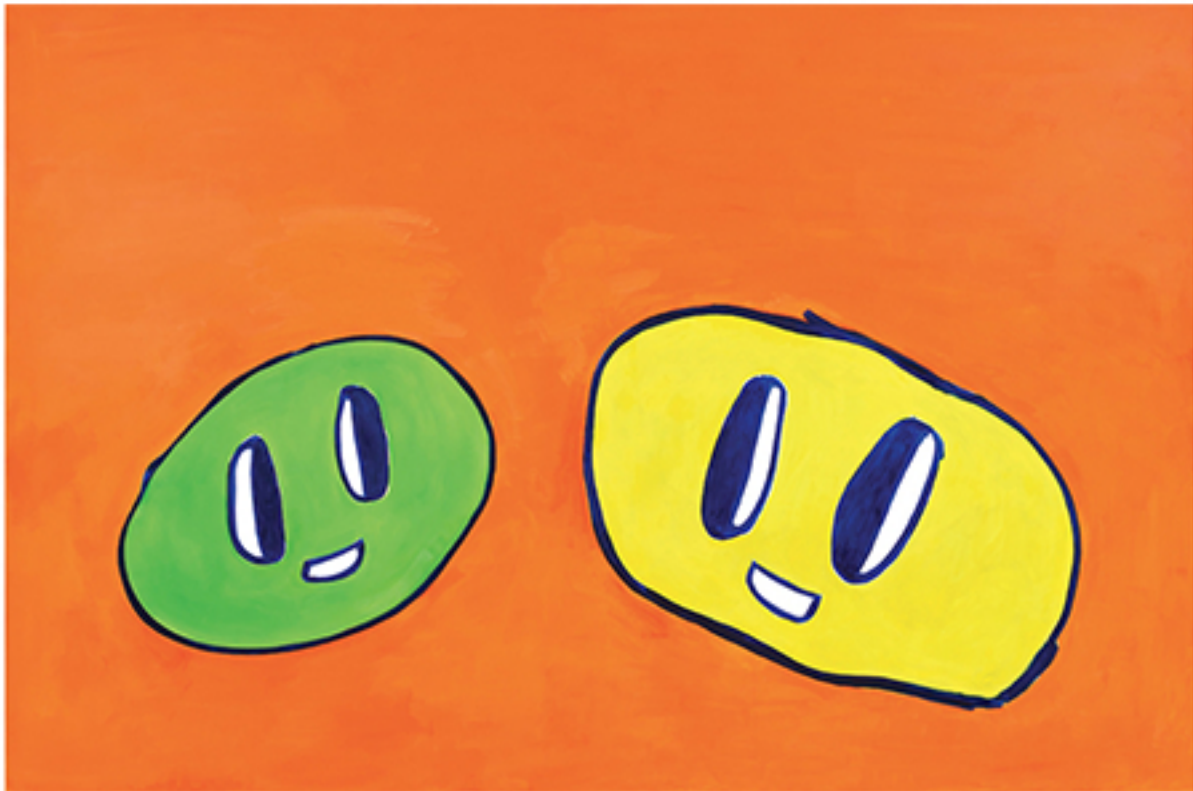


ARTFORUM

April 2018



André Butzer, Untitled (Fruchte), 2016–17, oil on canvas, 9' 6" x 14' 1 1/4".

André Butzer

GALERIE MAX HETZLER

I was lucky to see André Butzer's new paintings on a sunny winter day, with natural light coming in to make visible what is hidden in their black surfaces. There were eight big and nine medium-size dark paintings in Galerie Max Hetzler's Bleibtreustraße location, along with one very large and colorful canvas, a small work on paper executed in colored pencil and crayon, and an artist's book. The dark paintings each have a sort of vertical seam, right of the center, where light seems to come through, sometimes clear, most often faint. Around this so-called Fuge, or gap, brushwork is visible, dark in dark, best seen from the side. Through this painted opening one feels it is actually possible to enter these hermetic paintings; the fissure implies a sense of depth and inner life. At times, it looks like the thin trunk of a sapling in winter, slightly crooked, but there is nothing to confirm that one is looking at a landscape or other recognizable setting. One of the large paintings, Untitled, 2017, contains both blue and brown in black. This work felt especially dynamic and inviting—perhaps thanks to its position next to the window, as the light uncovered layers of color forming the dark painted surface. But does it make sense to focus on individual works like this? This exhibition felt more like the demonstration of an attitude toward painting, a specific phase in the artist's development, than like a presentation of paintings as such. The similarity of the canvases made the selection feel arbitrary; the repetition undermined any sense of urgency.

NINO MIER GALLERY

The second part of the show, at Hetzler's Goethestraße space, offered something different: a selection of fifteen mostly very colorful figurative works dating from 1999 through 2008, along with one new work. Some are dense and intense; they seemed the pictorial equivalent of a person who can't stop talking and keeps free-associating, heedless of whether his interlocutors are still with him. This Butzer is bold, sometimes funny, always excessive. A rare moment of compositional restraint could be found in two paintings that both feature a pair of huge eyes popping out, Friedens-Siemens XII, 2003, and Friedens-Siemens IX, 2001, the latter warm in color, with light coming from behind the eyes: a high note in the show. Butzer's poetry leans toward the painful, and he makes the act of painting seem a mythological enterprise in which figures and forms represent antagonistic life-forces.

What was not visible in this double exhibition was Butzer's work of 2008 to 2016, including the moment of his turn into the dark palette in 2010. The black paintings, of course, signify an allegiance to abstraction, the wish to paint inclusively and abstain from setting a scene. As the artist has pointed out, though, his earlier colorful figuration is also a kind of abstraction. In both cases, his paintings convey an existential condition or a sensibility, rather than a narrative. But the recent works made me wonder if Butzer has painted himself into a corner. What if the black takes over and the seams close further? Is there anything left to say? It seems only a U-turn could get him back on track, permit some contrast or allow more articulation. There was one work in the show that possibly anticipates such a turn (or return): the wide and bright Untitled (Früchte), 2016–17, showing an apple-like face and a pumpkin-like face against an orange background. To execute a silly, cartoonish painting on such a big scale seemed odd. Even though the work on its own did not offer a lot to look at, it brought fresh air into the show. It mocked the seriousness and the search for subtlety in the dark paintings, and left me hoping that it might anticipate a new phase in Butzer's work, a form of figuration that would somehow incorporate the austere sensibility of the artist's reductive abstract works without being limited by it.

—Jurriaan Benschop