

Brooklyn Crash

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"It's the twilight zone that interests me about catastrophes. The twilight zone into which everything and everyone involved is plunged. Basically, I am fascinated by the release of energy or the transformation. Catastrophes are often pure physics and anything that leaves such devastating traces behind is a sudden surge of energy which often breaks free in an unpredictable direction. [...]"¹

Somewhere, in an open desert landscape devoid of people: a car tire lies buried in the sand, another spins around in the air like a disc-formed spaceship pursued by a flying twin axle with wheels. Two electric pylons lie prostrate in the background. Their grid structures, resembling mutated organic plant shoots, transform themselves into formative forces of nature. A blue, radiant sky, concealed to the right by a white dust cloud high-lights the scenery.

The painting *Killer Wheels 2.0* (2007, ill. p. 157) demonstrates in an exemplary fashion Dirk Skreber's focus on banal, everyday motives and their appearances in images. The car wheel is shown intact, the tire profile being neither worn-out nor dusty, the shining hubcap together with wheel nut over-accurately polished to a mirror finish. The wheels, torn out of all contexts seem "cropped," in other words, without chassis or body-work, against the highly colored background. They obstruct the view of the landscape, intercept the gaze and then thrust it back onto the picture surface. The forces of their movement penetrate the pictorial space and vigorously recharge it. They possess a highly suggestive effect: punctiliously lifted out of the picture, they almost aggressively avert the observer's view. Much like projectiles, they dissipate the surface of the picture eluding all possible hints at the beginning of a story or an anecdote. However, it is precisely because of this that they acquire such a massive presence.

Dirk Skreber's paintings feed off transformations. He works on the basis of photographic models taken from newspapers or the internet and lures the observer by the dissociation of familiar motifs drawn from the everyday. Whenever the painter makes electric pylons mutate into spiry plants he draws on a hallucinatory ability of "seeing something else" in any random object. This phenomenon of double pictorial imagination, which mixes with a second or anticipates it, not only became the foundation of Salvador Dalí's paranoid-critical method, but also Max Ernst and Sigma Polke were enthused by the incessant metamorphosis of secondary motifs.²

An ambiguous perception similarly characterizes the spinning wheels, which advance to independently functioning parts and, for the viewer, come to represent an immanent threat.³ Through the blow-up technique, the motif of the tires inclines towards the monstrous; their isolation shifts them into a state of alienation, the bizarre, enigmatic, the uncanny. For the viewer, the forcefulness of this pictorial motif touches on a deeply unsettling compositional method: the grotesque, characterized by a balancing act between comic and blood-curdling elements and which discloses itself, for example, in

the "inappropriate" combination of the trivial and the sublime.⁴ At the same time, the representation of the arcane motif of tires contains moments of the absurd and the ridiculous. They recall the flying saucer, in UFOs, apparently steered by a power located somewhere beyond the picture, which lends them an additional mysterious moment. On the other hand, due to their banal form, any awe for the disc-formed flying objects is held within limits – the confrontation with them is given a ridiculous comic aspect.

Both modes of effect, latent threat and comic relief, influence the viewer's perception and reciprocally unfold their destructively directed powers against each other. This ambivalent form of representation and questioning is typical of the ironic character of these pictorial motives. The threatening-comical compound of objects treads a thin line between fascination and repulsion, between caustic wit and horror. Skreber's hybrid and aggressive monster tires are decked out for attack and instruct us in the jimjams. But only for a brief moment: the uncanny then presents itself again, exaggerated for a burlesque-like game, almost in the form of a parody.

Skreber pulls out all the stops in the fulminating large format *Untitled* (2007, ill. p. 158f.), in that he enhances the range of colors, as well as the size and dynamic of the objects to the point of utterly overpowering the viewer. In the background, blazing white flashes of light at the center of a glaring, orange-colored sky suggest an explosion, reminiscent of a terrific natural drama. Whereas the initial association is an atmospheric appearance, the wondrous depiction of the sky in bewitchingly beautiful and perfect artistic coloring appears noticeably uncanny since, from this angle axles and tires shoot out directly towards the observer. When faced with the dimensions, the relation between us and the monumentally appearing wheels, one is reminded of the tradition of the representation of sublime nature which, since the publication of Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, from 1757, has enriched landscape painting with a new aspect.⁵ This happens not without a glint in the eye and certain irony – while we still remain in awe of the overpowering spectacle, the tire phenomena marveled at come threateningly close, indeed, they appear to be steered directly at us, almost wanting to take us into their possession, not only intellectually, as the theory of the sublime would insist, but even physically...

The tire pictures count among Skreber's most recent group of works, which he began working on in 2007. In contrast to his paintings of crashes and flooding portraying the moment directly after the catastrophe, these depict car tires and axles dynamically whirling through the air. What actually happened here? Had a catastrophe really occurred or is it about to take place? In the depictions, all traces of the personal as well as narrative elements are erased; they deny any direct reference to obliteration or destruction. An unambiguous reading would be impossible: the pictures are open, inducing only associations to possible events.

