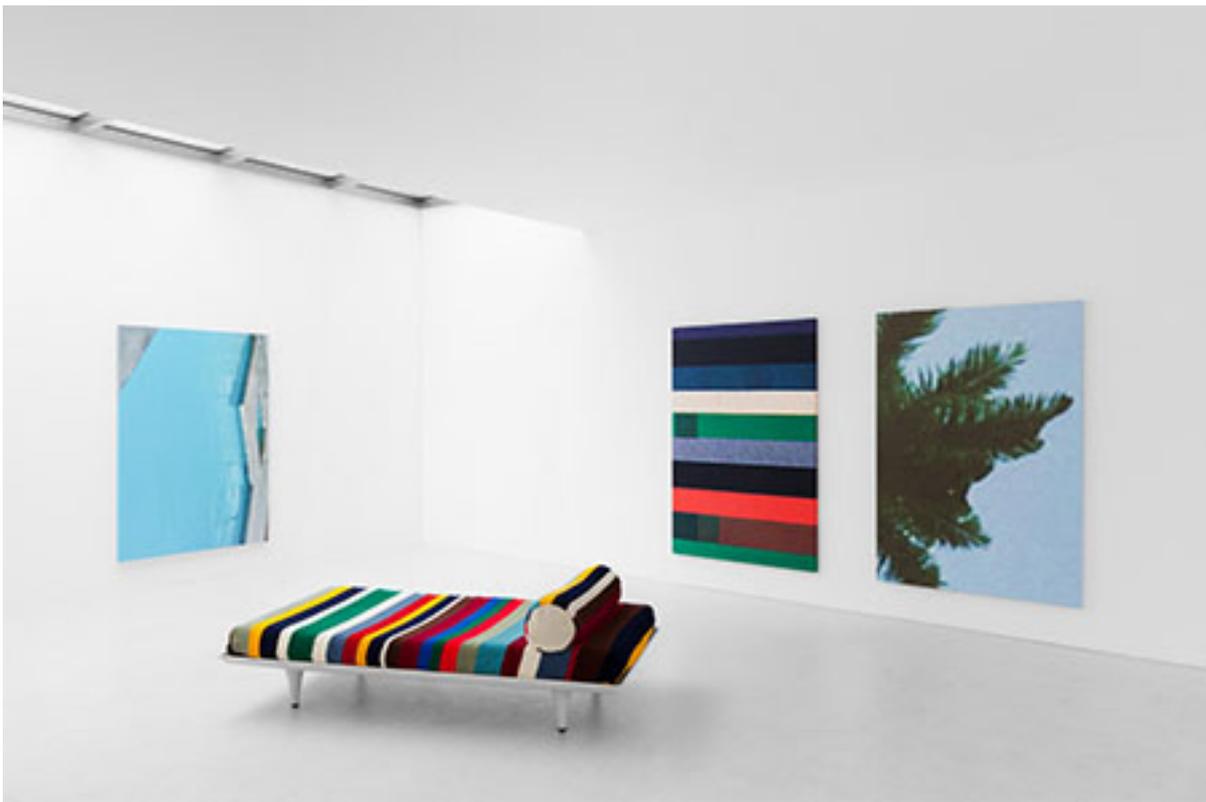


Frieze

Reviews

Tobias Spichtig

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installation view, 2012

The motley ways that contemporary artists employ photography – painterly, sculptural, mechanically reproducible, or all three simultaneously – are now so predictably legion that it takes a strange kind of show ‘about photography’ to surprise. Such was the case with Tobias Spichtig’s dexterous solo exhibition, which, despite the Swiss artist’s interest in coolness (fashion, club music, whirling projectors of grainy 16mm films) remarkably lacked the aesthetic pretensions it investigated. Take the exhibition’s titular ‘painting’: *The Blue, the Red, and the Green* (2012), a large acrylic print on canvas presenting a stack of strict, horizontal stripes in various colours. From afar, it might be a Modernist painting, but up close, blurry pixels show it is more recent than mid-century, more photographic than painterly. The image is a small section of a Frank Sinatra album cover, blown up (or writ) large. Spichtig’s work offers the easy, desirous spell that such mid-century painting predictably casts, then rescinds it. In the next step in this aesthetic pay-off, he subbed in the equally retro coolness of the source material, providing us with satisfaction but not dispelling our optical doubts.

The work’s clean, hypnotic stripes were taken up in a knitted blanket and neck roll a few feet away, covering a minimalist daybed by Andreas Christen. Spichtig’s bed (its colours inspired by Tommy Hilfiger’s collections) sincerely or slyly plumbs the ‘aesthetic solutions’ championed by the famed designer since the 1960s, offering yet another alternative to the faux-painting that *The Blue, the Red, and the Green* first proposed. Hanging nearby were more temporal sight gags playing on the easy project of imaging lust for ever-distant lifestyles. Seemingly ‘80s-era ‘paintings’ of pools, palm trees and blue skies were paced by blurry, architectural shapes – all photo prints of found Internet images. Upstairs, Spichtig’s images became smaller, more intimate and more affecting. Personal photographs – lovely girls in repose, cars, lamps, cats, pools, rooms, guns – were repeated and arranged in framed grids, one image per framed ‘image’ (all 2012). The cool, koan-like works conjured an austere yet kaleidoscopic marriage of Wallace Berman’s Verifax collages and David Hockney’s photo-collages. That both references invoked the American West Coast was apt: Spichtig’s references are oddly Western in their pop-cultural psyche, even as they offer fashionable images of Swiss youth.

This temporal and geographic stew was made emblematic on the exhibition’s top floor. Here sat *Metaphorical Object 1–4* (2012), a series of coupled 35mm manual cameras that faced and were screwed into each other via their lenses – a cinematic kiss of the most intrinsic sort. A self-critiquing Surrealist object du jour, the cameras’ referents began with René Magritte’s hooded *Lovers* (1928) and went from there. Just beyond lay a darkened room with sloping ceilings,

under which three 16mm projections took aim. Each of Spichtig's films offered the luminous rectangle of a music video clip sans music, except for the projectors' insistent, moody hum. If electronic music duo Hype Williams' stealing of the bedroom dance scene in Jim Jarmusch's *Permanent Vacation* (1980) for their 2011 track 'Your Girl Smells Chung When She Wears Dior' conjured the No Wave New York 1970s, and Bryan Ferry's stylized video for 'Slave to Love' (1985) encapsulated the 1980s, then photoblogger Mark 'The Cobrasnake' Hunter's video for Classixx's 'I'll Get You' (2009) offered our barely legal/legible present. Here, a lithe, pretty girl of indeterminate age rides her bike along the suburban coast, then frolics through the water à la an American Apparel advertisement. The fashion codes and corresponding ideas of desire as imagined and imaged and framed in each video were crystal clear. Yet without music, and with the projector's patient hum, Spichtig's installation became inarguably, incalculably moving – parsing our strange, ardent, superficial and cinematic hearts. And then there were the cameras sitting/kissing lucidly outside the door. I left the attic reluctantly.