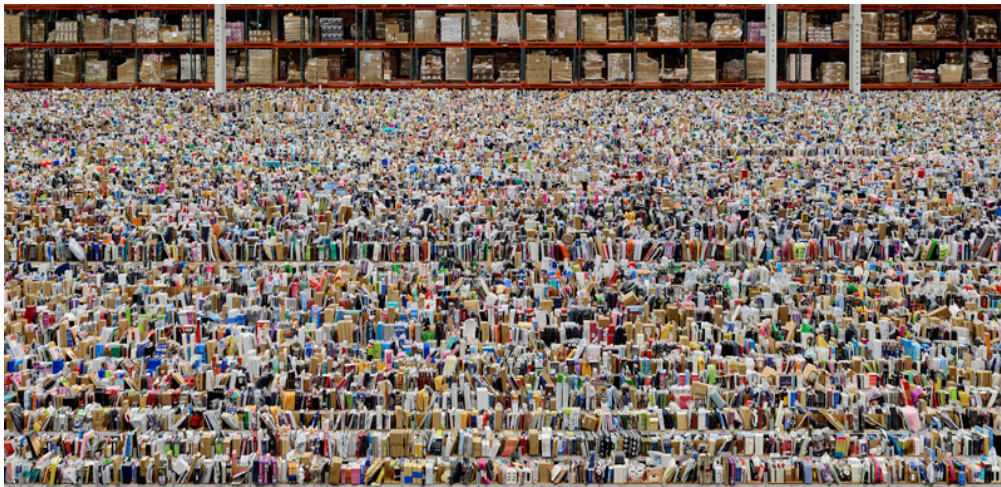


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‘It’s Not Just an Imitation of Painting’: Andreas Gursky on His Photos of Tulips, German Leaders, and Amazon Storage Facilities, at Gagosian

Nate Freeman



Andreas Gursky, Amazon, 2016, ink-jet print.

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For those who want to escape the sense of horror and confusion that has taken over New York following the result of the presidential election, a good idea would be to go by Gagosian’s space on West 21st Street, where a wonderful Andreas Gursky show, “Not Abstract II,” opens up today. I previewed it on Thursday with the artist, who had come from Düsseldorf to install. It’s anchored by new photographs of tulip fields at Keukenhof, the famous gardens in the Netherlands, shot from a helicopter, with the lines of individual bulbs abstracted into a giant mass, the colors shifting from vibrant yellow to big, glowing purple. Ah, tulips. Tulips sound really nice right now.

But another Gursky photo at Gagosian, just to the right of those pretty flowers, will jolt you back into reality. It’s a composite work showing the last four German chancellors somewhat improbably staring at Barnett Newman’s *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950–51), which features the red, orange, and black of the nation’s Weimar-era flag. The zips in the Newman, Gursky said, represent shifts in German political eras. And there in the middle is the unmistakable bob haircut of Angela Merkel, who issued a sharp rebuke to our new president-elect on Wednesday.

“Germany and America are connected by values of democracy, freedom and respect for the law and the dignity of man, independent of origin, skin color, religion, gender, sexual orientation or political views,” Merkel’s statement read. “I offer the next President of the United States close cooperation on the basis of these values.”

(Donald Trump, on the other hand, whined in a tweet last year about how Merkel had beaten him out to be *Time*'s Person of the Year. "They picked person who is ruining Germany," he wrote, in broken English.)

So, yes, the German leader, who may have to step up and run NATO now that the U.K. and the U.S. are led by politicians incapable of statecraft, she does make an appearance—but Gursky said, while walking around the show, that it was not meant as an overt political statement.

"I didn't expect the result of the election, but I think that the image I did from the German chancellor's office has now another impact than before the election," he said. "In a way, they stand up against Trump, and they could also represent leaders from our contemporary world."

The show does, though, cheer you up, with its slight-of-hand photo manipulations that are so deft you never see the seams, just the intimations of infinity that they create: the endlessly tall buildings, the impossible archipelago of coastlines converging on each other, the racks upon racks of irons and vacuum cleaners at an appliance store, the unending expanses of tulips.

The first work in the show is *Amazon* (2016), and it's made from photographs taken this year during a trip to a million-square-foot distribution warehouse servicing Amazon, the online shopping giant. What's striking about the work is that, next to the orderly, well-pruned tulips of the Netherlands, the Phoenix, Arizona-based facility is absolute cacophony. Items—books, of course, but also bath mats, toilet paper, coffee machines, toaster ovens, Play-Doh kits—are placed on tables in no particular order, accessible to employees only by a map.

After having the install crew adjust the lighting on the photo, Gursky, standing in the gallery in a zip-up jacket, offered a quick take on the piece, the sentences in English but being quickly translated from the German in his head.

"What's interesting is, there's no order, it's totally chaotic," he said of the images that inhabit *Amazon*. "I dunno what this is, yah?"

