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Jordan Kantor

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Jordan Kantor's outwardly unassuming canvases walk a line between the relaxed and the restrained, between pop-cultural immediacy and coded academic reference. In flat, affectless strokes, the San Francisco-based painter plots a highly selective and carefully edited course through the visual landscape of contemporary reportage, ranging across a thematically vast but tonally claustrophobic space. Leaning heavily but intelligently on the methodologies of Gerhard Richter and Luc Tuymans ("The Tuymans Effect," Kantor's detailed examination of the Belgian painter's prevailing influence, appeared in these pages in November 2004), he uses photojournalism as a base from which to distill a deceptively casual sequence of images possessed of peculiar gravitas.

As Matt Saunders observes in his efficient catalogue essay, Kantor's paintings share—along with unfussy handling and a basis in appropriation—an exploitation of filmic (or, rather, televisual) composition,



Jordan Kantor,
Kittinger's Balloon,
2006, oil on
canvas, 64 x 64".

an interest in "oblique self-portrayal," and a cumulative effect that gives the lie to what at first suggests iconic simplicity. Kantor's compositions, often based on bold cropping, are sound enough that each image more than holds its own, but the recurrence of certain figures—the artist has a thing for officialdom, and for anonymous perpetrators and victims—also binds them together. Even among a small selection—there were only seven paintings in the show—the project's general thrust is thus clearly discernible.

Greenhouse, 2006, is typical; a surveillance-like glimpse of two figures, seen from above, behind, and at an oblique angle through a half-open glass-paneled door, it is rendered in dry strokes and a muted palette—two of the visual hallmarks that Kantor shares with Tuymans. One of the figures, a black-suited man, holds a small object in his left hand that could be a cell phone or a camera; his companion is mostly obscured. Given such nonspecific specifics, one might expect the scene to be without atmosphere, yet the opposite is true. It conveys a palpable sense of anxiety, even paranoia, filtered through a detached interest in the ways in which images are made—whether manually, mechanically, or electronically—and seen.

The subtitle of *Untitled (Pasolini)*, 2004, makes both of these connections more explicit still. At the top left-hand corner of the canvas (very roughly the proportions of a cinema screen), a figure lies face-down on a uniform gray surface, while a large white arrow at the picture's bottom right (a road marking, to judge from its perspectival distortion, though it's hard not to think of it as a cursor on a computer screen) seems to exist only to direct our attention toward it. Like an outline traced around a corpse, it is at once a simple indexical device and a signifier of an event so grave that verbal commentary is beside the point. In different hands or another context, the gesture might appear comically overdetermined, yet Kantor's picture retains a somber mood.

The tone of *Kittinger's Balloon*, 2006, is similar, except that this canvas also boasts the stately feel of a history painting. A faceless crew of jumpsuit-clad workers are shown holding out a long swath of fabric in front of a military or industrial vehicle—an element perhaps of the titular vessel. The image's intimation of ritualized procedure, coupled with its dark grays, browns, and reds, invests the work with a subtly different variant on the observational distance of the show's other works. In establishing links with classical art history while sharing elements of style and substance with a select band of contemporaries, Kantor ensures that a conscious oscillation between surface and depth will continue to fuel a serious, meditative, and admirably limpid practice.

—Michael Wilson