

REVIEW - 08 FEB 2018

Peter Piller

Barbara Wien, Berlin, Germany

BY BEN FERGUSSON

Peter Piller is known for presenting images collated from his personal archive of photographs, magazines and newspaper cuttings. Using the power of repetition, he gives new meaning to news clippings of houses in which crimes have been committed or aerial photographs of people washing their cars. In his solo show, 'behind time', however, Piller presents two sets of works that he has created himself: photographs of birds taken in the wild, punctuated by doodles and collages on headed paper.

The exhibition is dominated by the large bird photographs – or, more accurately, landscape photographs with birds. In Piller’s images, hawks, crows, kestrels and woodpeckers are obscured by grasses, hidden behind branches and, more often than not, blurred or cropped as they flee the frame. The tiny kingfisher in *Eisvogel* (Kingfisher, all works 2017) becomes an iridescent insect, its blue-bottle belly bright against the gun-metal grey of the blurred river. In *Mäusebussard* (Buzzard), below a silver sky, the buzzard is all wing, arched into the black silhouette of an electric pylon.

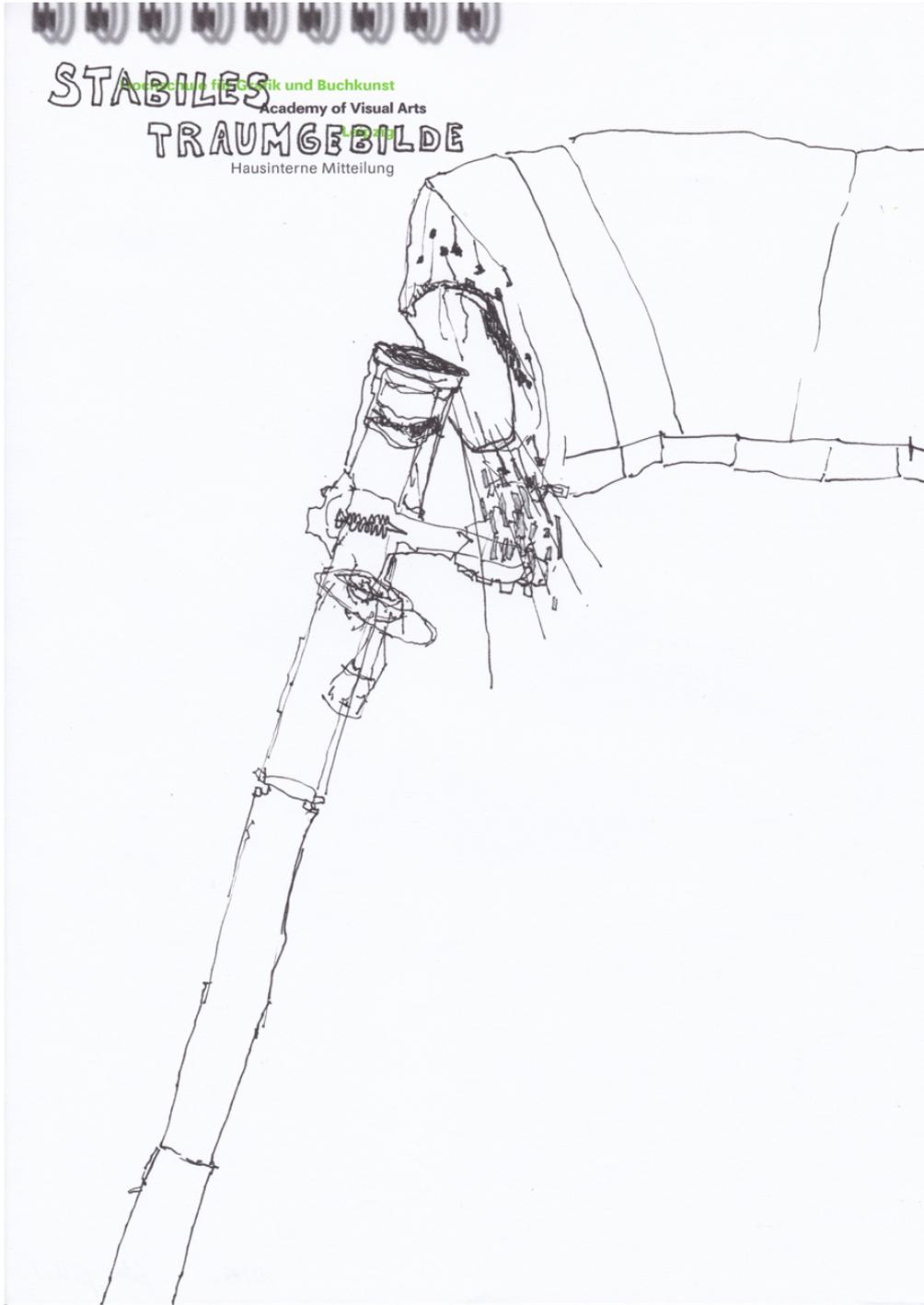


Peter Piller, *Mäusebussard* (Buzzard) 2017, archival pigment print, framed, 85 x 125 x 4 cm. Courtesy: Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin

In an interview with Piller accompanying the exhibition, much is made of the fact that the images fail as conventional wildlife photographs. Yet while they do not reflect the high-definition pictures that saturate glossy nature magazines, the fleeting glimpses that Piller offers are much more successful representations of the human experience of birds than those presented in the likes of, say, *National Geographic*. We never see merlins swooping open-winged towards us; we never see kingfishers pincering fish, enveloped in glittering, beaded water. We experience birds fleetingly, as blurred apparitions and half-obscured shapes in the trees, their bodies and heads hidden under folding wings. Piller’s birds are not anthropomorphized but fully themselves: transitory, distant, elusive, in all senses flighty.

In previous exhibitions, Piller has redacted textual information from East German military magazines, for instance, to alter our perception of the images presented. In ‘behind time’ the opposite technique is employed. We discover through Piller’s accompanying texts that the genesis of the photographic series was his ten-year-

