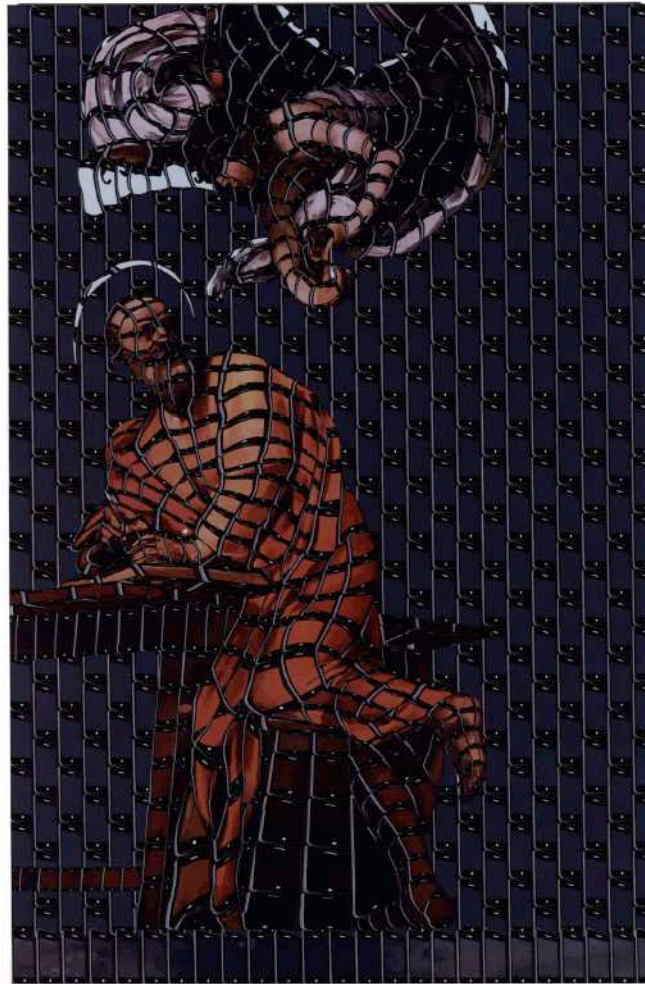


Martin Herbert, "Transcendent Boredom," *ArtReview*, April, 2016

# ArtReview

## Transcendent Boredom

by Martin Herbert



*Caravaggio Meets iPhone*, 2015, acrylic digital print on canvas, 270 × 179 cm.  
Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York & Rome

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

In works that employ extreme repetition as an allegory for human existence, the German artist Thomas Bayrle makes his case for hope and faith



*Galaxy Windscreen Wiper*, 2011, Mao portraits by Andy Warhol, windscreen wiper, sound, Courtesy the artist

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Merzifonlu Maloum, 1989, silkprint on laid paper, 159 x 118 cm.  
Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York & Rome

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*Renault, 2002, cardboard, foam, model cars,  
70 x 60 x 10 cm. Courtesy the artist*



On a rainy morning in Frankfurt, Thomas Bayrle is sitting in his kitchen over espresso and seed-shaped seedcake, variously describing himself as “nothing special”, a “very repetitive artist”, “luckier than I was intelligent”, “a local guy”, “a middle-class boy” and “not revolutionary at all”. The artworld begs to differ, and at seventy-eight Bayrle is enjoying a late-career renaissance. He’s prepping two retrospectives, two more on the horizon. Modish yet credible galleries such as Gavin Brown’s Enterprise in New York, Air de Paris, Barbara Weiss in Berlin, and Dépendance in Brussels represent him. Someone from Sweden just phoned to say that a six-week summer school he co-organised at the 1970 Frankfurt Art Fair was one of the first social artworks. The painter Jana Euler, one of many former students imprinted by Bayrle’s industrious quarter century and more as a professor at Frankfurt’s Städelschule, was here before me, showing Bayrle and his artist/archivist wife, Heike, images from her latest Berlin show. It features a nestled tribute to his work from the mid-1960s, before he embraced an industrialised aesthetic and, as he says cheerfully, “my style stopped”.

