

Martha Schwendene, "This Artist Foresaw Our Digital Future in a Meadow of Dandelions," *The New York Times*, June 21, 2018

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ART REVIEW

This Artist Foresaw Our Digital Future in a Meadow of Dandelions



"Toilet," from 1967, is among the works from Thomas Bayrle's "superform" series in a retrospective of his work at the New Museum. The room itself is lined with Laughing Cow wallpaper and a floor covering composed of tiny shoes. Credit Thomas Bayrle/2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; Bryan Thomas for The New York Times

In the digital fever dream of Thomas Bayrle's work, pixelated pictures twist and bend and resolve into fuzzily warped images. Abstract films and videos pulse with psychedelic patterns. But if Mr. Bayrle's art seems like the ultimate in early computer design, most of the 115 works in his first major New York retrospective, "Playtime," at the New Museum, are actually handcrafted. Made over nearly 60 years, Mr. Bayrle's work instead offers a window into digital thinking or, it could be said, how we got to where we are now.

Consider this anecdote. Rather than taking the usual path through art school, Mr. Bayrle, now 80, started his career in the 1950s as an apprentice in a weaving factory in Germany. Studying pattern making for jacquard looms — the precursors to the computer, with its punch cards for transferring designs onto woven fabric — he also spent countless hours pulling stray threads out of machines so that they would not malfunction. On his days off, he would walk in the countryside. Once he came upon a meadow blooming with dandelions and saw a sea of dots: the world of units and patterns, machines and pixelation merging with nature.



“Rosary (Porsche),” from 2010, is one of several car engines on display in the museum’s fourth-floor gallery. The space also includes larger examples of Mr. Bayrle’s photo collages, including, from left, “Airplane,” 1982-83, and “Capsel,” 1983. Credit Thomas Bayrle/2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; Bryan Thomas for The New York Times

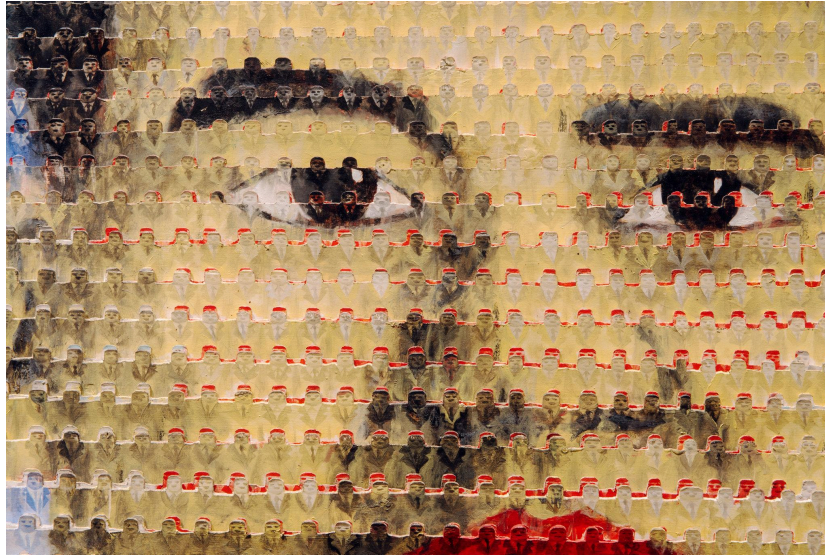


A detail of Mr. Bayrle’s “Capsel,” which repeats and distorts an image. Credit Thomas Bayrle/2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; Bryan Thomas for The New York Times

The outcome of this entranced, nature-meets-technology vision is obvious in Mr. Bayrle’s signature “superform”: a single image or figure repeated hundreds or thousands of times to create a larger figure or form. This is the most frequent motif in “Playtime,” appearing in paintings, prints, wallpaper, fabric designs, books, films and videos. And even an immersive room. Mr. Bayrle was also influenced by the German theorist and critic Siegfried Kracauer, whose idea of the “mass ornament” applied to people submerged in the patterns and flows of capitalist society. This could also be seen in Jacques

Tati's 1967 French film "Playtime," which gives the New Museum show its title and whose set was made from modular cubicles that were meant to mirror the compartmentalization of postwar European life.

