

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

Critics' Picks

Andreas Gursky

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Centering on the Chao Phraya River that cuts through Bangkok on its way to the Gulf of Thailand, Andreas Gursky's latest series of large-scale photographs (all 2011) swell with a pelagic, even metaphysical sense of sublimity. That aqueous fantasy is punctured by objects that stealthily—but pointedly—upend its slick fantasy: a dirty pink satin child's mattress afloat on the water; a stray tire; other bits of flotsam that blend in, from afar, with the images' shimmering surfaces. The play between detail and alloverness is clearly one that Gursky aims for. So too, do the works' licked, glossy perfection stand in tension with the more painterly aspects that seem to ineffably congeal and disperse.

Rather than whirl or eddy, light in *Bangkok I* and *Bangkok V* streaks down the image in quick zips. In *Bangkok III*, illumination appears more diffuse, dancing on the water in a reversed perspective that looks as if it could spill into the gallery space. In *Bangkok IV*, by contrast, streaks and patches of lit surfaces appear more strikingly flat: buoyant on the river's surface, and at the same time almost plumb with the picture plane. The eye is also pulled to empirical minutiae—thick clumps of water-borne greenery and the occasional scrap of trash they harbor. The images stir up an implicit tension between aesthetic delectation and environmental reality, between anonymity and fragments of life set adrift.

The formal devilry of the "Bangkok" series lies in its detail. Gursky's suite of enormous prints titled "Ocean," 2010, pull back dramatically in the other direction. While the former approximates something of Monet's *Water Lilies*, "Ocean" conjures Clyfford Still. Gleaned from high-resolution satellite imagery, these images mark a departure from Gursky's typical photographic practice. At first sight, they evoke Google Earth or the Discovery Channel—aerial shots of the planet at once vast in scale and immaculate in surface. With only the cropped edges of landmasses visible at the margins of each work, recognizable cartographic coordinates are rendered unfamiliar. The oceanic expanse between continents—which

Gursky was obliged to fill in, in the absence of satellite information—forms the looming center of each piece. Here, too, tensions between photographic exactitude and painterly evocation lift the images out of their particular representations into ideas about the practices, aims, and provocative ellipses of representation itself.

-Ara H. Merjian