More generally, Bayrle’s hybrid of Pop and systems thinking, which has moved freely and inventively through silkscreen, sculpture, film, computer animation and graphics, soundwork and more, is increasingly recognised as anticipating the network- and circulation-centric practice of many young artists (among other things). In 2012 London’s Frieze Art Fair invited him to supply critical decor for sites including its entryway: Bayrle’s acid-bright corridor, floor and walls, decorated with relentlessly repeating red, green and yellow patterns of loafers in a poker-faced elicitation of substantial footfall, looked contemporary and retro at once. When we speak, a booklet before us shows images of a work-in-progress, one of Bayrle’s signature micro/macro ‘super-forms’ given a twenty-first-century upgrade: a section of Caravaggio’s *The Calling of St Matthew* triptych (1599–1600) in Rome composed of thousands of tiny, digitally torqued repetitions of iPhones that each contain on their screen a miniature of the very image into which they accumulate, industrial-poinsettist style.

Bayrle, pondering this work and its overtones of a surrogate belief system, pronounces himself hesitant to jump on any tech bandwagons. Yet he recognises that as an icon of global society the smartphone is “the new car” and points out that this image of a Baroque painting, which countless Chinese tourists have photographed, would invariably be emailed back to China five times over – people operating mechanically and using machines to circulate religion itself, which Bayrle sees as already a globe-girdling machine and, closing the circle, as a projective model of the human organism. This has been a longstanding position in his work: see for example his 2014 installation for the Jesuit Church of St Peter in Cologne, including the screenprint *Madonna Crochet* (1988), a Madonna and Child made up of a humming flow of tiny crucifixes as if charged with perpetual electrical energy, and *Stroke by Stroke: The Wiper* (2012), a half-disassembled Asian windscreen wiper mechanism whose rhythm blends with recorded rosary chanting in Korean. We’re jumping the gun, though. What led up to this point began long ago, circa 1949. Bayrle has told interested parties the details many times before, but it’s a good origin story, plus it changes a little every time. Let’s hear it again (or newly),

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and think about when, how early and from what unlikely combinations of sources art can transpire.

“After the war,” says Bayrle, as the coffee machine gurgles, “we lived in a super-orthodox Catholic village and I was Protestant, and in hot afternoons in summer, when I was about twelve, I sneaked into the church and saw this mountain of old women, all in black, praying the rosary very fast: ‘bababababa...’ I brought it together immediately with the sound of engines, with the repetition of machines. And it’s not just in Catholicism, it’s everywhere, in mantra for example, a kind of world reality. I thought, no I felt, that our existence is built on billions of repetitions, heartbeats, breathing, eating, shitting, anything in the body itself, endless repetitions, to keep us alive. Later, when I apprenticed at a weaver’s, using the Jacquard weaving machine, I just connected that sound and reproduction thing together automatically with this rosary. For me it was absolutely normal.”

During the late 1950s, Bayrle began to hallucinate the sound of the rosary in the sound of the weaving machines as they reached a specific pitch. “I realised I needed to get out,” he says, and went to train as a commercial artist prior to making his Abstract Expressionist-inspired paintings and reactive kinetic works. In 1967, having reached a crossroads, he would be advised by artist Peter Roehr (a key figure in German postwar art who died aged twenty-eight, “more intelligent than he was lucky”) not to forget the lessons of that particular job. Bayrle, who now wanted “neutral production, as if machines could have done it,

fulfilling a plan”, began making the first of the endlessly repeating, initially hand-drawn and silkscreened weaves of ‘super-forms’, from cars (*American Dream* (Chrysler), 1970), to masturbating women (*Onanie*, 1971), to dancers (*Ballerina*, 1972), to the Christian iconography in iPhone pictures, that are his oeuvre’s mechanical heart.

