

## Print Article



Wilhelm Sasnal at Anton Kern Gallery, 2010, installation view



Wilhelm Sasnal  
*Hardship 1-4*  
2010  
Anton Kern Gallery



Wilhelm Sasnal  
*Hardship 1-4 (detail)*  
2010  
Anton Kern Gallery



Wilhelm Sasnal  
*Untitled*  
2009  
Anton Kern Gallery



Wilhelm Sasnal  
*Untitled (Scooter)*  
2009  
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## SHADES OF GRAY

### by Robert G. Edelman

When meandering through Chelsea, a show as understated as [Wilhelm Sasnal's](#) at Anton Kern Gallery can be a respite from the clatter and clamor, at least on first encounter. Absorbing or analyzing this work, which the gallery notes is only a selection of paintings made by the artist between 2000 to the present, is another matter.

I saw this exhibition after walking through the [Marlene Dumas](#) show on view around the corner at David Zwirner, so I was in a mindset that was appropriate for Sasnal's enigmatic and allusive paintings. Both artists approach painting with an almost journalistic detachment from their subject, with a sketch-like handling of paint supplying the energy and conviction. In Dumas' case, the subject is most often a mix of cultural, political and historical moments, a documentation of a world that is steeped in custom, tradition and at times, the tragic.

Sasnal, by contrast, displays a more outwardly personal imagery: the paintings in this show tend toward loose renditions of travel and family photos, tinged with a cultural nostalgia. What may set his work apart is that Sasnal's response to each image seems to determine what kind of paint application he uses, whether hard-edge, soft-focus or impasto. This tactile range is apparent in Sasnal's [videos](#) as well, which are posted on YouTube.

Sasnal lives and works in his native Poland, and has much in common in his stylistic quirks with the Leipzig School, in particular the bizarre montage inventions of [Neo Rauch](#) and the depiction of disaffected youth of [Tim Eitel](#), as well as the out-of-focus image blur, grayed-down and scraped surfaces of the representational [Gerhard Richter](#), and [Luc Tuymans](#). However, Sasnal has distinguished his work by its extremely reductive appearance, and the mysterious or often skewed juxtaposition of image and a flatfooted painting style. In any case, the work has hit a nerve in the art world: Sasnal has been exhibited extensively throughout Europe and New York, and his prices at auction have escalated along with the recognition.

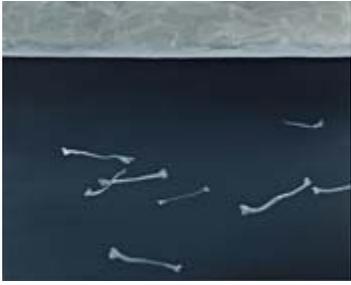
*Hardship 1-4* is a group of four paintings that function like an introduction or prologue to the exhibition. Of the four small works, installed in a row on the wall, the two on the left are almost identical renderings of two faceless people (the artist's wife and son) lounging on a bed. The third and fourth paintings are tonal and roughly textured monochromes, the one entirely gray and then a flesh-toned painting to complete the quartet. These last panels are like test charts for color and texture for the first two images. Taken together, the grouping offers a mood rather than a message; perhaps in this case the artist is offering clues on how to "read" his paintings.

Rest, repose, and the shadow of mortality are underlying themes in several works here, including an untitled image of a rather pale man (is that Marcel Duchamp?) stretched out on the grass beneath a tree, and a figural black motorbike, lying flat on a deserted gray street, in *Untitled (Scooter)*, both from 2009. In another work, a naked man, asleep on a beach towel (perhaps a self-portrait?) is rendered in liquid, tonal grays. As the most realistic image, it's an example of Sasnal's continuing interest in how painting can suggest an intimacy through a dissection of casual photos. Translucent bones float on a dark gray background as if washed up onshore in *Skeleton of Water* (2008), perhaps in homage to anonymous victims of a past tyranny. Though restrained, this is really the only politically charged work in this exhibition.

Three paintings on another gallery wall seem to be grouped as a family album. One shows Sasnal's wife Anka in a pose both relaxed and provocative, her blue swimsuit the only color on the gray beach. In *Untitled (Kacper)*, a miniscule figure, the artist's son, stands alone on a beach, dwarfed by a huge white cloud that the gallery suggests is a "form of a large biomorphic white shape that seems to trigger modernist memories in the viewer." Indeed, it looks like a gigantic, floating [Jean Arp](#) to me, or maybe an empty cartoon bubble from an early [Andy Warhol](#). A tiny painting in between these two, an image of figure standing on a beach, is a sketch of quiet contemplation. One might assume that Sasnal wants to share these moments as fragments of his reality, albeit a manicured one. Overall, this body of Sasnal's work would have fit quite comfortably within the 2010 Whitney Biennial's cool ambiance.

*A Stroboscope* (2008) is perhaps a most telling work in the show, in that it

**Wilhelm Sasnal**  
*Untitled*  
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is an attempt to capture a physical phenomenon in paint simply via a literal depiction of a machine, without the artist's interpretation or intervention. A stroboscope is, of course, a flashing light that can create the illusion of stopping time and changing colors, and can even cause epileptic fits in some people. Just the kind of device that a painter of reductive imagery might find useful: what we see and what is actually there may not be the same thing.

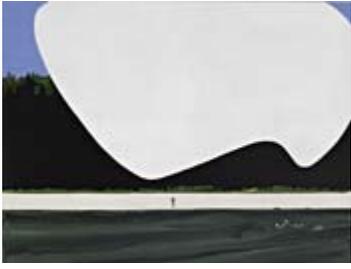
Wilhelm Sasnal, Apr. 8-May 15, 2010, at Anton Kern Gallery, 532 West 20th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011

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*Skeleton of Water*  
2008  
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*Skeleton of Water*  
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**Wilhelm Sasnal**  
*A Stroboscope*  
2007  
Anton Kern Gallery