

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Searle, Adrian. "Bambi at Birkenau," The Guardian. December 16, 2009.

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## Bambi at Birkenau

Deer eating grass, a pond in a woodland, a distant bell . . . **Adrian Searle** is gripped by Mirosław Bałka's eerie death camp videos

**M**irosław Bałka stood in the middle of the yard where they used to take the roll-call at Majdanek concentration camp - and span, video camera in hand. His footage sweeps round four screens, one on each wall: the wooden barracks, the bleached blank sky, the careening horizon, the snow, telegraph wires and trees. But it's the blackness of the barracks rushing past that matter. It is like being too close to the edge of the platform when a train goes by. The whole thing has an awful delirium.

Bałka is best known as a sculptor, but for the last 10 years, has augmented his ashen, sombre works (which often reference human spaces and habitations) with short videos. Topography, at Modern Art Oxford, is the first exhibition in Britain devoted entirely to them. It's a great foil to How It Is, his huge steel chamber filled with darkness, that's currently at the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern.

It is not unusual for artists to switch media, though not all artists do so happily. Richard Serra's early videos were as much concerned with materiality as his sculpture, while Bruce Nauman's are of a piece with his installations, objects and performances. So it is with Bałka, who occupies the entire upper floor of MAO. Carrousel, 2004, his spinning Majdanek work, has a gallery all to

itself: Bałka places the viewer in the centre of the vortex; over each of the four screens is a slanted strip of wood, just like the overhanging eaves of the barracks, and stuck to the wall behind the bottom right-hand corner of one projection is the logo of al-Jazeera, the Arabic-language news channel. What can this mean? Time collapses between past and present. Despite what the Bush administration said, al-Jazeera is as good a witness, as trustworthy a news channel, as any. Should we be asking about the authenticity of the material Bałka has shot, the relationship between the Muslim world and the Holocaust, between news and propaganda? Carrousel is a world unHINGED.

In another work, Bambi (Winterreise), we see deer cropping the ground and bounding about in the camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. What do the deer know of history? It seems banal, till one realises Disney's Bambi was filmed in 1942. The thought of the prisoners arriving at the camps to see trees and nature all around is more horrifying and painful than to imagine that no birds sang - a myth, often repeated - or that they were being herded into a land that was itself already dead.

Bałka's Pond might almost be a bucolic, romantic vignette, with its trees and little pond, the off-camera voices of children, a church bell, wind in the microphone. But this, too, is a death-



**What do the deer know of history? . . . Bałka's Bambi (Winterreise)**

camp image: not everything Bałka does makes direct reference to these miserable places, yet they are there just the same, wherever one is. Can one look at railway tracks anywhere in northern Europe and not imagine where once they might have led? It is like tracing the lines on the palm of your hand, and wondering what is written there.

In Flagellare A, B, C (2009), Bałka thrashes the varnished concrete floor of his gallery in New York with his belt, holding a camera in his other hand. The floor seems to flinch and judder with each sharp blow. The video is projected on to three rectangular beds of salt on the floor. It's hard to work out what's happening, what the source of the violent, rhythmic beating is. Morbidity, violence and a kind of humour permeate Bałka's videos. His placement of

**The thought of the prisoners arriving at the camps to see nature all around is horrifying**



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the videos in the gallery also keeps us circulating, going back and forth between them. There are jokes, too, especially in his remake of Bruce Nauman's Mapping the Studio, replacing the rodents that infest Nauman's studio at night with a clockwork mouse, which Balka follows with a torch. The mouse is running nowhere. The ordinary and the portentous collide.

But it's disconcerting to find people dressed in ridiculous gold jumpsuits wandering Balka's show. These are supposedly cosmonauts, part of a crew Polish artist Pawel Althamer has brought to Oxford from Poland for Common Task, which involves a teleportation zone and fake space station that now occupies the ground floor gallery. Althamer and his crew arrived in Britain last week in a gold-painted airliner. Common Task melds a fantasy of space travel with the impoverished social realities of present day Poland. But as art, it's pretty stupid and makes no sense with Balka's show.

The only good thing is that Common Task, which includes videos of the jumpsuit-wearers wandering various places in Poland, has taken over the entire ground floor of MAO, getting rid of the silly coffee bar, shop and other paraphernalia that usually waste half of the space. Funny Althamer's work might be, but it's no match for Balka's seriousness and sophistication. Balka is the real deal.



Topography and Common Task are at Modern Art Oxford until 7 March. Details: 01865 813830.