He was pointing to a container with some electric lime green-colored spherical objects.

"I think they're tennis balls?" I said.

"The picker, who gets the commission, they, if there's an empty space, somewhere, they put something there, somewhere," he went on, attempting to explain the batshit crazy reality that is the world of a million-square-foot Amazon storage facility. "Each book has a code, so if a picker gets a commission to find five different books, the machine shows the way, how to find the books. And if you live, for example, in Los Angeles, where there is also a big distribution center, and they don't have those five books at this moment, the commission goes to Phoenix, because it's a question of time to deliver quickly, even if the distance is so far."

Written in gigantic block letters on pillars in the warehouse are some pretty horrifying start-up-style commands—"work hard," "have fun," "make history"—that brought to mind the *New York Times* report on the deeply sadistic abuse of Amazon employees, which turns the workplace into a battlefield where sabotage is encouraged, random firings occur due to "purposeful Darwinism," and where, as one employee put it, "nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk."

In the photo, the commands float on pillars above the randomness of the bric-à-brac stacked on the tables.

Gursky said he hadn't read that article, but he had been struck by the bluntness of the Stalinist work commands.

“If you enter this way, they have it on very big letters—’deliver fast,’ ‘have fun,’ ‘make history’—yah?” he said. “It’s a sign of our times. Amazon is a company that you can’t ignore, and for me it doesn’t matter if it’s in Germany or the United States.”

More soothing is *Les Meés* (2016), which depicts solar panels on a rolling hill in the French countryside outside Marseilles.

“Normally, they are laid out on the flat ground, but I found it interesting to see them on a landscape like this,” he said.

Here, Gursky alerted me to the electronic beeps and blips, and deep bass rumblings, that accompany the show, playing through unseen speakers installed within the walls. A collaboration between the artist and Richie Hawtin, a Canadian DJ and producer, it’s similar to an arrangement that the duo set up for Gursky’s recent solo show at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf. Hawtin told me they made most of the beats at his studio in Berlin, he and Gursky staring at high-res renderings of the images as he banged out stuff on the decks.

“For me, in a way, it becomes one with the sound—the image moves, it’s like the sounds are running through the image,” Gursky told me.

Moving on, there are two works from Gursky’s superhero series, which sparked a headache-inducing licensing battle last year when Gagosian tried to secure the rights to show the comic book characters in the photos and ended up in court with the top brass at Marvel and Disney. (The deal to show Iron Man, who makes an appearance in “Not Abstract II” at Gagosian, came about because Gursky “vaguely knows Gwyneth Paltrow.”)

He also had a note on the show’s name.

“There was a museum show in Germany, and the idea from the curator was to show my abstract images, and the title should be ‘Andreas Gursky: Abstract,’ ” he said. “And I thought about the title a bit more, and I thought, I don’t feel comfortable with this title, so I thought it should be, ‘Andreas Gursky: Not Abstract.’”

Then there is *Lehmbruck II* (2014), which shows the Lehmbruck Museum in Duisburg, Germany, its interior of concrete slabs bisected by glass, works by Duane Hanson and Alexander Calder, and a Damien Hirst shark-in-formaldehyde work all dotting the scene. There is also “an audience of one or two carefully placed figures,” as it is explained in the press release for the show where *Lehmbruck II* was unveiled, at White Cube in London.

Curious, then, that the one figure in the work is actually White Cube founder Jay Jopling, walking away from the work with a mien very accurate to the man: hands in pockets, sideburns cropped just so, neck jerked back to see the work once more as he leaves.

“One morning I woke up and I went, Ah, I think Jay needs to be in the image,” Gursky said. “I cant tell you why, yah? It’s more about intuition. I show him with this attitude, and from the back.”

At the 2014 White Cube show, another work, *Lehmbruck I* (2014), accompanied this one, which was shot in the same place but shows different artworks. It was supposed to include a Tino Sehgal performance, but, as Gursky put it, “It was difficult to reach him.”

“So I said, OK, I invent a performance by myself,” he said. “It’s a naked woman in this slouched position.”

And then we came to the tulip works, all untitled and all from 2015 or 2016. Like much of Gursky’s output, these change dramatically depending on how close you are to them. When you’re standing from a fairly far distance, they look like iconic Abstract Expressionist paintings—like Stills or Rothkos, Gursky said.

But, of course, they aren’t paintings. They’re photographs of real things. And in this case, the real things are small, fragrant, pretty flowers.

“I live in Düsseldorf, near the border to the Netherlands, so I know the fields,” he said. “Every year, in April and May you can find them. I thought, if I can find a way to do contemporary photography with this background, from today, it’s not just an imitation of painting—and the big difference is if you approach the image and study the detail, it’s *not* painting. Maybe it sounds a bit harmless, photographing flowers, but I found it interesting.”