old son's desire to take up bird watching with his father. When, as an adolescent, his son abandoned the shared project, the artist carried on alone. Piller suggests nothing so trite as a direct connection between his son 'flying the nest' and the birds flying from his photographs, but it is impossible not to read a certain pathos into images that capture the joyful transience of birds, long a metaphor for the fleeting nature of time.



Peter Piller, *Stabiles*

Traumgebilde, 2016, indian ink and color pencil on paper, 30 x 21 cm.

Courtesy: Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin

Piller's text also reveals that these pictures are a refinement rather than a departure from his archival works. For the bird watcher, the photograph is not the objective; it is a record, a verification that a given species of bird has been spotted. As in action painting, the images are a residue of the actual work; in this case, watchful anticipation, which, as Piller states, 'is an active rather than a passive state.'

The sketches dotted around the large colour photographs accentuate the sense of time passing, the ephemera of a life lived waiting and watching. The works – made on headed paper from the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig, where Piller teaches, and from the Leipzig hotel where he stays – are hard-to-read, feverish doodles, reminiscent of surrealist automatic drawings, suggesting human figures, voids, chained hearts, crowds and quays. Together with the photographs, an image emerges of an artist waiting alone in hides for birds, sitting in lengthy academic meetings, bored in hotel rooms, the passions of his life – his art, his family – in other locations, in other times. In the context of Piller’s wider practice, it makes the exhibition particularly humane, personal, touching even.

Peter Piller, ‘*behind time*’ <<https://frieze.com/event/peter-piller-0>> runs at **Barbara Wien** <<https://frieze.com/gallery/barbara-wien>> , Berlin, until 17 February.

Main image: Peter Piller, *Teichrohrsänger (Reed-Warbler)*, 2017, (detail), archival pigment print, framed, 65 x 95 x 4 cm. Courtesy: Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin

BEN FERGUSSON

Ben Fergusson is a writer and translator and teaches at the University of Potsdam. His debut novel *The Spring of Kasper Meier* won the Betty Trask Prize and the HWA Debut Crown and in 2015 he was shortlisted for *The Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year Award. His second novel, *The Other Hoffmann Sister* was published by Little, Brown in 2017.



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