

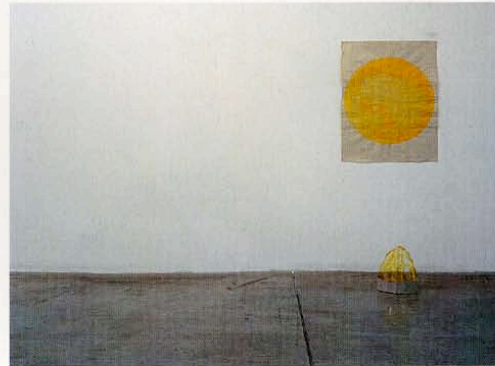
Ian Kiaer

CHRISTIAN RATTEMEYER

LANDSCAPE AND MODEL



IAN KIAER, GREY CLOTH PROJECT: GLASHAUS (*house of glass*), 2005, detail / PROJEKT GRAUES TUCH, GLASHAUS. (ALL PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY, NEW YORK and ALISON JACQUES GALLERY, LONDON)



IAN KIAER, GREY CLOTH PROJECT: GLASHAUS (*house of glass*), 2005, work on paper, cardboard, colored acrylic sheeting / PROJEKT GRAUES TUCH: GLASHAUS, Arbeit auf Papier, Karton, farbige Acryl-Abdeckfolie.

One of the most subtle but striking works at the European biennial Manifesta 3, hosted in 2000 by the Slovenian capital, Ljubljana, was an installation of a small block of foam set in a corner on a three-legged stool. It was topped by an even smaller cardboard cube, vaguely suggesting an architectural model, and flanked by a significantly larger block of foam, about the same height as the stool. Above the ensemble almost in the corner hung a watercolor of a scene by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (c. 1525–1569), or more precisely, a detail from one of Brueghel's works showing a windmill on a rock. BRUEGEL PROJECT/CASA MALAPARTE (1999) by London-based

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artist Ian Kiaer links the isolated placement of Curzio Malaparte's famous villa overlooking a cliff on the coast of Capri with an isolated windmill taken from the background of a Brueghel painting. Architecture and its context in relation to isolated placement as well as the history of landscape painting are inscribed in one of Kiaer's earliest mature works with astonishing poetic economy.

Kiaer often draws from the history of landscape painting and from models of utopian and radical architecture, revealing ways in which they impact on the paradigms of aesthetic contemplation. Vision—the changing models of seeing and being seen, and the underlying philosophical and ideological models of self-imagining and control—could be said to permeate all of Kiaer's work, subtly informing his

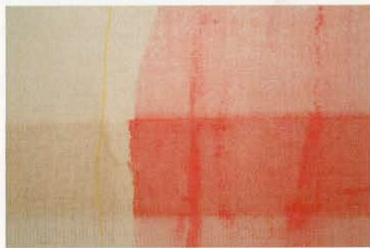


IAN KIAER, installation view Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, 2007, from left to right,
 BRUEGEL PROJECT: SURVIVAL BALLOON, 2007, BRUEGEL PROJECT: YELLOW FILM, 2007 / Installationsansicht, von links
 nach rechts, BRUEGEL PROJEKT: ÜBERLEBENS-BALLON, BRUEGEL PROJEKT: GELBER FILM.

choice of subject matter and installation. The view from above is a constitutive factor in our experience of landscape painting and the architectural model. In both cases, the aerial view is traditionally associated with a sense of completeness, an implied position of totality, and hence an all-knowing and all-seeing perspective shared by the divine creator, the painter, the architect—and the viewer.

The history of the aerial view is closely allied with the development of “landscape” as an aesthetic category, which led to a theoretical and perceptual paradigm shift, liberating man from the yoke of nature and, in turn, remaking nature as an aesthetic subject of contemplation. In his classic 1962 essay on the origins of the aesthetic category of landscape, Joachim Ritter traces the slow unhinging of the reflection of

nature from a unified, philosophical and religious context to one of free aesthetic experience.¹⁾ Ritter’s argument begins with Petrarch’s first ascent of Mont Ventoux—a radical, failed attempt to inscribe nature into philosophy—and culminates in Friedrich Schiller’s reflections on aesthetic education in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1793), where nature, as a cultivated and subordinated landscape, serves as a contemplative arena for free citizens. When Petrarch made his famous ascent of April 26, 1336, for no other reason than his “wish to see what so great an elevation had to offer,”²⁾ he launched a conception of nature as “landscape” that radically redefined the contemplative relationship between man and his environs. That conception led to a new form of philosophical knowledge, based on the perception of



IAN KIAER, BRUEGEL PROJECT: FOND, 2007, acrylic on linen, foil, plaster board, tissue, dimensions variable / BRUEGEL PROJECT: LIEBEVOLL, Acryl auf Leinen, Folie, Gipsplatte, Gewebe, Masse variabel.

