

Wolfgang Betke

AUREL SCHEIBLER

A belt sander is likely the most important piece of equipment in Wolfgang Betke's studio, allowing his works to develop, characteristically, through the repeated application and removal of paint. He grinds through or across swaths of paint and gestural lines, as well as around or on top of collaged elements, and frequently sands down the canvas itself—or, in several recent works, an aluminum ground—to such an extent that holes appear. Betke's manipulations of surfaces through processes of addition and subtraction bring together strategies of gestural painting, *décollage*, scuffing, and erasure. Betke's work thus proposes a kind of representation that is partly constructed through the remnants of what was before; as when Jacques Derrida writes of writing *sous rature*, the effaced mark nonetheless stands.

The face—or rather the portrait—as a metonym for an idea of the self is done and undone in several works that were on view here. There are often suggestions of hair, shirt collars, or flesh-toned shades that evoke a neck. In *Scheindemokratie und Verwunderung* (Sham Democracy and Astonishment), 2013, the face itself is merely a washed-out white, sanded down to leave the canvas pockmarked with orifices, eyes, noses, and mouths, in patterns that constantly come together and fall apart. In *Keep an Eye on that Nose*, 2013, one of a pair of large paintings on aluminum, the metal has been ground down, in some places to nothingness, to leave the rough impression of a face. A nose is painted explicitly in the middle of the work: The eye that is “on” it in the title may be the one visible above it in a collaged section of an advertising poster, or it may be one of the eyes suggested by the holes in the aluminum. But at the same time, the eye is surely that of the viewer, no more than one of the faces here enmeshed with other faces, other eyes and noses visibly or invisibly implied by paint, collage, or erasure.

In *Eremiten TV* (Hermit TV), 2001/2011, Betke applies a similar technique to the idea of landscape. A large painting of a brick wall under a blue sky—seemingly fading into the surface, which, however, is pocked with small ruptures of frayed canvas—brings an eventfulness of incident and detail to the ostensible blankness of the idea of staring at a wall; the hermit's television is the world as mirror of the self. The centerpiece of the exhibition, *Paravent*, 2013, pushes this process further, into three-dimensional space. The way the two sections—one of three “wings” and one of two—of the eight-foot-high folding screen were set up here allowed one to walk between them until one was almost completely surrounded by the aluminum panels bearing fragments of landscapes and abstract compositions rendered with acrylic paint and marker pen. Each panel is sanded down along either the top or the bottom, suggesting either land or sky, while the gallery space and the viewer are brought into the work through the fuzzy mirroring of blank but unpolished sections of aluminum, some showing signs of having previously been painted.

The mingling of self and environment that is a defining feature of *Paravent* also occurs in paintings such as *Bildungsoffensive* (Education Offensive), and *Richtlinienkompetenz* (Guideline Competence), both 2013, which not only blur the landscape-portrait distinction into irrelevance but also, like much of Betke's work, bring together subject and object, perception and invention, outside and inside. The implication is that reality is formed of intersecting layers that are perpetually reconstituted, in the work and by the viewer, through fragments of presence and absence.

The mingling of self and environment that is a defining feature of *Paravent* also occurs in paintings such as *Bildungsoffensive* (Education Offensive), and *Richtlinienkompetenz* (Guideline Competence), both 2013, which not only blur the landscape-portrait distinction into irrelevance but also, like much of Betke's work, bring together subject and object, perception and invention, outside and inside. The implication is that reality is formed of intersecting layers that are perpetually reconstituted, in the work and by the viewer, through fragments of presence and absence.



Wolfgang Betke, *Bildungsoffensive* (Education Offensive), 2013, acrylic paint, oil paint, ink marker, and collage on canvas, 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 19 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".

—Alexander Scrimgeour