

Marcel Odenbach at Anton Kern Gallery

Marcel Odenbach: Large-scale Collage
Anton Kern Gallery, New York, NY
May 28 - July 2, 2015

By SPENCER EVERETT, JUL. 2015

In relation to his film work, which often refines the dross of civic participation and the failure of political leadership, German multimedia artist Marcel Odenbach's collage works at Anton Kern Gallery are, when viewed from a distance, an ironization of culture's ability to formalize, frame, and ornament the natural. Viewed holistically, his compositions are rooted in early Modernist archetypes: the fields are populated by Impressionistic gestures that exaggerate the color gradients of foliage in public spaces, in summer light. People seem conspicuously absent here, replaced by the indexes of their earlier presence. But the chain link fences and littered clothing featured in his *Green Zone* series, coupled with perspectives that feel firmly grounded in a sobered, human body, leave us with a view of summer that is the sum of its boredom and malaise, the hollow spaces created by excess time.



Grünfläche 2 (Green Zone 2), 2014, Ink and collage on paper, 74 1/2 x 111 inches

But this is only a view from the present, a first order of business at a glance, of internally-fraught landscapes that threaten to become idyllic to the casual eye. And so, such hollowness becomes the touchstone for the historical assemblage visible on a smaller scale: on closer inspection, these scenes are the result of a painstaking collage process that commits small images of disparate people to the task of creating a macrocosm. In *Grünfläche 1 (Green Zone 1)*, we see through the shrubbery and soiled bed sheets into countless numbers of people and things whose roles are likewise manifold in their implications: tribes of indigenous people, Nazi soldiers, politicians, religious iconography, and various artifacts—I'd like to say relics—of art history conjoin to form the whole.

This process, at first, feels ethically-neutral, relativist, even nihilistic: is any reproduced figure, regardless of his or her role in history, suitable for use in achieving the aesthetic ends of the larger picture plane? Odenbach's work melds the victimizing and the victimized, brutally combining the viewer's otherwise opposed senses of judgment toward the antagonists and lament for the victims, into the same uniform figure of history on its march into the present. What's more, the bits of colored paper streaked across the picture plane—expressive wisps of greens and browns and blues—resemble nothing less than camouflage. But are the people camouflaged into the landscape, or is the sum of their representation itself the camouflage that hides the individual bodies that compose it? Both conditions are performed simultaneously. The face of the present in Odenbach's work is the sum of past events that synthesize into a portrait of our current state, and more exactly, the current state of the viewer as defined by the moment of viewing the work. It's proven here that such a "current state" is necessarily shortsighted.

The handling of medium in all the works in this exhibit is characterized by a near-surgical perfection that threatens to silence the imperfect destinies of those included while also serving as a crucial reminder that their positions are defined by large, systemic forces—historical forces—that threaten to astound the viewer at the expense of eradicating the viewed. Odenbach’s inclusionary process, however, ultimately feels grounded in compassion. The work directly addresses political traumas—most notably those stemming from the Civil Rights Movement—that, in conjunction, are blunted into historical significations of geopolitical tragedy more generally. Atrocities large and small, and all those involved in them, result in images that express, in all their intricacy, a sense of uneasy harmony. To Odenbach’s credit, this harmony feels less like triumph for the artwork than a lament for its objects, and, in light of his use of these people, a lament for their very objectification both here and within the larger sociopolitical framework.



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The clear centerpiece of this exhibition is *Tupac*, a large portrait of Tupac Shakur. Tupac is central by way of its exceptions: not only is it the only portrait in this small show, but more specifically it’s the only work through which the small images of people combine to form not the negation of their presence—something that nods to classical beauty or the natural—but a person, and one whose gaze challenges the viewer with equal parts apprehension and cool confidence. At last, the specters of history are assembled into a face that dares speak for them, a face whose blackness alone is a symbol of subversion within a racist culture.

It’s cliché to mention that an artwork can’t be faithfully reproduced. But in Odenbach’s work there’s the sense that these photographic images, themselves of course reproductions, have arrived at their final resting place: they can hardly exist as thumbnails, and even the photos available on the gallery’s website inevitably betray the work’s essential complexities to such a degree that any reproduction of these images harbors a veiled political critique: introduce these images, these issues, into the larger discourse and they’re lost to the sheer magnitude of their larger shape, to bigger “agendas.” They simply disappear. Unlike the compositional approaches that typically characterize collage practice, the viewer isn’t bombarded by the multitude in Odenbach’s work. However present the multitude may be, its figures don’t reach for the viewer, but wait patiently to be received. It’s as though an unthinking bystander, or anyone confronting the works in reproduction—or perhaps more saliently, a callous citizen or political agent— could simply pass the materials by. After all, they make for a pretty picture, and with enough myopia, a pretty picture is always enough.

A few years ago, MoMA acquired a piece of Odenbach’s similar to the ones in this series, titled *You Can’t See the Forest for the Trees* (2003). This title does more for the tragic irony of the works in this show than the titles provided here: large and majestic, as usual, the forest is never in danger of being overlooked. It’s the trees, in fact, that continue their struggle to be seen. **WM**