The day after the election of Donald Trump, protesters took to the streets of Oakland, California, wielding a massive white banner with angular, duct-taped lettering reading: ‘Choke on your silver spoon you fucking Nazi’. A photograph of this protest serves as the basis for Wilhelm Sasnal’s arresting painting Untitled (Choke) (2017). In the artist’s hands, the image takes on the graphic slickness of an album cover. Set against a ground of Pepto-Bismol pink, the banner occupies the bulk of the canvas. We see little of the protesters themselves, aside from four fists grasping its corners and the flat silhouettes of their legs below. As with much of Sasnal’s work, his detached, deadpan handling of the image gives the painting an insistent ambiguity, in spite of the caustic antimilitarist text it depicts.

Though none of the other works in Sasnal’s exhibition at Anton Kern are as explicit as Untitled (Choke), the word ‘Nazi’ hangs in the air throughout. Spread across two floors of the gallery’s new Midtown townhouse – located mere blocks from Trump Tower – the exhibition is an elliptical meditation on Western civilisation’s apparent compulsion to repeat the mistakes of the past. At the exhibition’s entrance, one painting depicts the United Nations logo at an oblique angle, with hovering white orbs suggesting the glare of a monitor (UN, 2015). Across the room are three small greyscale portraits of former UN general secretaries, among them the Austrian Kurt Waldheim, who was revealed, after his term ended, to have been complicit in Nazi war-crimes. On the opposite wall, we see two Angela Merkels – one young and smiling (Angela Merkel 1, 2015); the other more recent, furrowing her brow as she stares into the distance (Angela Merkel 2, 2016) – and Marine Le Pen, who Sasnal casts as something like a cinematic ingenue, with a dreamy gaze rendered in an icy blue-grey palette suggestive of a film still (Marine Le Pen, 2012). Upstairs are two paintings of Hillary Clinton, only identifiable because of the titles (Hillary Clinton 1 and 2, both 2016), in which she is viewed from the back as she delivers a speech at a podium. We see only the spotlighted contours of her figure in a darkened auditorium. The source photographs date from Clinton’s tenure as first lady rather than her failed presidential campaign, but in the show’s context the pictures take on a funereal quality.

Interspersed among these political symbols are paintings of unpopulated landscapes, alternately transcendent and banal, which are primarily based upon photographs taken by the artist rather than mass-media imagery. Whereas the portraits are relatively small and uniform, tethering them to their original photographic sources, the landscapes are larger and more eclectic in style; in one, a pile of discarded tyres is framed by streaks of spraypaint; on the next wall, a soaring view of the bright winter sky is punctuated by birds and fluffy clouds. These juxtapositions seem purposefully jarring, toggling between private and public, the world-historical and the everyday. But if the meaning behind Sasnal’s network of images remains elusive, its underlying grammar feels familiar, capturing as it does the disorienting psychical effects of watching catastrophe unfold via a social media feed.  

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