The same is the case in the picture *Art Arfons Facing Unforeseen Problems 1.0* (2007, ill. p. 152 above), which alludes to

the thrice American record holder in land-speed racing who had just died and who, though having suffered eight accidents in over thirty years, always managed to escape with light injuries and wounds. Here, a break between motif and title is discernable, since the painting does not honor what the title has promised but rather undercuts it. The picture alienates a particular way of viewing art, which is directed at mere recognition, at pure recollection. Beyond contents and meanings, painting discloses itself to those capable of experiencing their sensual aspects. And yet, through the associative nexus of theme and picture title, the reference to car racing is maintained.

This group of works can be placed in the tradition of surrealist fancy, though the everyday does reveal itself – commonplace electricity pylons and car tires – in the form of wondrous appearances. However, in contrast to surrealism, this leap into the fantastic is consummated at an ironic level.

Skreber's principle of picture series or variation elucidates the fact that each painting pulls along another one in its wake and that this last, in turn, determines the next. Painting is a vital, dynamic process whereby, with each new picture, further aspects emerge and new angles are put to the test. For the artist, repetition only signifies occasion to fathom pictorial possibilities, why one picture is not enough for him. Hence, the dark red pools of blood which evenly cover the sandy soil in the large format picture *Untitled* (2007, ill. p. 158f.) – like the colored details in the other pictures of this group of works – are also a pretext for introducing contrasting elements into the composition.

In contrast to perspectival spatial constructions, Skreber links the most diverse pictorial motifs by means of the montage principle, which distinguishes itself by canceling the central perspective. Thus, with wheels running next to and against one another, Skreber defines diverse pictorial levels. The succession of single wheels, their positioning within the pictorial space and their spatial attributes show themselves to be contradictory and ambiguous.

In view of his being inundated with the concurrence of wheels drifting apart, the pictorial levels and spatial depths, the viewer sees himself confronted with a barely manageable scenario. And, balancing at this highpoint, the dividing line between the tolerable and the unbearable, there can be found, of course, an outlet and the recognition that, after all, this is only a picture – because the immense dimensions draw the gaze towards the detail. The landscape collapses into single parts, indeed, contradictory degrees of reality; from the even, light sandy soil, the very plastic puddles of blood through to the comic as well as hyper-realistically depicted tires and those dashes of color as barely disguised pools of oil. Here, Skreber's painting unfolds itself brilliantly in the materiality of diverse surfaces, in the well-rounded, gleaming tires, in those threadbare rubber skins, the glittering hubcaps, the accurately formed rims – until the artist presents us once again with their illusionist artificiality by emphasizing the visual breaking edge between surface and depth with single splashes of color. He thus leaves behind a painterly trace, which draws our gaze away from the motif

and once again makes us conscious of what we are actually seeing, namely, a surface covered with paints.

- 1 Dirk Skreber 2004, cited in: "A Still Moment in the Twilight Zone. Dirk Skreber in Interview with Renate Goldmann", in: *It Rocks us so Hard – Ho Ho Ho*, exh. cat. Aspen Art Museum, Aspen; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Cologne 2004, p. 31.
- 2 Cf. Salvador Dalí: "Der Eselskadaver" (1930), in: *Unabhängigkeitserklärung der Phantasie und Erklärung der Rechte des Menschen auf seine Verrücktheit. Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Axel Matthes, Tilbert Diego Stegmann, Munich 1974, p. 131–135.
- 3 A photograph, taken from the internet, showing the failed start of the Formula1 race of 1998, in Spa, and the multiple pile-up which served as inspiration for Skreber's motif of wheels spinning around, whereas the collapsed electricity pylons in newspaper photographs taken in connection with reportage go back to a power failure in the Münsterland region, in November, 2005.
- 4 On the effects of the grotesque, cf. Friedrich Piel, *Die Ornament-Groteske in der italienischen Renaissance. Zu ihrer kategorialen Struktur und Entstehung*, Berlin 1962, p. 44: "In dem Augenblicke, da wir urtheilen wollen, ein Ding sey so, empfinden wir das Gegentheil davon." Cf. Christian W. Thomsen, who emphasizes the simultaneous perception of the attractive and the repulsive, the ridiculous and blood-curdling moments as typifying the effects of the grotesque: Christian W. Thomsen, *Das Groteske im englischen Roman des 18. Jahrhunderts. Erscheinungsformen und Funktionen*, Darmstadt 1974, p. 11–13.
- 5 Cf. on the sublime in Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still et al: Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, London 1975. On the sublime in contemporary art: *The Sublime is Now! Das Erhabene in der zeitgenössischen Kunst*, exh. cat. museum franz gertsch, Burgdorf 2006.