

Heike Baranowsky

Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

It made a welcome change that the three video pieces in Heike Baranowsky's show 'American Skies' weren't the ubiquitous large-scale projections that currently proliferate in so many exhibitions of contemporary art; they were neither multi-screen nor black-boxed, and could barely be described as 'video installations'. It was, in fact, easy to mistake these modestly scaled images projected low on the gallery's walls for simple slide projections: they were completely silent and at first glance appeared to be still images, picture postcard shots of American landscapes.

A moment's perseverance is required to make out the dusty tumbleweed blowing across the dry California desert scene in *Blown in the Wind* (all

works 2002) or to realize that the black dot in the middle of the twilight sky in *Shape Shifter* is actually a Zeppelin pivoting slowly on its axis and tracing a lazy figure of eight in the sky. Only the third piece, *Ballett* (Ballet), offers anything close to dynamic activity, when the dark specks littered across the centre of this rural Illinois landscape rise up *en masse*, a flock of starlings that swoops off-screen before doubling back and reappearing from another corner.

Writing in Berlin in 1921, Joseph Roth described bitterly how nature had been 'Baedeker-ized': 'Its task is to amuse us. It no longer exists for its own sake.' Fast-forward 80 years or so and you could say that nature has been Hollywood-ized, its role now more often than not to be a convincing backdrop for some on-screen action. Baranowsky's quiet observances strip away the entertainment factor to return the natural phenomena to their original surroundings. The lonely tumbleweed could set the scene in any number of

Westerns, but here its significance lies in the fact that it is a genuine plant being tossed around by a real gust of wind. The choreographed jumble of birds in *Ballett* recalls Roth's remark: 'What I see hasn't made it into the Baedeker. What I see is the sudden, unexpected, and wholly meaningless rising and falling of a swarm of mosquitoes.' Despite the Hitchcockian visions conjured up by the birds as they peel away from the ground and veer off like a magnetic force field, Baranowsky's approach is determined more by geometry than by melodrama.

In the adjacent corridor a neat drawing (*Ballett I*) divides the picture field into alphabetically labelled horizontal planes and plots the flight of the birds from one point to another. Another drawing (*Blown in the Wind*), a scribbly diagonal whirl, describes the indecisive path of the tumbleweed; and in a third (*Shape Shifter I*) the Zeppelin's flight is drawn as an elegant elliptical figure of eight, with crosses to mark its fixed points. This formal reduction of the films' content neutralizes their filmic and cultural associations, underlining their authenticity as natural occurrences and positioning the artist as a detached observer. Our over-familiarity with video as an art medium (not to mention Hollywood) makes us canny now to tricks of the camera and the editing suite, and the question of authenticity is always one of the first. Most of Baranowsky's earlier video pieces are neat loops; this time, only in *Shape Shifter* is the pattern altered, as Baranowsky brings the blimp back to its starting-point to complete the circle seamlessly. But otherwise taking the authenticity of the recorded movement as given, by looking for meaning in the pattern of nature's randomness, the artist steps back from her role as cre-

ator of meaning.

However, the exhibition's title, 'American Skies', suggests that Baranowsky could in fact be feeding us a line. These two innocent words do describe the firmament through which the little blimp swims, or the sheet-blue slab of the California desert sky, but they also bring to mind retina-searing images of aircraft hurtling through the Manhattan skyline, or more recently the fragments of a disintegrated space shuttle raining down to earth. Together with a row of photographs ('American Skies') hanging in the gallery's entrance room this serves to pin down the open-ended video images, both geographically and politically. The pictures are small re-photographed press images of American military activities or natural phenomena against a backdrop of industry, each labelled with the title and date of its original publication. Their helicopters, military planes and chemical towers suggest the American skies themselves are a site for political activity and lend the video works a not-so-indifferent aspect. Taken as metaphors for the political situation Baranowsky encountered on her residency in the US a Zeppelin's flight on the day of the massively popular Superbowl hints at surveillance; the hypnotic group movements of the starlings at mass hysteria; the singular trail of the tumbleweed suggests the disenfranchised, lone dissenter. Perhaps such a metaphorical reading is too far-fetched, but the detached and simplified quality with which Baranowsky presents her material gives it a clarity and openness that force the onus of interpretation back on to the viewer. Meaning is as suspended and indeterminate as the blimp endlessly tracing its figure of eight.

Kirsty Bell

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Heike Baranowsky
Shape Shifter
2002
Video still