

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

Michael Buthe

ALEXANDER AND BONIN
132 Tenth Avenue
September 10 – October 12

It's a wonder that German artist Michael Buthe remains obscure in the United States. Despite a robust career in Europe and a singular vision for painting's potential in the second half of the twentieth century, Buthe hasn't outrun the shadow of his compatriots such as Sigmar Polke, Blinky Palermo, and Imi Knoebel. Fortunately, this exhibition makes a case for the artist's peculiar practice, as fresh and preoccupying today as it may have appeared in its own moment.

Via a camp enactment of the occult, Buthe triggers painting's performative capacity as a means of returning to a handcrafted image. In "Secrets," an exhibition of the artist's work from the late 1980s and early '90s, painting is posed as a psychic medium through which images seem less appropriated than summoned. *Landschaft (Spanische Energie)*, 1985, is a picture swimming with red, yellow, and blue acrylic, coagulating at the top left in a lumpy golden eye that has been literally smashed, showering the rest of the painting with gold. A wooden pitchfork protrudes threateningly from the center of the picture, and behind the ecstatic surface something more sinister seems to lurk. But in Buthe fashion, things deflate before they cloy. The pitchfork swishes in a brocade scarf, and the eye's melodramatic explosion diffuses into Buthe's signature dot pattern, an effect which references halftone reproduction as much as glitter or confetti (or, elsewhere in the room, stars). Seven examples from Buthe's series "Steine," 1991–92, photographs of rocks in grass that have been painted over, pit the straight-faced factuality of the snapshot against the painted image in its most ostentatiously auratic form.

Drawing on performativity from another register altogether, *Le Dernier secret de Fatima*, 1986, two enormous three-panel paintings set on opposing walls, refers to the 1917 apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Fátima, Portugal, during which three prophetic "secrets" were supposed to have been imparted upon three young witnesses, the last of which was only officially released by the Vatican in 2000. The work's cheap, impenetrable surfaces—seas of handpainted stars atop billowing red and blue grounds—defy vision the way a phantom might, revealing hidden expanses, fleetingly, when glimpsed from the corner of one's eye.

— Scott Roben

Roben, Scott.
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Landschaft (Spanische Energie), 1985. mixed media, wood, brocade, cardboard, acrylic on canvas, 86 x 65 x 13"