



# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

**ANSELM REYLE**

BYE BYE KITTY!!!  
UNDER DESTRUCTION  
MARTHA COLBURN

plus  
JAMES FREY REFRAMED



# ANSELM REYLE GLITTERING ENTROPY

Beneath and beyond the high gloss and brilliant color, Anselm Reyle's abstract works in his first-ever U.S. museum show reveal significant art-historical depth and real-world relevance.

BY DAVID EBONY



"MY PARENTS TRIED to show me good taste, but I rebelled against it," Anselm Reyle told a packed house at the Des Moines Art Center theater during a presentation on the opening weekend of his first U.S. museum survey. The German artist grew up in an artistic household. His mother painted highly textured abstracted landscapes influenced by European Tachiste painters of the 1950s and '60s, such as Antoni Tàpies and Emil Schumacher, whose dense, earthy abstractions built up with layers of sand-encrusted pigment were the epitome of informed good taste.

Born in 1970 in Tübingen, near Stuttgart, Reyle attended the Stuttgart State Academy of Art and Design before transferring to the Karlsruhe Academy of Fine Arts, where he studied with Helmut Dorner. Reyle took an early interest in landscape design and music before finally homing in on painting and sculpture. He was inspired by 1960s psychedelia and especially the Day-Glo, hard-edge agitprop look of graphic design in the early punk movement. The acid-yellow-and-black cover (European version) of the Sex Pistols's first LP, *Never Mind the Bollocks*, was a touchstone that he often cites.

Soon after graduating in 1998, Reyle set up a studio in Berlin, where he began to produce ultrarefined abstract paintings and sculptures, plus elaborate installations with neon. Riffing on postwar abstraction, he pokes fun at formalist conceits, as in his meticulously executed vertical stripe paintings. Some of these recall works by Kenneth Noland or Gene Davis, but Reyle employs rather jarring color combinations and his stripes also bear wildly varied textures, including silver foil and glittering black sandpaper, that hardly conform to the Color Field style.

In a short time he established an extraordinarily successful practice. Solo shows in Berlin in 1999 and 2001, followed by others in Rome and at Gavin Brown's enterprise in New York within the following two years, cemented his reputation as a rising international art star. He soon became a darling of collectors, dealers and auction houses, with his works routinely bringing well into the six figures. He moved into a larger Berlin studio and hired some 60 assistants to fulfill the demands of an ever-growing waiting list for works. With that kind of meteoric success comes an inevitable backlash.

Some critics in the U.S. and abroad have derided the artist's highly polished, luxuriant paintings and objects for their seemingly superficial allure, which they dismiss as über-kitsch. This, however, is precisely the provocation Reyle is after. From the outset, he opposed the predominant taste-setting trends in contemporary German painting. Except for Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter and a few others he admires, Reyle reacted against paintings he sarcastically labels in interviews as muddy and messy pseudo-Expressionist compositions, often embellished with funky figures, photo fragments and the occasional swastika for dramatic effect. Instead, he seeks to channel the proto-Pop sensibility of the Nouveaux Réalistes—especially Yves Klein and

Right, Anselm Reyle: *Untitled*, 2010, aluminum, chrome optics, patina, 95 1/4 by 75 1/8 inches. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, Mathais Kolb. Courtesy the artist.

Left, *Wagon Wheel*, 2009, found object, LEDs, 67 by 67 by 17 3/4 inches.

## CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Anselm Reyle," a survey at the Des Moines Art Center, through Apr. 17. Recent works by Reyle at Contemporary Fine Art Galerie, Berlin, Apr. 30-June 11.

An interview with the artist by David Ebony may be found online at [www.ArtinAmericamagazine.com](http://www.ArtinAmericamagazine.com).







View of the exhibition "Anselm Reyle," 2011, showing (foreground) *Harmony*, 2007, bronze, chrome optics, plinth, Macassar wood veneer with piano lacquer. Photo Rich Sanders. Courtesy Des Moines Art Center.

Right, untitled, 2008, bronze chrome optics, patina, plinth with Macassar wood veneer, 61 by 17¾ by 15¾ inches overall.

Arman—and adopts the approach of artists in the Zero Group, whose German founders Heinz Mack and Otto Piene engaged in experiments with light (natural and artificial) and unorthodox industrial materials and processes in the 1960s and '70s. Above all, Reyle feels a kinship with California abstraction, including the highly polished monoliths of John McCracken and the L.A. Finish Fetish artists, such as Larry Bell, Peter Alexander and Kenneth Price.

