GLADSTONE

Thomas Bayrle's Hypnotic, Hyper-Detailed Art Will Change How You Look at Modern Cities

Thomas Bayrle   *Die Stadt (The City),*, 1976
"Thomas Bayrle: One Day on
Success Street" at ICA Miami

Thomas Bayrle, *City by the Forest*, 1982. Courtesy of
New Museum.

Between the late 1960s and '70s, two artists—one in the prime of his career, the other near the beginning of his—began strikingly similar works about cities.

The elder figure, the French actor and director Jacques Tati, had already won an honorary Academy Award, but Playtime—a film he released in 1967, set in a colorless version of modern Paris—was slower and subtler than any of the comic masterpieces that had made audiences fall in love with him. Around the same time, the Berlin-born artist Thomas Bayrle was winning acclaim for his bright, punchy commercial art. By the '70s, however, he'd begun an ambitious series of grey, deadpan collages of urban sprawl. That series, and much of Bayrle's other work from the past 50 years, is currently hanging in the New Museum in Manhattan as part of a retrospective, "Playtime," self-consciously named after Tati's film.

Tati and Bayrle have a lot in common: a knack for conveying the tawdriness of urban life; a clear, calm gaze that thwarts easy interpretations of their work; a sense of humor that owes as much to Rube Goldberg's mouse traps as it does to Charlie Chaplin's slapstick. In City (1977), Bayrle depicts the modern metropolis as a kind of virus, replicating itself one concrete slab at a time. There are no people in this city, just boxy little cars and boxy big buildings, stretching off beyond the edges of the frame.

A similar view of modernity echoes through Tati's Playtime. The film's color palette is dominated by the bluish-greys of its ubiquitous, interchangeable office high-rises, and Tati crams the soundtrack with ambient sounds of radios and vacuum cleaners and squeaky shoes in marble hallways. Mere specks next to the gargantuan sets, the actors seem forever on the verge of being swallowed up in their surroundings—Playtime would be seriously depressing, in fact, if it weren't so funny.

Bayrle makes no secret of his admiration for Tati, but the similarities between their work run deeper than imitation. Born in 1937, Bayrle was eight years old when the Allies invaded Germany, spelling the end of Hitler's Third Reich. By his late twenties, he'd worked as a designer for Ferrero Chocolates, Pierre Cardina, and several other of the world's biggest corporations, then in the midst of an unprecedented economic boom. This boom, it's been argued, served an important psychological purpose for the post-war European: "Acceptance of American-style capitalism," the New Museum's exhibition catalogue explains, "was part of an attempt to forget the horrors of World War II."

Tati's connections to the trauma of war were arguably even stronger than Bayrle's. He was born in 1907 to well-to-do parents; as a young man, the films of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin inspired him to become an actor, much to his family's embarrassment. In 1939, however, he enlisted in the military and fought against the Nazis in the Battle of Sedan. Though Tati's early comedies from the 1950s (Mon Oncle; Monsieur Hulot's Holiday) don't explicitly discuss World War II, they satirize the middle-class consumer values that flourished in response to the war (the same values that helped make the young Bayrle a star designer).
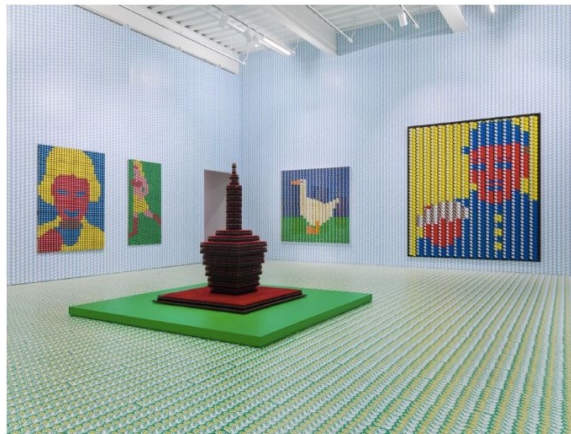
Installation view of Thomas Bayrle's "Playtime" at the New Museum, New York, 2018. Courtesy of New Museum.

