

MODERN PAINTERS

REVIEWS

NEW YORK

Lothar Hempel

Anton Kern Gallery //
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GERMAN ARTIST Lothar Hempel is certainly fond of ambiguous narratives. His latest exhibition is titled "Suedehead," after a 1971 novel by Richard Allen (which in turn refers to a fashion-savvy 1970s branch of the skinhead movement), and, with one exception, is composed entirely of works from 2011. A dog-eared copy of the book itself—not for sale as an art object—lies on a table that also contains an ornate birdcage and a terrarium filled with pink-red sand. Hempel's practice is one of clues, guesswork and obscurantism. His large sculptures have been compared to stage props, but they can also look like scanned and blown-up magazine pages, in that they have a slickness associated more with the graphic than the handmade. Take *Shoplifter and Shop Window*, in which an artfully degraded image of a Suedehead youth is set before a clean purple, green, and blue backdrop; hanging on a wire nearby is a charm bracelet and an outdated digital watch, as if daring the two-dimensional figure to make his move. *Acid and Iron* presents a similar juxtaposition of flattened imagery and real objects: a photograph, likely sourced from a modern-dance performance still, screened onto a metal cutout, augmented by a lightbulb and surrounded by an assortment of rocks. It's similar to, although not as surreal as, Hempel's 2007 *Nächtliche Begegnung/ Encounter in the night*, in which a mysterious cat-headed woman rides an illuminated bicycle.

Rounding out the new works are five paintings, in acrylic, colored pencil, oil, and pigment ink on aluminium panels, that are reminiscent of Kai Althoff in their treatment of figure and kitsch. In counterpoint to Hempel's expertly produced installation pieces, these de-skilled images could be sourced from a teenager's notebook. They look like fashion sketches—the bare outlines of women in colorful plumage—with brick walls in the background. *Pub Brawl* is perhaps the oddest: a man on his knees before a woman, one hand in her garter belt, the other bearing a spiked pinkie ring; a photographic image of an anonymous young girl embossed with the word WHISKEY. (Despite the title, no one appears to be fighting—yet.)

Hempel's output has a polished finesse that demands respect, even if we're unsure of why exactly. They slip production of the paintings on aluminium abides by a certain a certain standard of sloppiness. As for Hempel's installations and wall pieces, it's clear that this is contemporary art that knows what contemporary art is supposed to look like. Even if the objects were meaningless, they'd still be beautiful objects; the aesthetic conceptualism would still thrill the eye even if the concepts turned out to be so much hot air. This is particularly



Lothar Hempel *Blush*, 2011. Acrylic, oil, colored pencil, and pigment ink on aluminium, 48 x 36 1/2 in.

true for two works—*Plakat (Echo)* and *Plakat (Jump)*—that follow a similarly effective format: modern-dance imagery screened onto steel with Minimalist arrangements of steel rods on either side; plenty of black background space; the whole work displayed in a diamond-shaped frame. It's a handsome arrangement, whether it's explicable or not.

Hempel is an adept enough magician—orchestrating a weird, shimmying dance among birdcages, "bad" painting, and appropriated images—that it's worth following hi,, worth trusting that this is more than an array of intriguing objects with a questionable tie to a British cult novel. Is Allen's book the Rosetta stone that would decipher it all? I haven't read it, nor do I plan to anytime soon—Amazon's Web page for the title promises "guaranteed sex, violence, and no brains"—so I can only guess that its influence is general, more vibe than content. As a free-associative prod for Hempel's creative process, at least, Allen's fiction proves fruitful.

— Scott Indrisek