

The Saatchi Gallery

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MORGAN FALCONER ON ERIC BAUDELAIRE AT ELIZABETH DEE GALLERY, NEW YORK

For all the riches and rigour that French theory have brought to contemporary art in the past few decades, they have also brought needless complication. Weakling ideas have been given the crutches of clever theories; simple and elegant work marred by weighty commentaries. Eric Baudelaire's new show for Elizabeth Dee certainly sounds like a theory-victim: we're served up with Gilles Deleuze, Samuel Butler, Leonardo da Vinci and 9/11 before we've even got through the press release. Baudelaire is one of France's rising talents - a recipient of the HSBC prize for photography in 2005 - but he sets himself a lot to live up to here.

Surprisingly, after all this wordiness, the exhibition itself is very finely pared down. Its central component is a film, *Sugar Water*, from 2006, which is shot on the platform of a ghost metro station in Paris, Pte. Erehwon (the title borrowing from Samuel Butler's satirical novel which inverts the word Nowhere). A bill poster arrives and begins to post up a display showing a Paris street lined with cars. When that's done, he pastes over it again with another display showing the same street with one of the cars exploding into flames. Then he follows it with another showing the car's charred remains. Then he pastes the whole thing blue and his work is done. History, here, seems to have alternative outcomes, and news of violent events arrives quickly.

History, for Baudelaire, isn't found in the slowly unfolding fabric of the everyday, but rather in the public and private memory of great and violent events, memories which freeze-frame those events into static images. Leonardo da Vinci appears to recommend something like this in his advice to painters on how to paint a historical battle scene, a text that Baudelaire reproduces to accompany the show: da Vinci suggests that the scene be frozen so suddenly that the dust is still hovering in the air above the horse's hooves.

Baudelaire elaborates his ideas further in the series of photographs that accompany the film. In these, some of Paris' typical nineteenth-century buildings are shot at such an oblique angle that they appear impossibly thin - merely facades, perhaps hiding ruins. And across the Plexiglass covers of the photographs he has emblazoned stylised graffiti saying "I Claim," or "I Speak," or "I Hate Ground Zero," or "I Need Ground Zero". Finally, to complete the ensemble, he has papered the walls with a photograph of a highway underpass which, coiled with ivy, is slowly being reclaimed by nature.

Throughout the show, Baudelaire's veiled subtext is the 9/11 attacks. What he says about the imaging of those attacks - how their history has been produced - is very perceptive, as it is true that the images of the collapsing towers - and their spreading dust - have become such hugely over-determined icons that they now function like vast spectacles obscuring politics and causation. He addresses this clearly in the film; in the photographs there is less clarity, though his message seems to be a similar one about how the very image of Paris' streets can stand in for a long history of street fighting and political upheaval. Understood in this sense, we might read the wallpaper as a reminder of how, slow incremental change works to undo the image.

Baudelaire might not have succeeded in explicating Gilles Deleuze in three easy steps, but he has done something much better in presenting some very compacted and haunting conundrums in elegant imagery. And if images could always compact French theory as well as this, we would probably all have a lot more time on our hands.

Morgan Falconer

Eric Baudelaire: Circumambulation
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