Germany is a country where much of the population works for relatively small, family-run companies, like weavers, and also the Western society that most deeply enshrines the inextricability of the individual and collective, the former serving the latter: with, historically, unquestionably mixed results. When, in 1963, Bayrle first saw American Pop, out went Cy Twombly-influenced canvases such as *Neapol* (1962) and in came motorised reliefs like *Nürnberger Orgie* (1966), its giant Nazi-uniformed arm rising over myriad tiny figures, and *Ajax* (1966), a cleaning-fluid bottle blazoned with regiments of scrubbing housewives. Such early work, made in Bayrle’s late twenties and still potent, reappears in his retrospective in Wiesbaden, *Seniors Ceremony*, which also revives the fine Francophile modernist paintings of his artist-anthropologist father, Alf Bayrle. Collectively it audaciously aligns Nazism, Germany’s hygiene obsession, postwar Germany’s *Wirtschaftswunder* or ‘economic miracle’ and capitalist production under the signs of conformity and cleansing. (According to Bayrle, Ajax’s American manufacturers exploited the German love of cleanliness to the point of creating an iconic hausfrau to sell their product.) Here black humour and calculated exaggeration allowed the artist to approach something his countrymen might not have wanted to face.

After his decision to incorporate the lessons of weaving into his art, however, Bayrle’s work changed, deepened. The industrialised society was still there, but his mixed feelings about it – “always 50/50”, he is fond of saying – became more emphatic. In the variably coloured *Bügelman* (*Coat Hanger Man*, 1970) series of screenprints, a human head

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Documenta 13, Kassel, 2012 (installation view).  
Photo: Nikolaus Schletterer. Courtesy the artist

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Mat, 1966, oil on wood, engine, construction, 145 x 148 x 32 cm. Photo: Axel Schneider.  
Courtesy the artist and Museum für Moderne Kunst MMK, Frankfurt



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is made up of innumerable hangers. "The Bügelman is in a big store selling coats, waiting for the next customer," Bayrle explains, "and after a thousand times of selling the coat, he only sees the hanger. I saw this boringness of the profession, but I didn't comment on it like the left, to fight against it – I saw a sad poetry in it. A pessimistic dream: this is my life, I'm a clerk at the warehouse. It was very important to me not just to criticise. We all suffer, somehow, and have nice days and bad days. For the left, it was not consequent enough." I ask him if he sees, in the same way as counting rosary beads, a kind of transcendent boredom in such a job. He agrees, and augments: "Awfulness is necessary for our comfort. I worked a lot with leftist groups and students and they always said, you are a reactionary, and it's been like that since. You never fit, but I didn't want to fit. I wanted to still give a chance that this so-called capitalism has also some good sides. If it didn't, we wouldn't follow it."

Ironically, if Bayrle's vision didn't work for partisans it may have been because that vision was far larger than politics, which is where works in which the tiny makes up the whole become allegorical, their referential framework stretching across centuries to what Bayrle considers the beginning of our modern condition. "We have many problems, we divide them into smaller ones – I see this in the miracle of our body, thousands of functions all divided under smaller functions. And this miracle, this beauty, is where religion starts: you can fix a lot, but you cannot even make one cell, and we have to recognise that this is a super-miracle." Relatedly, Bayrle – a longstanding fan, he'll later say, of rhythm-and-blues and jazz – recognised that within religion since the Middle Ages a relationship to the heartbeat, rhythm and countless small repetitions is evident. Not just in rosary chanting (and parallel procedures like mantra), and in prayer rituals in monasteries, but in church architecture and even the development of industrialised society, our culture is interlinked to our very bodies, our very molecular structure. From circa 1200, he notes, preshaped stones and a different system of building per se allowed cathedrals to be built in 12 years rather than 120. "Gothic," says Bayrle, "is already the beginning of the conveyor belt."

