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William Steiger: Thrills

By ROBERT C. MORGAN, MAR. 2016

William Steiger, *Cyclone Rollercoaster #2*, 2016, Collage with gouache, glue and found paper, on paper,
Framed: 15 x 19.75 inches (38 x 50 cm)

Having reviewed and written about William Steiger's work during an earlier stage of his career, I am taken by the fact that his subject matter and his point of view appear to uphold a consistency. I am not entirely certain as to what this means by today's standards, but it seems to imply the artist's ability to sustain a certain *ethos*, meaning that he returns again and again to explore and investigate both the visual and conceptual terms that carry these dated architectural and playland entertainment phenomena into the age of the Internet. Therefore, the transition between the Post-Industrial and the Informational Age appears all the more pronounced, if not, deftly poignant in articulating a shift in our consciousness through a painterly means of arbitration.

I go to Hilla and Bernd Bechers' photography to suggest what I believe offers a curious comparison. In the work of the Bechers, there is a similar means of arbitration, poised in a

slightly different way, where the precision of their photographs, consistently employs an overcast sky to avoid shadowing, and a horizon taken at midpoint (using a cheery picker) between the ground and full height of the *Cooling Towers* or the *Gas Tanks*. Often these icons of industry in the twentieth century are placed in an even grid sequence to reveal the similarity of their design. They might be understood as somewhere between documentation and sculpture, which is not unrelated to the work of Steiger.

William Steiger, *New York II (Digger's New Yorker)*, 2016, Oil on linen, 30 x 24 inches (76 x 61 cm)

Still, I would argue, Steiger avoids extreme forms of documentation in favor of another way of working, namely, through a reductive abstract means of decodification. Here one bears witness to paintings, such as *New York I (Digger's New Yorker)* and a three-quarter, backwards view of the sign for *Silvercup Studios*, both oil on linen paintings from 2016. As with the Bechers, Steiger employs precision in every aspect of his work, but instead of repeating the motif in a grid format, we are shown single examples of these block-formed and/or linear structures. There may be variations on a theme, as for example in *Digger's New York* in which he uses a smaller format with various collage elements. These works are shown in separate frames. In recent years, the artist has become more involved with collage techniques that include gouache, glue, and found papers. The precision is maintained in the collages as they carry their own visual affect in terms of the directness by which the structural subject matter is viewed.

William Steiger, *Thrills*, 2016, Collage with gouache, glue, found paper and vintage map, on paper, Framed: 15 x 17.25 inches (38 x 44 cm)

What separates Steiger's paintings and collages from design? He is often confronted with this question. My readymade answer to this would be "the manner in which he *uses* abstraction." Certainly one might say that there is abstraction in design, but this kind of abstraction follows different external rules than the kind of approach Steiger performs. Rather Steiger employs abstraction in the way any real painter does: to pronounce the affect of the painting and to give it feeling – not a defined feeling, but an ambiguous one. Art requires some degree of ambiguity in order to exist as art.

Analyzing the painted signage in the magnificent *Thrills* (2016) or the collage version of *Cyclone Rollercoaster #2* (2016) is evidence enough to suggest that Steiger's awareness of the internal workings of abstract form are what give his work the pulse and excitement that it has. It is a kind of tour-de-force that makes us open our eyes and to re-charge the synaptic connection between the retina and the brain, and thus begin to feel the celebration in this artist's work as something truly exemplary. **WM**