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Galleries - Kenneth Baker

Fascinating, frightening glimpses of urban density

Kenneth Baker

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German photographer Michael Wolf has lived in Hong Kong for about a decade and has cultivated a unique vision of it.

Ignoring the drama of the city's natural setting, he has turned his camera on the "architecture of density," as he calls it: the high-rises of crushing uniformity built in response to overcrowding in one of the world's most expensive cities.

The heart sinks unless we think of a picture such as "Architecture of Density 13b" (2004) as a manipulated image, which it is not.

In it we face from a considerable distance a battery of concrete apartment facades apparently rising without limit, with no clue how far they extend in any direction.

Did Wolf shoot the picture from the roof of an adjoining building, from the 20th floor, the 50th? No telling.

The buildings in Wolf's pictures, at least those taken by daylight, make human individuality seem like a nostalgic notion or one strictly and punishingly correlated with wealth.

Anyone who has seen Co-op City in the Bronx will know how close to home Wolf's bleak vision comes.

Yet glimmers of life and unpredictability -- the very things that drive bureaucrats nuts - - wink through the veils of apparent pessimism in Wolf's images.

They show in the flickers of drying laundry and in occasional eccentric window treatments.

The incandescent windows that punctuate his recent night pictures give an impression, maybe a false one, of diverse prospects and asynchronous living.

"Night #1" (2004), with its radiant facades, redoubles the daytime likeness of the

window rows to filmstrips. That metaphor alone revives some sense of the open future that the architecture appears to foreclose.

It also reawakens our curiosity about what the numberless people in their boxlike habitats do there. We peer in at peril of recognizing ourselves.

Muller mulls pop music at Meier: Los Angeles artist Dave Muller makes Pop art look old without really trying. Anyone who walks into his small show at Anthony Meier will hear as well as see why.

Robert Rauschenberg once made a piece that incorporated working radios. They gave the work a second foothold in real time and saluted Rauschenberg's friend, composer John Cage, who employed chance-tuned radios as musical instruments.

But Muller, a DJ in his college days, has in effect set up his own ultra- low-power radio station in the Meier exhibition. He has downloaded a huge supply of popular music into an iPod and equipped it with a wireless device that feeds several FM radios placed throughout the gallery.

The system selects the musical material at random from the staggeringly long playlist of records Muller has listened to since the minute 2005 began.

Music playing in a contemporary art gallery generally signals a lack of professionalism on someone's part -- the proprietor's, the staff's. But here it serves as a sort of extrusion of Muller's mental life, somewhat as critics once thought the abstract expressionists' paintings did.

Muller's acrylic on paper paintings, especially those in the front room, hang comfortably in the saturated sound environment.

In "The Sound of Music" (2004-05), Muller has hung eight separately framed vertical paintings on paper in a stepped sequence, hinting at the idea of the musical scale.

Each image describes a pair of LP record albums, seen edge on, as they undoubtedly are in Muller's own collection of more than 3,500. The conjoined names of performers supply acronyms for the syllables of the scale: Miles Davis and Roy Orbison: DO; John Lennon and Albert Ayler: LA, and so on.

The concept does not impress, but Muller's technique does. He renders album spines in acrylic, tremendously magnified, accurately describing all the fraying, cracking and dents that coated cardboard can suffer with age and handling.

His choice of commercial packaging as subject or format has a considerable history behind it, stretching back beyond Andy Warhol to Stuart Davis and American trompe-l'oeil painting. His album portraits resemble most the work of San Francisco artist Steve Wolfe, who faithfully simulates records, not just albums, and out-of-print paperback editions.

The extreme dimensions of Muller's pieces recall abstract exotica by artists such as Barnett Newman (1905-70) and Kenneth Noland. "Various Artists: the nonesuch guide to electronic music (Beaver & Krause)" (2005) measures just over 9 feet long.

But Muller seems to care more about his work's extension, or lack of it, in the reader's memory of the recordings he portrays.

As his installation piece -- a wall-painting projecting the future of pop music as a desert -- suggests, Muller thinks in timelines, with no priority given to art history's.

Michael Wolf: Architecture of Density: Photographs. Through Feb. 26. Robert Koch Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 421-0122, www.kochgallery.com.

Dave Muller: Stars & Bars (American): Works on paper and installation with sound. Through Feb. 18. Anthony Meier Fine Arts, 1969 California St., San Francisco. Hours: Tues.–Fri., 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. (415) 351-1400, www.anthonymeierfinearts.com.

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