

Diana Thater

Diana Thater: *Chernobyl*
David Zwirner, New York
9 November – 22 December

'Postapocalyptic' deserves retirement. It's had a long, hard-working life, and yet still doesn't complain when it's called up to pull the deadweight of descriptive laziness and capitulations to cliché. Take your pick of the ruined, the abandoned, the murdered land, but apocalypse will never make a genuine appearance on earth. As a concept, it's total. Whereas our human imaginations are merely regional: we kill ourselves by the square foot, never all at once. Which is why nothing comes after the end.

Diana Thater's *Chernobyl* (2010), installed in David Zwirner's easternmost gallery space on one of the many Sandy-ravaged strips of West Chelsea, reminds us just how limited our imaginations are. Filmed in the 'exclusion zone', a 30-kilometre no-man's-land that rings the 1986 meltdown site, Thater's video reveals a remarkably vibrant sanctuary, filled with plants and animals, all undoubtedly irradiated, yet all very much alive after a generation or two or three. Centred on the wreckage of an old theatre in Pripjat, the company town whose onetime residents managed and cared for the reactor, Thater's installation recreates the geometries of the theatre's walls and gives us a panoramic loop that changes like Chernobyl's diminished seasons.

The point of Thater's piece is not to draw us once again into the depths of self-hatred whenever the subject of nuclear power and its ecological disasters are broached (though it does that too). Instead, its designs are on time itself, and the fact that it doesn't 'pass' (another cliché)

but is 'lived' and lived in. The zone around Chernobyl is occupied by much wildlife, including, amazingly, horses, specifically Przewalski's horses, the last surviving subspecies of wild horses, which were introduced to the area because only there could they exist relatively undisturbed by humans. There are people too. Mortuary workers who care for the remains of the dead – actually, only half-dead – nuclear hulk and its burial ground.

'Half-dead' may not be right either. Plutonium-239 decays at a rate of 50 percent every 24,000 years. That's a stability no human civilisation can hope to achieve (the Holocene itself only dates to about a 21 percent drawdown of the isotope). The cesium in the ground, which was meant to disappear after only 60 years, looks to be taking five times longer. These are historical scales and geological scales, both human and inhuman, and Thater's video implicates them in their invisibility, just as a shot of the moon rising over a statue of Lenin in the video's opening sequence implicates the ideology – equally invisible – that has irradiated us all.

JONATHAN T.D. NEIL

David Ostrowski

David Ostrowski: *From Bad to Worse*
Ltd Los Angeles
18 October – 24 November

The day I visit David Ostrowski's exhibition, it's raining. The unusually inclement weather seems appropriate for these battered, defeated-looking paintings. I am reminded of the terrible storm that hit New York recently. Ostrowski's work corresponds to images of Chelsea-gallery employees hauling drenched canvases out of waterlogged crates.

This exhibition, however, belongs not to water but to the dryness of a Los Angeles summer. The Cologne-based Ostrowski undertook a residency in the city, hosted by Ltd Los Angeles, the result of which is this suite of paintings. Is it fair to correlate these scuffed and scarred canvases, made with acrylic, lacquer, spraypaint, sheets of paper and cotton, with the locus of their production? Maybe not. They are, after all, part of the *F* series of paintings that the artist has

developed over recent years, and are remarkably similar to works (some with the same titles) that he is showing in an almost simultaneous exhibition at BolteLang, Zurich, reportedly made before visiting California.

However, when confronted by paintings as devoid of content as these, one is tempted to reach for affinities with the context of their creation in order to flesh out their references. The dirty black lines that Ostrowski makes with a spray can might, to some viewers, evoke the smog of a car exhaust. The worn black surface of a painting such as *F (Dann Lieber Nein)* (all works 2012) could be compared to tarmac, and its butter-yellow frame a chromatic tribute to the Southern Californian sunshine.

Such readings are obviously superficial and could just as easily be matched with any sunny but traffic-blighted city. Nevertheless, there is a sense here that even Ostrowski himself isn't prepared to disregard it entirely. A poster for the exhibition reproduces a grainy photograph of a man spraying black lines on a wall from a moving Jeep. The medium of smoky spraypaint is one that other artists – notably Sterling Ruby – have deployed as a specific signifier of Los Angeles grime and proprietary vandalism.

One might also turn to the wealth of literature offered by the gallery. Alongside an essay, an interview and the standard press release – itself appended by an exchange between Jerry and George from the sitcom *Seinfeld* about their idea for a (TV) show about 'nothing' – is a double-sided page of aphorisms by the bard of Los Angeles, Larry David.

'I don't think anyone is interested in reading about my emotional state. It's not even interesting to me,' says David. Despite oblique disavowals such as this, Ostrowski's painting is rich with emotion, and has frequent moments of surprise and beauty. A strip of iridescent adhesive foil taped to *F (Jung, Brutal, Gutausehend)* is one such epiphany. But Ostrowski seems determined to undermine himself. *F (Ian Tits)* presents the only representational imagery in the show: scrawled breasts, straight from the toilet wall. Its imbecility seems contrived, a forced fulfilment of the show's prophetic title, *From Bad to Worse*. It doesn't have to be as bad as all that.

JONATHAN GRIFFIN