

Curating the Contemporary

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Michael Sailstorfer: Clouds and Tears

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Michael Sailstorfer's debut solo show in Mexico City opens with *Wolken Monclova* (2017), an arrangement of truck tyre inner-tubes, composed into nebulous chandeliers, leaning and bumping into each other and blocking out the sun, which typically lightens Monclova's atrium entrance. Smoothly formed through their inflation they bring with them the presence of Berlin's heavy winter skies, infecting Mexico's optimistic attitude with European cynicism. The usually airy vacuum, with its verdant planted wall, is conferred a brooding presence and the threat of rain.

At the opposite end of the show this threat is realised in *Tränen* (2015), a video presentation of a rural German cottage being crushed down to the foundations by a series of giant raindrops. Three at a time they slowly descend onto the roof tiles, timber work and the breeze block exterior. One plummets straight through the roof, another deflect off, tearing a route through the tiles, the third clips the apex falling behind the building. Slowly, over nine minutes, the impacts have a collective result, through the roof, through the timbers, taking down the walls and pummelling the remains.

Filmed in an idealistic village, the house is destroyed by actual gigantic cast teardrops, painted in silvery blue and hoisted into the air by three cranes. The townsfolk created an impromptu festival to watch as Sailstorfer's video piece come to life, drinking beer, eating BBQ and reclining in foldout chairs. In post production, the crane cables were removed, finishing the work with a surrealist tone which recalls René Magritte, the Monty Python animations of Terry Gilliam and the aesthetic of some early computer games. All this is set against a backdrop which recollects the history of European landscape painting, with the sun shifting through the sky from crisp morning blue to golden evening, granting each stage of the destruction a different pictorial tone.

Time and inevitable erosion and collapse are echoed in another work in the show, *Zeit Ist Keine Autobahn-Mexico City* (2017), which sets a BMW tyre spinning, at fluctuating speeds, against a reinforced section of wall. The wheel will, over the run of the exhibition, burn itself out, shedding flakes onto the floor and emitting a faint odour of burnt rubber. Like *Tränen* it is an accelerated experience of time, one which fondly remembers the measure of a life that is a car's odometer, but more grimly talks of our universal final destination.

In regards to these works Sailstorfer talks of the 'transformative presence' which sculpture can have. Both *Zeit Ist Keine Autobahn-Mexico City* and *Tränen* expand beyond their formal limits. One emits an odour, the other emits sounds, the crunch, smash and thump of destruction. Between these two expansions is the central chamber of the gallery, constantly influenced by presences just out of sight.

Here, at the centre of everything, we find a crowd of masked figures focusing together towards the middle, like the audience of a theatre in the round (or in-the-square more exactly). Each face is cast in a metal: iron, aluminium or bronze, yet was originally constructed from more DIY materials, bent cardboard and tape holding it together. At times you can see in the metal, the undulating ridges that are found between layers of cardboard when you rip off a corner.

The psychological phenomenon of pareidolia comes to mind, the perception of something familiar (e.g. a face) where none exists; there is little in the 'masks' that actually suggest they are masks. Some, more than others, feature holes which could be interpreted as eyes or mouths, but as frequently they are without a real correlation to the human form. We confer meaning onto them, not the other way round.

And at the centre of the centre, above it all, sitting on a girder, is *Solarkatze Monclova* (2017), a solar cat, which everything else revolves around, the core of a metaphysical universe denoted in poetic artworks. The cat is a stand-in for Sailstorfer, a contemplative creature who knows more about the origin of these works than the visitors can glean from the press release. It knows about the anecdotal stories from Sailstorfer's childhood that inform material choices in his work, it knows about the experiences that have formed the vocabulary of his art. Appropriately it hides from sight above them, absorbing neon light energy to warm itself.