THE DES MOINES SURVEY is an excellent overview of Reyle's achievement to date. Organized by museum director Jeff Fleming, the show contains 13 major examples of the principal motifs, styles and types of works—paintings, sculptures and installations—that have preoccupied the artist for the past decade or so. A Reyle exhibition can have a kind of fun-house atmosphere. Meandering through a show of works

with such highly reflective surfaces and vibrant colors, often literally glowing with neon and pulsating LEDs, viewers can get a bit giddy and light-headed. But the Des Moines show is generously paced and airy, allowing for plenty of breathing room for audience and art alike.

The superficial glamour of Reyle's surfaces attracts viewers like fish to a flashing lure; and as with a fishing lure, there is a hook. Uninterested in mere sensation, Reyle demonstrates a consistent intellectual rigor, alluding to art history as well

as urban industrial decay and a host of other environmental issues. The first piece visitors encounter is a large (approximately 8-by-6½-foot) untitled relief painting in teal, about 5 inches thick. Part of an ongoing series of monochromes in sumptuous colors, the work, completed last year, at first appears to have a gem-encrusted surface. On closer inspection, the jewels prove to be junk. Strewn with industrial refuse, the surfaces contain auto parts and shattered computer equipment, plus chains and broken beer bottles. The shimmering assemblages convey a sense of entropy alluding to a toxic wasteland and emblematic of the demise of the Industrial Age.

The works in this series (a smaller example in magenta is also on view) result from an elaborate process that can take up to two years to complete. To begin, the artist arranges on the canvas flotsam and jetsam that his assistants have dragged in from streets near his studio. (Recently, Reyle started a refuse exchange with one of his friends, the artist Franz West, whereby each sends the other studio discards for the week for possible reuse in their work.) The entire trash-strewn surface of Reyle's composition is carefully cast in aluminum as a single relief panel and sprayed over with many layers of rust-resistant car paint. With the help of assistants, the artist burnishes the surface with chrome polish until it acquires its improbable sheen.

Covering one wall, *Relief* (2008) consists of neat rows of square panels, each with a slight horizontal fold in the middle, that are based on discarded metal facade sections commonly used in Soviet-era government buildings. Retrieved from demolition sites in former East German cities, the panels were cast in resin and coated with powdered rust. Mounted to the wall with LED lights fixed to the back, each panel glows around the edges. Despite its ostensibly simple construction, *Relief* mesmerizes, as each panel's halo slowly shifts through the colors of the rainbow over a half-hour sequence determined by computerized rigging embedded in the wall.

ONE OF THE MOST attention-grabbing works in the show is a large untitled wall piece consisting of a dark blue, translucent Plexiglas box nearly a foot deep. As viewers move toward the box, the faintly visible contents glitter. Inside, a canvas covered with bunched or gathered strips of silver foil—a highly reflective Mylar-like material that Reyle has custom made—causes the sparkling effect. The object is an homage to Yves Klein and the cosmic energy his International Blue monochromes suggest. But, as the twinkling points of light piercing the dark blue Plexiglas evoke a starry sky or a spectacular planetarium show, Reyle's work inspires poetry of its own.

He uses the silvery material in a variety of pieces, including the stripe paintings and the other reliefs set in Plexiglas boxes. On an adjacent wall a foil relief enclosed in clear acrylic reveals how works in this series are constructed. In this example, Reyle threw purple paint on the gathered silver foil. The vertical drips recall Larry Poons paintings from the 1970s. Reyle's painterly gesture activates the otherwise hard, cold reflective surface of the foil and sets in play a flickering optical game that makes it hard to gain a sense of depth or focus on any single area of the composition.

On one side of the gallery is a massive black-painted abstract bronze sculpture, *Harmony* (2007), set on a low-lying wooden plinth. The work's curvilinear organic shape with an open center echoes modernist sculptures by Hans Arp and Henry Moore. Based on a small soapstone sculpture his

mother purchased on a visit to Africa, *Harmony* is absurdly but intentionally overwrought. He has transformed a humble object into a grandiose sculptural statement made with expensive and precious materials. Cast in solid bronze, the work weighs several tons, requiring a hydraulic lift mechanism hidden inside the plinth to move it onto rollers for transport. The plinth has a veneer of finely polished Macassar wood, a costly type of ebony often used for fingerboards in various musical instruments. Ironically, and somewhat perversely, the bronze has the semblance of a modest artificial material such as resin or fiberglass. Many hours of polishing by teams of assistants have caused the bronze to have the look of molded plastic, and the many layers of sprayed black car enamel covering the bronze further heighten the luster.

