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Dirk Skreber's exhibit at Milwaukee Art Museum captivates with catastrophe

By Mary Louise Schumacher



A crumpled car and steel installation outside the museum is part of the "Currents" series exhibit of the German artist. Credit: Neil Kulas.

What is it that compels us to gawk at mangled cars on the highway or to get glued to cable news after a tsunami or oil spill? What impulse is it that makes us transform sites of suffering like Auschwitz or ground zero into places of tourism?

Are we drawn — seduced even — by calamity? Does looking allow us to glimpse, if at a safe remove, the ultimate and unavoidable unknown: death? Does it bring a thrill or a sense of collective experience into our mundane routines?

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This at times unseemly fascination with the destructive force of things and its complex stew of emotions — awe, revulsion, attraction, curiosity, fear — is a primary subject matter for German artist Dirk Skreber, whose work is on view in the contemporary galleries at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

His large-scale paintings, a disturbingly gorgeous video installation and a sculpture of a crumpled car on the museum grounds are up as part of the museum's longstanding "Currents" series, exhibits meant to showcase relevant and emerging contemporary artists.

Skreber, who lives in Brooklyn and studied at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, offers us a meditation on how we rapidly acclimate to images of disaster, the ways pictures disintegrate and transform before our eyes, visually, conceptually and, perhaps, spiritually.

They are unsettling, filled with contradictions that tug us in opposing directions: the violence and beauty, the velocity and stillness, the hyper-realism and sketchy abstraction, the mangled objects and a pervasive slickness, the intense action and desolate emptiness.

In one painting of a van wrapped around a pole, there is an almost heightened sense of detail in the way the van's roof rips away from its body and leaves a sharp, exposed edge. You can feel the force of the collision in the crumpled nose of the van and the way the back doors are flung open and unhinged. This is where the eye goes.

And yet, depending on how and where you place your attention, the scene begins to dissolve in different ways. There is something oddly false about it all. The pole itself breaks apart into sketchy daubs of browns. Another car sits split apart, as if amputated at the midriff. The landscape is emptied of people and particulars, smoothed out and polished like a car exterior. It subtly reflects everything like a puddle. Strange, tall poles stand in the distance, reminiscent of scenes of Golgotha from the history of art and resonant with the idea of ancillary deaths.

The whole thing seems suspended between a cataclysmic, momentary accident and a decrepit ruin. Not only do the car and the paint break apart, the idea of the painting does, too. This is visual wreckage in more ways than I can number.

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A still from Dirk Skreber's video installation at the Milwaukee Art Museum, showing a slow-motion car crash, is part of an exhibit that plays with the watchability of disaster. Photo courtesy of the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Nearby, in another painting, a lone train car hurtles through a similarly uncanny landscape. Or is it standing dead still? Minute bits of landscape seem to break free from gravity and the stoic calm of the painting and careen in tiny bursts of flung paint across the canvas.

At the center of the gallery are two monumental paintings of a diver swimming anonymously with what we learn from the title is some kind of rapid-fire, antimatter gun. Though some experts say weapons using antimatter are pure myth, the stuff of video games, research into the ultimate weapon has been in the news of late.

One painting is the inverse of the other, with the first in expected blues and the other in a range of hot oranges and yellows. The human figures and would-be weapons seem to be surfacing together like conjoined twins. The second painting reads like a film negative and is a reminder that much of what we know of the world comes from images that are created.

One of the more disconcerting works in the show is a painting of a drone surveying a flood plain. The smooth, windowless aircraft is handsome, like a Nambe vase or Anish Kapoor art object. The landscape below is impossibly pretty, too, its silvery stillness reflecting the pale pinks, lavenders and yellows of the sky. It has all of the gloss of a Vanity Fair ad, and yet this drone embodies the idea of disembodied looking, too.

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As is the case with many of Skreber's works, the vantage point is telling — something akin to the filmic long shot or implying surveillance, an all-seeing perspective. The piece that brought the ideas of this show together, for me, though, is the video of a controlled car crash that, though it took place almost instantly, is slowed down to about 15 minutes before it runs in reverse.

Two silver dots seem to swell within the frame, marked by a hot-white line down the center until we realize we are looking at hubcaps racing toward a metal pole — and us. The black car buckles and curls around the pole, the windshield sails up like a handkerchief caught in the wind and glass is sent floating.

Though the video quickly falls into an abstraction of seemingly weightless and glinting objects, that point of impact remains clear, betrayed by the trajectory of expanding and retreating car parts. The soundscape Skreber created for it is a wall of buried, layered noises including the sounds of his own body and heart.

We lose track of what is we're looking at and get lost in the exquisite beauty of it all. This seems like a metaphor for our time, for the ways we are awed and ultimately injured by the spectacle of things like climate change and war. Can the visual evidence hold our attention any more?

Watching Skreber's video piece is like watching the birth, expansion and collapse of the universe, which only adds to the existential gravitas of the work.

When you go to see this show, be sure to see the installation of postwar German art in an adjoining gallery, including a monumental photograph of an oil rig by Thomas Struth, who also touches on issues of politics, science and art; Andreas Gursky's large-scale image of a hotel lobby; Joseph Beuys' famous felt suit; a large landscape painting by David Schnell that also seems to shed gravity, and one of my favorite pieces in the collection, Anselm Kiefer's "Midgard."

The museum is placing Skreber in the context of these other artists, and they do inform his work.

The "Currents" shows began at the Milwaukee Art Museum in 1982 and have included some of the better artists of recent decades, including Julian Schnabel (1987), Francesco Clemente (1988), Ross Bleckner (1989), Cindy Sherman (1991), Eric Fischl (1991), Louise Bourgeois (1992), Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1993), Damien Hirst (1994), Kiki Smith (1995), Ed Ruscha (1997), Gursky (1998), Rodney Graham (2001), Rachel Harrison (2002), and more recently Isaac Julien and Tara Donovan.

"Currents 36: Dirk Skreber" will be on view at the Milwaukee Art Museum, 700 N. Art Museum Drive, through March 2. For more information: www.mam.org.

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