IAN KIAER, BRUEGEL PROJECT: FOND, 2007, detail / BRUEGEL PROJECT: LIEBEVOLL, Detail.

actual experience. The aesthetic experience of landscape not only replaced philosophical reasoning as a form of knowledge of the world, but also subsequently challenged the scientific exegesis of the visible world as the mere "study of nature." In conjunction with a new theory of aesthetics that acquired currency around 1800, Schiller considered the con-

templation of nature as landscape (and society's relationship to it) an important indicator of the existence of freedom. Schiller argued that only free citizens—inhabitants of culture, not nature—are able to subject landscape to purposes of visual pleasure and contemplation. The history of landscape painting follows a similar trajectory. When Joachim Patinir defined landscape painting in the 1520s, the aerial view encompassed the entire visible world, villages and fields, seas and mountains, always with a church in the center. Brueghel updated Patinir's cosmology in his kaleidoscopic scenographies that show simultaneous events, as in Icarus' fall and the plowing of a field in the foreground in *LANDSCAPE WITH THE FALL OF ICARUS* (c. 1558). Brueghel's work caused the first cracks in the *globus mundi* which was later to shatter into all the thousands of pieces of individual experience.

Since his participation at Manifesta 3, Kiaer has produced a series of very precise yet open-ended installations that often take as a starting point architectural utopian proposals and projects: *MOSHE SAFDIE PROJECT/SILVER* (2001), *ENDLESS THEATRE PROJECT* (2003), *ENDLESS HOUSE PROJECT* (2004), and *THE GREY CLOTH* (2005). All of these installations bring together diverse elements such as small-scale volumes evocative of architectural models, spheres reminiscent of globes or planets, discrete sculptural elements like a bed frame, cupboard, and overhead projector, and a number of extremely simple, almost monochromatic watercolors and drawings that barely reference the different landscape paintings they are based upon. And in all of them, references to the changing modalities of vision and perception—and a highly articulated sensibility to the extreme changes in scale that these modalities engender—abound. Kiaer's installation *ENDLESS THEATRE PROJECT* takes as a starting point two theater designs: the plans and drawings for Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's *Théâtre de Besançon* (1778–1784),

which involved a radical shift from the viewing boxes of conventional eighteenth-century theater design to uninterrupted, curved amphitheater-like seating; and Friedrich Kiesler's project for a *Raumbühne* (space stage), in which the audience would surround the stage in a full circle. Organized into a series of clustered arrangements—not unlike *tableaux vivants*, if you will—the elements of the installation invoke different aspects and conventions of viewing. One grouping unites different elements by their black color scheme: the found objects of an office swivel chair and a small desktop, the slightly uneven rubber sphere of a soccer ball bladder, a smaller section of a plastic sphere, and an ink drawing of a bird perched on a spherical fruit or blossom, hovering over a curved ground underneath, which echoes the curved horizon of terrain seen from far away. Another grouping consists of a pale watercolor of Ledoux's *Project for an Agricultural Lodge* (1775), a floor assemblage of four square white polystyrene panels with the inside corners trimmed to reveal the negative silhouette of a circle, and a white ping-pong ball casually positioned near the wall. The third, and largest, arrangement is structured around a small architectural model of a semi-circular amphitheater and includes an assemblage of several sheets of asphalt cut out to silhouette the plan of Ledoux's auditorium, a small, simple model of the theater's volume, also constructed of asphalt and tucked in the corner of the room, and an ink-on-canvas drawing after Jean-Antoine Watteau's *LES CHARMES DE LA VIE* (The Music Party, c. 1718). From the latter, he isolated the background and single cello leaning against a chair, but removed all protagonists and architectural surroundings. Watteau's leisurely concert in the park serves as a model for a different kind of spectacle, where observation is as much a matter of being seen. Again, Kiaer merges and confronts two modalities of perception: the fragmented and self-absorbed view that is paradoxically part of an absolutist politics and the reclaimed, unobstructed overview, now part of an early bourgeois ideology of enlightenment.

Most recently, for a solo exhibition at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery in New York in 2007, Kiaer drew on another work by Brueghel, *THE RETURN OF THE HERD* (1565). Brueghel's scene shows shepherds

bringing home a herd of cattle, densely crowded into the left foreground of the work, while a dramatic and expansive vista reveals mountains and a valley stream, forests, fields, and an ominous stormy sky. For *THE BRUEGEL PROJECT* (2007), Kiaer created a series of installations that take on details of Brueghel's composition: a canvas showing the original source image (in pale grey and yellow) with a hole cut into it where one peasant appears; a single white cow in the foreground of a painting that reappears as a small sculpture perched on a semi-circular mound, set on a round wooden disc and, again, peeking out of a found kitchen cabinet set in the middle of a room. The sense of impending doom is translated into a large silver sphere made of shiny insulation plastic hovering over an aggregation of tiny cubes made of the same material: a celestial body that at once seems to protect and threaten a village.