Early versions of the superform appear in kinetic wooden constructions Mr. Bayrle called "painted machines," which consist of rows of hundreds of tiny wooden figures that give the impression of a larger figure. They shift and change perspectives when activated by motors, which are set to timers at the museum. Examples here depict Mao Zedong and Ludwig Erhard, the former German chancellor and economist who was considered the driving force behind that country's postwar economic "miracle."



A detail of Mr. Bayrle's "Mao" (1996), one of his "painted machines" consisting of rows of hundreds of tiny wooden figures that give the impression of a larger figure. Credit Thomas Bayrle/2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; Bryan Thomas for The New York Times



"Ajax," 1966, suggests the German obsession with hygiene and "cleansing" its Nazi past. Credit Thomas Bayrle/2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

By the mid-60s, Mr. Bayrle was living in Frankfurt, which was one of the most Americanized cities in Germany, with approximately 40,000 American soldiers stationed there. Mr. Bayrle's painted machines reflect this American influence. "Ajax" (1966) and "Super Colgate" (1965) nod to how American products were flooding the German marketplace, but also, they suggest something darker: the German obsession with hygiene and "cleansing" its Nazi past.

Paintings and silk-screen prints from the '60s and '70s pick up the superform and the warp and weft patterns of Mr. Bayrle's weaving years. In one print, the rough, punchcard-looking image of a duck is composed of tiny shoes; in another, a human figure is made up of cows from the "Laughing Cow" cheese brand. Around the same time, Mr. Bayrle made garments that could be worn as "moving prints," and which he included in a 1967 exhibition in Milan. The stackup and repetition of objects also mirrors the Pop of artists like Konrad Klapheck, who referenced German automation too, and Leni Riefenstahl's films of Nazi rallies, with endless rows of soldiers.

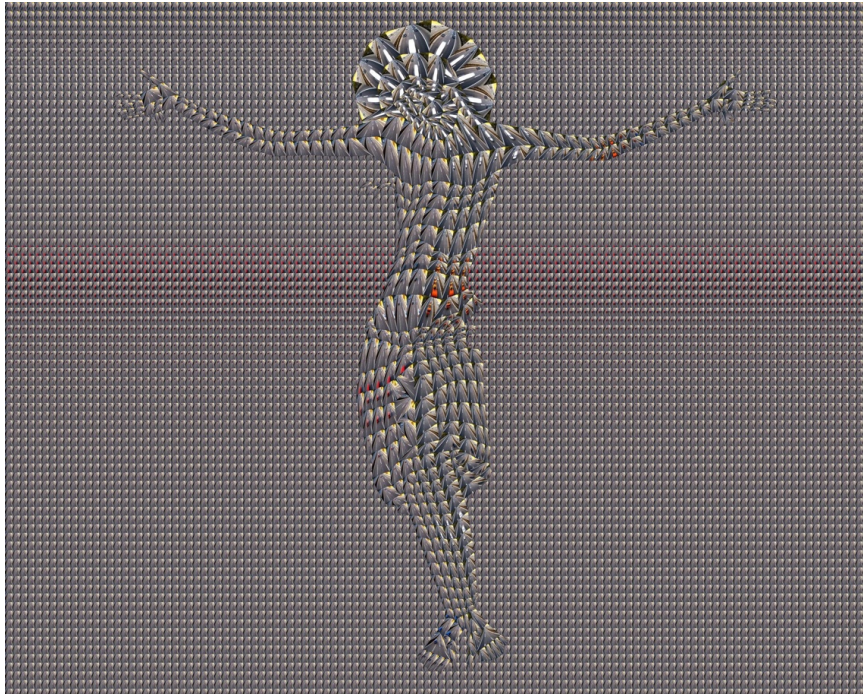


"Super Colgate," 1965. Credit Thomas Bayrle/2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; Bryan Thomas for The New York Times