There are corollaries to this: Bayrle believes, following the thoughts of early-twentieth-century philosopher Wilhelm Worringer, that the mechanistic vigour of the Gothic and everything afterwards is a Northern European 'overcompensation' for not being able to achieve either the deep abstraction of Egyptian culture or the pleasure and joy of life attained by the Ancient Greeks. But since European technological culture became, effectively, that of the world, the upshot is that one can critique the reality we have, but it's inseparable from what we are. It is terrifying on one level (it leads, at worst, to totalitarianism) and mind-bending when we consider the impossible wonder of the human body. It also makes our machined experience, and our religious systems, and all of these aspects connect. As collective life has become more globalised, wired and interconnected, Bayrle has tracked it. During the mid-1970s he began making silkscreen images of highly complex metropolises, cities as machines (see, as one guesses the artist Paul Noble has, the silkscreen *Hauptstadt (Schreibmaschine)* (*Capital City (Typewriter)*, 1976). The road, around this time, becomes Bayrle's go-to cipher for interconnection, perhaps not surprising given the primacy of the autobahn in the German imagination. In works like the *Autobahn-Geflecht (Motorway-Weave)* series of 1979, roads and weaving are literally intertwined, painted strips of ersatz roadway interwoven in an image of a hypertrophic circulation system that nods back to

Bayrle's apprenticeship at the loom. By the five-panel acrylic-on-canvas *Spaghetti alla Carbonara* (1986), the roads are the kind of throbbing tangle known best to the citizens of Birmingham. By *Autobahn* (2003), the roadway has become a sculptural funfair ride that loop-the-loops through the gallery.

While pursuing these thematic, and crucially in terms of how he'd later be seen as being ahead of the game, Bayrle on a technical level was attempting to "have fulfilled what wasn't technically fulfillable – printing on latex and distorting on [photocopy] machines, imitating computers that didn't exist", in order to realise works like *Mercedes Madonna* (1989), in which myriad miniature Mercedes both make up another Madonna and Child and appear to drive endlessly within it. (Around the same time, from 1988 to 91, Bayrle was working with one of his students at the Städelschule on an Atari computer to produce related effects.) Bayrle had been in communist Russia, he remembers, in Novgorod, and had been impressed by the icon paintings, how constructed in their proportions they were – machines to inspire faith – and how consistent: "There was an art that has been strong over hundreds of years and had almost only five-percent freedom. The rest was determined. Like cars: you can have a green one, blue one, but it's the same. The sameness is a standard of solidity, for me, and the individualism is tiny but very important. The one percent" – which, indeed, can be seen in the aspects of manual production within Bayrle's effortful, machinelike aesthetic – "is as valuable as the 99 percent."

It is this, and Bayrle's perpetual desire not to be doctrinaire but to see both sides, that pulsates humanely through his work. The work, that is, of an artist who's seen the Jacquard loom develop, as it famously did via the punch card system that powered it, into the computer and the interlinking Internet; and whose career stretches from the Warhol-predating *Mao* (1966, the leader's face made up of tiny Chinese faces) to *Galaxy Windscreen Wiper* (2012), two of Warhol's Mao images accented by Ford Galaxy windscreen wipers ticking back and forth. Again: the mechanised society, if more humane than Mao's, is now a global reality, his art attests, one of ordered, top-down circulation systems, products replicated like DNA (or, in Bayrle's preferred analogy, like frogspawn), whose systems of meaning like religion are also expansions of our very heartbeats. And even if humans, like cars rolling off a production line, are all very, very similar, the scintilla of individual difference – particularly within strictly regimented societies – is vital.

"I believe", Bayrle says, "in freedom even in dictatorship. It's very explosive, and they fear it very much, so they reduce it, push it inside. And we may be forced in our surveillance world to be pessimistic and say everything is lost. Sure, a lot is lost, but I don't believe it's gone. It is there and can come back. I have hope." Well, yes: Bayrle is, after all, an artist. "Yeah," he laughs. The son of two anthropologists, the man whose Documenta 13 presentation in 2012 – almost half a century after his first – included a thundering aeroplane engine blended with the immemorial sounds of rosary intonation, thinks about it. Then he considerably ties up with a bow everything he's been saying about society, embattled optimism and endurance, perhaps even his own career. "When I had my childhood dreams, I was always flying over a river. A black river, in the night, but I never touched it. I was always just over – so close to the water, but I didn't hit it. I survived," says the local guy. "And it was beautiful." ar

Thomas Bayrle: *Seniors Ceremony is on view at Museum Wiesbaden through 26 June*