Brueghel's radical pictorial language, based on the equivalence of landscape, villages, and bystanders in depicting an historical event instead of focusing on a central scene, serves as a model for Kiaer's dramatic shifts in perspective, scale, and narrative. Landscape and model, seen close up and from afar at the same time, convey the radical discontinuity between the all-encompassing overview and the complete fragmentation of experience: a contingency of being in the world. These fundamentally modern conditions of perception—individuality, fragmentation, contingency, and self-implication—are the result of a long history of negotiating one's role within the larger natural world. Kiaer's sustained focus on the role landscape played in the shaping of aesthetic contemplation and on the models of visibility its history has engendered, reminds us of the purpose aesthetics once fulfilled: to glimpse one's own freedom in the visual pleasure the world provides and to understand one's contingency vis-à-vis its might.

1) Joachim Ritter, "Landschaft. Zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft," *Subjektivität* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1967), pp. 141–164.

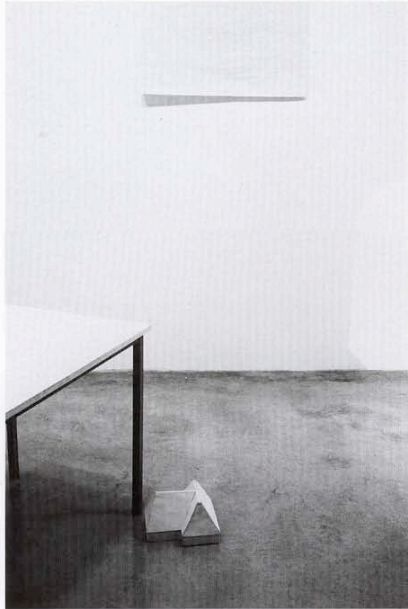
2) James Harvey Robinson, ed. and trans., "Petrarch: The Ascent of Mount Ventoux. To Dionisio da Borgo San Sepolcro" in *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1898), pp. 307–320, p. 308.



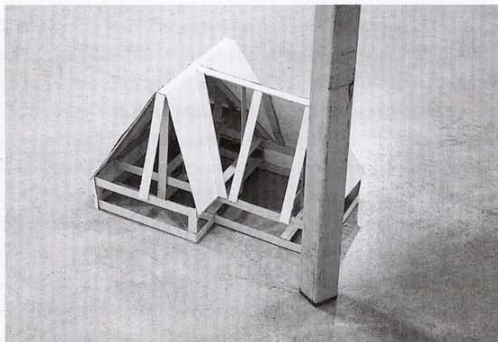
IAN KIAER, BRUEGEL PROJECT: CASA MALAPARTE, 1999,
acrylic on calico, balsa wood, cardboard, foam, mixed media,
dimensions variable / Acryl auf Kaliko, Balsaholz, Karton,
Schaum, verschiedene Materialien, Masse variabel.



IAN KIAER, BRUEGEL PROJECT: CASA MALAPARTE, 1999, details.



IAN KIAER, BRUEGEL PROJECT: HUT, 2007, projector, formica
table, paper, cardboard, acrylic on paper, dimensions variable /
BRUEGEL PROJEKT: HÜTTE, Projektor, Formica-Tisch, Papier,
Karton, Acryl auf Papier, Masse variabel.



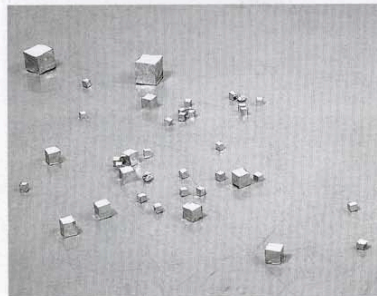
IAN KIAER, BRUEGEL PROJECT: HUT, 2007,
detail / BRUEGEL PROJEKT, HÜTTE.

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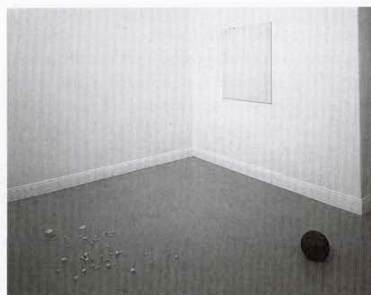
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IAN KIAER, GREY CLOTH PROJECT: GLÄSERNE



IAN KIAER, ENDLESS HOUSE PROJECT: BIRDS, 2004, detail.



IAN KIAER, ENDLESS HOUSE PROJECT: BIRDS, 2004,
rubber football bladder, foil, pencil, watercolor and acrylic on
canvas, emulsion on hardboard / PROJEKT ENDLOSES
HAUS: VÖGEL, Fussballblase, Folie, Bleistift, Wasserfarbe
und Acryl auf Leinwand, Emulsion auf Hartfaserplatte.