A similar process resulted in a smaller untitled free-standing sculpture on view (2008). Reyle invited his assistants to stick discarded objects like bolts, bits of

### THE SUPERFICIAL GLAMOUR OF REYLE'S SURFACES ATTRACTS VIEWERS LIKE FISH TO A FLASHING LURE; AND AS WITH A FISHING LURE, THERE IS A HOOK.





wire mesh and other studio scraps into a large hunk of clay. The distressed, amorphous clump was then cast in bronze. After much polishing, it was sprayed with many layers of glitzy gold car paint, and further polished and burnished. Placed on a tall sculpture stand covered in slick Macassar veneer, the object, after all this effort, winds up looking (intentionally) like an oversize plastic bauble that fell out of a Cracker Jack box.

All of the bronzes are cast in an edition of eight, although each number in the edition has a unique color, echoing Reyle's favorite car tones. While his initial compositions take very little time, usually around 20 minutes or so, the refinement of each piece takes numerous assistants many months to achieve. His studio is therefore a constantly bustling enterprise. But it hasn't been unaffected by the worldwide economic downturn of recent years. In early 2008, his waiting list shrank and he scaled back his operation as he was forced to lay off 30 of his assistants. Reyle often says that he needs a team around him because he doesn't like to work alone in the studio. He recoils from the notion of the solitary existential studio experience, and insists his creativity blossoms best in a hyperactive work space. After some struggle to regain momentum in the studio, Reyle revitalized his career with a successful 2009 exhibition at Gagosian in New York; he is currently expanding into a larger studio on the outskirts of Berlin.

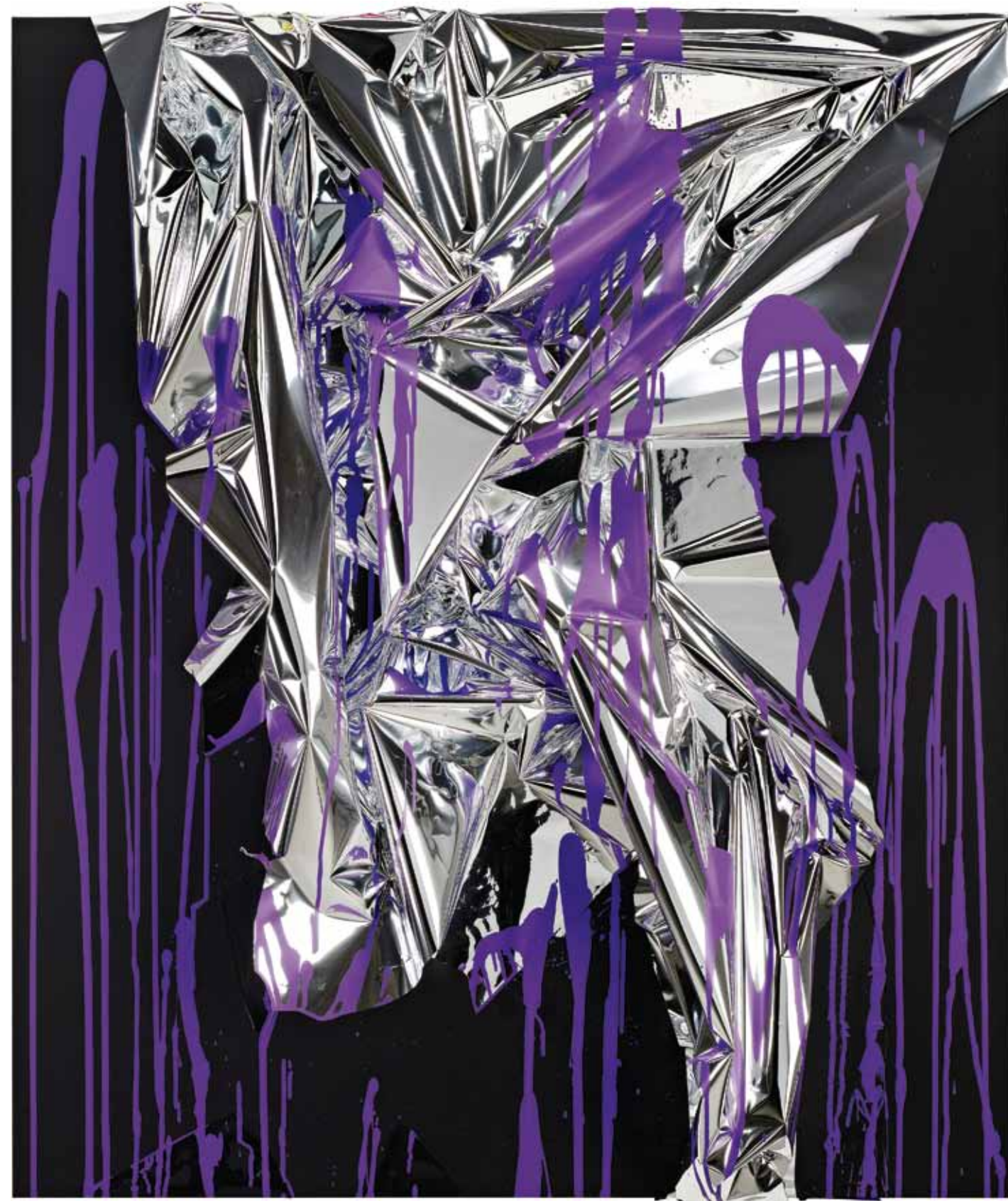
**REYLE RECOILS FROM THE NOTION OF THE SOLITARY EXISTENTIAL STUDIO EXPERIENCE, AND INSISTS HIS CREATIVITY BLOSSOMS BEST IN A HYPERACTIVE WORK SPACE.**