During the post-war period in Western Europe, millions of people suddenly seemed to share the same tastes and desires to buy the same things. This was the era in which television helped popularize rock 'n' roll; when the critic Dwight Macdonald popularized the concept of the middlebrow; and when the global creep of American pop culture threatened to drown out staid European tradition (a process aptly termed "Coca-colonization"). Both Monsieur Hulot's Holiday and Playtime begin with a spot-on evocation of the cultural homogenization going on in Europe at the time: a mob of identically-dressed tourists crowding into a bus, surrounded by identical buses. Tati seems to find something vaguely sinister about this spectacle, even as he finds beauty and warmth in it, too—an ambiguity mirrored in Bayrle's famous claim: "It is important for an artist to have both positive utopia and desperate reality."

The cultural homogenization of European cities had an enormous impact on the cities themselves. Both Paris and Berlin had been ravaged by war, and the architects tasked with rebuilding them offered utopian visions of healing and rejuvenation. Iconic structures of the period included Berlin's Neue Gedächtniskirche, designed by Egon Eiermann and completed in 1963, and Paris's Charles de Gaulle Airport, designed by Paul Andreu and completed in 1974; both are bold, avant-garde symphonies in grids of glass and steel.

These buildings were vast, staggering, dazzling—in fact, they were designed to be. The French architect Le Corbusier, one of the most influential voices in post-war urban planning, boasted that his proposed series of Parisian high-rises would provide "a dazzling spectacle of grandeur, serenity and gladness," and his theories led to the construction of enormous "towers in parks" across Europe and North America. But the triumphant upward growth of Western cities triggered a powerful backlash. In her 1961 classic The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs offered an eloquent critique of modernist urban planning: The rise of massive, intimidating skyscrapers and freeways, she argued, threatened to wipe out everything vibrant and unique about cities and city-dwellers.

Thomas Bayrle, *Erhard Gargantua*, 1966. Photo by Brauchitsch. Courtesy of New Museum.

In their work from the 1960s and '70s, Bayrle and Tati seem to echo Jacobs's critique, showing what will happen if such urban sprawl continues unchecked. In order to satirize the modern city, however, Tati first had to make a city of his own. With a budget of 17 million francs (unheard of for a French comedy), he hired 100 construction workers to build roads, ultra-modern office interiors, and miniature skyscrapers on the outskirts of Paris. The resulting set—nicknamed Tativille—is easily the most memorable character in Playtime. It's a heartless, cyborg version of Paris, as if every building were designed by Andreu or Eiermann. The same could be said for many of Bayrle's cityscapes. City by the Forest (1982) seems to mock Le Corbusier's lofty ideas about towers and parks; instead of coexisting with nature, this city seems poised to devour the wilderness around it.

When watching Playtime or studying one of Bayrle's city collages, it's crucial to look closely. Tati hired hundreds of extras and gave each one precise, careful directions for where to move. It's incredible how many little stories and sketches he conceals in each of the film's crisp, deeply focused frames; film scholar Noël Burch was onto something when he said that Playtime demanded to be seen several times, and from several different seats in the theater, to be appreciated completely. Looking at Bayrle's city scenes can be either anxiety-inducing or weirdly calming, depending on your temperament. You find yourself following the cars up

and down the streets, as if through an enormous maze, until, eventually, you come back to your starting place. As if to protest the rigidity of modernist city-planning, both Tati and Bayrle give viewers the freedom to roam to and fro with their eyes, never insisting on where to look or what to think.

But perhaps it's because Tati and Bayrle have such conflicted feelings about their subject matter that they give their audiences so much latitude in deciding what to feel. Tati went bankrupt building the ersatz skyscrapers he satirized in Playtime, and Bayrle continued cashing checks from Ferrero Chocolates and Pierre Cardin, exactly the kinds of companies whose employees might work in the pathetic little buildings featured in City. That's why, in the end, it's not enough to say that these two great artists are appalled by the growth of the modern European city. They're also amused, confused, hypnotized, and more than a little bit terrified.