records his surroundings with a determined lack of emotive engagement, producing what he describes as 'documentary images that formulate an optical enquiry rather than describing reality itself'. He likes to watch. Whether the results of this can be engaging on their own terms is another matter.

**Kirsty Bell**



Eberhard  
Havekost  
*Rusty*  
*Landscapes 1/5*  
2004  
Oil on canvas  
140x100 cm