

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### South China Morning Post

#### The master manipulator

*In this age of perfect images, Florian Maier-Aichen prefers to manipulate his photographs*

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*Florian Maier-Aichen with one of his heavily tweaked "photographs" at the Gagosian Gallery in Central. Photo: Edward Wong*

Now that everyone's a photographer, what's a photographer to do? In Florian Maier-Aichen's case, he looks back into the past and forward at new technical processes. Then he combines the two. He plays with images so that you're not sure if what you're seeing actually exists. Sometimes, experimenting with old film means there are mistakes. He likes that. That's when a use-by date, having expired, creates imperfect works in the present.

He's influenced by history - the history of photography, the history of his country, the history of photography in his country, which is Germany. Even though Los Angeles, where he lives for part of the year, has been the most important geographical space in his life (it freed him from Europe), you'd probably be able to guess, at least from some of the landscapes in his current show at Gagosian Gallery, that he's German. Guesswork is required because of the 15 works on display, 11 are titled *Untitled*.

This sort of non-labelling can make a note-jotting journalist's, never mind a viewer's, heart sink. Despite his flaws, Damien Hirst - a former Gagosian stablemate - at least has a way with beefy captions you can chew over, such as *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. Maier-Aichen, who's 40, clad in shorts, low-key, with wide-spaced eyes and a slight dreaminess that's more than simple jet lag, definitely isn't Hirst.

Why the lack of titles? "Because I think everything is in the picture," he says simply. But he must have a way of distinguishing one from another in his head. "We give them nicknames. This one [an abstract swirl of loops] I call *Rollercoaster*. But my wife nicknames it *Dog*."

You wouldn't automatically assume that either *Rollercoaster/Dog* or another *Untitled* ("I think the nickname for this is *Splash*"), with its explosion of paint, is a photograph. "It's like animation," says Maier-Aichen, a fan of Chuck Jones, who directed many Looney Tunes cartoons. "I do scribbling, fill in with acrylic and then photograph it. By default of that process, the end result is a photo."

Sometimes, his work is highly technical, with overlapping use of exposures and complicated tweakings; sometimes he wants to be what he calls "anti-scientific", as he was when he created the huge, untitled starscape (nickname: *Big Sur Stars*) at the entrance to the gallery. "Most starscapes are photographed as a scientific project. But I had a desire to paint a watercolour. The background was photographed, the foreground was drawn in, then it was photographed to be honest to the process."

It's not a real constellation, however. "I hate reality! I didn't even look at real stars; they're scratches or scribbles." Like the cartoon bubbles which float out over the Ennis House (designed in 1923 by Frank Lloyd Wright, which Maier-Aichen photographed in 2011) in Los Angeles, they're a sly insertion of the particular that makes you look more closely at the whole.

Purists might complain, but photography has always played tricks with the viewer. French photographer Gustave Le Gray used to combine negatives of the sky with negatives of the sea, and Maier-Aichen pays homage to him in a 19th-century black-and-white seascape complete with a 21st-century tanker gliding along the horizon. That's one of the smallest works in the show.

Some of the largest are his European landscapes, in the soaring tradition of German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, who used to include tiny figures to give perspective. In Maier-Aichen's case, that reminder of human presence comes from his manipulation of the image.

Maier-Aichen has an ambivalent relationship with Germany. Of Los Angeles, he says, "you don't have the history that puts a big weight on you". He doesn't simply mean Germany's mid-20th-century history (although he says, later, "I don't love my countrymen enough. It's a built-in complex from our history. You know your countrymen the best, so you don't forgive them much.") The weight that made him leave was the 1980s generation of photographers in Dusseldorf taught by the influential Bernd Becher. Becher, with his wife Hilla, specialised in hyper-realistic images of industrial architecture. Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky (who had a show at Gagosian in Hong Kong last year) are the Dusseldorf academy's most famous alumni.

"You felt you were in the wrong school," says Maier-Aichen, who studied at Essen, 35km north of Dusseldorf. "Those photographers had taken over the world already." Of their work he says: "That generation tends to make over-produced images, they're too clean. I call it George Lucas syndrome. The early *Star Wars* films were charming, but the last one was so poor - the technique was too advanced - it lost touch with the story."

And so he went to Los Angeles, where it was possible to prove himself in an alien landscape. Much of his work takes that specifically American collision between the earth and the human presence on it, and makes it look even more weird. Although he doesn't like the word fiction to describe what he does, he accepts that it's a convenient term to distinguish the result from documentary. But it's actually closer to science fiction.

The early photographers, with their burnt and blackened hands, had to be both scientists and craftsmen (and women). "I'm a hobby scientist," he says. "I'm a purposefully bad scientist and at crafts, I'm far from being perfect. That allows mistakes, and that brings back texture to photography." Couldn't any of us make deliberate mistakes in our photos? "You need to contextualise it - maybe people don't see the mistakes, but I do."

In a way, he has to make it more difficult because it's become too easy, too accessible. "Photography is so democratic now that it has low self-esteem," he says. "But not everyone can paint. And so one consequence is to incorporate hand-made elements."

One of his rules is never to take a photograph at first sight. "It's too spontaneous." He does a great deal of research before he finds the exact spot. The end result may be unpredictable, and untitled but he brings a rigorous formality to it - just as he does to this conversation, sitting as politely upright on a sofa in his shorts as a man in a suit.

In 2006, Charles Saatchi named him as one of his two favourite new photographers working in America. (The other was Luis Gispert, who is American.) Saatchi liked his "ironic fascination" with the country. As it happens, that was the year Maier-Aichen moved back to Germany - to Cologne because that's where his wife, Stephanie, a graphic artist, comes from, and because it had "the structure" (colour labs, technical processes) he needed for his work. America made him appreciate his homeland. "It's real," he says.

There's a little joke in the show. It's a work with an actual title: *Aus Ven (From Hven)*, a phrase that deliberately evokes a postcard. It's an aerial shot of an island between Denmark and Sweden. The fields are geometric and their colours are outlandish, in every sense of the word. You look at it for a long time thinking, Yes, this is definitely manipulated. You try to find the join in the seams, to see how Maier-Aichen did it. But he didn't do a thing. It's real too.