REYLE'S ART DOESN'T always call for labor-intensive team effort and costly materials. Among his most striking works is a series of found antique farm machines and implements, such as plows, hay wagons, wagon wheels, and the like, which he typically spray paints with garish, Day-Glo colors. Like strange, hypnotic mandalas, a series of wall-hung wagon wheels is lined with LEDs that slowly change color. A group of hay bales is made of polished aluminum straw. Reyle regards these pieces as his tribute to Arte Povera artists, especially Mario Merz. As the brash colors and incongruous materials hint at the increasing levels of toxicity in agricultural production, Reyle's works are at once playful and profound. Collectively, they offer a wry statement about ecological and environmental responsibility. While some of these pieces have been shown in New York in recent years, they were oddly and inexplicably absent from the exhibition in Iowa, a state known for its sprawling, fertile farmland.

Other examples of Reyle's work with humble materials were on view in Des Moines, however, including a room-size installation (2010) of found metal objects, such as a rusted box spring for a twin bed leaning against one wall, rusted pots, chains, bent pipes and a large rusted garbage bin. Intertwined among these elements are glowing tubes of neon—some found, such as tavern signs retrieved from the Berlin trash, and others commissioned. This theatrical installation conveys a kind of allegory of homelessness and urban demise; the colored lights add a rather hopeful dénouement to the otherwise abject scene.

As each Reyle work bears some degree of art historical resonance, this installation struck me as something of a tribute to American artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Keith Sonnier. Reyle is more explicit in his homage to American Pop art in his newest works, which take as a starting point Andy Warhol's "Paint It Yourself," a paint-by-number series from the early 1960s. *Little Yorkshire* (2010),

a fine example by Reyle on view here, is an image of a puppy. It certainly alludes to Jeff Koons's well-known puppy imagery (a brief Koons interview of Reyle appears in the exhibition's catalogue) and the legacy of Pop art. In reproductions Reyle's new series looks uncomfortably close to Warhol's. But viewed firsthand, the paintings are unmistakably the German artist's. Each filled-in patch of the canvas is richly textured with reflective areas of collaged foil, impastoed pigment and passages of Day-Glo color. Reyle told the press that these patchwork arrangements of color and sizable areas left blank refer just as well to paintings by Cézanne. That must come as some relief to critics who would regard a simple reiteration of Warhol's already banal subject matter as showing appallingly bad taste. ○



Above, untitled, 2010, mixed mediums on canvas, acrylic glass (not shown), 56¼ by 47¾ by 7¼ inches.

Opposite, *Little Yorkshire*, 2010, mixed mediums on canvas, steel frame with lacquer, approx. 7½ by 10 feet.