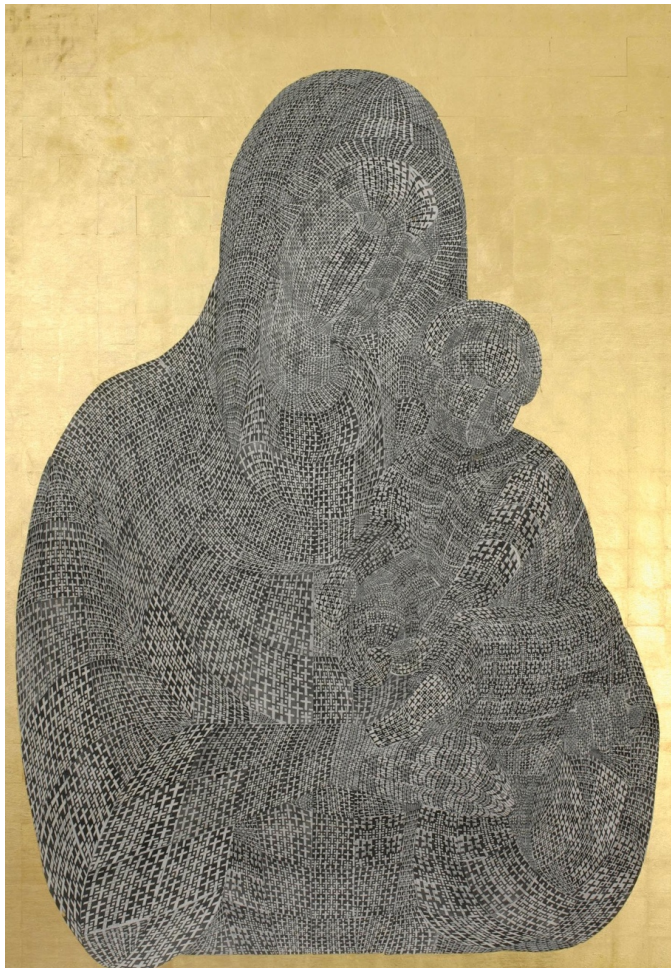
As the '60s heated up, with German students protesting living conditions — and the prevalence of former Nazi Party members in the German government — Mr. Bayrle found himself in a unique position: working in commercial advertising and book publishing with access to machines that could reproduce posters or other materials used in demonstrations.

With his friends the artist Bernhard Jäger and the composer Uwe Schmidt, he designed a poster in 1968 — a silk-screen print on paper recreated here — featuring a photograph of Rudi Dutschke, a student activist who had just survived an assassination attempt. Block letters underneath the image read in German, "The revolution does not die of lead poisoning!," referring to the "years of lead" in which peaceful protests turned to more violent politics.

In the '70s and '80s, Mr. Bayrle perfected a process for distorting images that he applied to everything from paintings to films and videos: He would make a print block of an image, create a rubber version, and then stretch and twist the rubber to produce an analogue of what can be achieved with simple software today. A prototype sits in a vitrine, along with drawings for an "Autobahn Head" (1988-89), which appeared in a 16-millimeter film that is also on view, evoking a kind of '80s New Wave coolness.



A still from "Interchange," a single-channel digital video from 2006 that conflates images of highways with the silhouettes of the crucified Christ. Credit Thomas Bayrle/2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York



Mr. Bayrle's "Golden Madonna" (1988) consists of a fuzzy photocopy collage of a mother and child with gold leaf on wood. Credit Thomas Bayrle/2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

If Mr. Bayrle's work seems mainly focused on automation, production and mechanization, however, it also contains a heavily — and sometimes heavy-handed — Christian component. Madonnas, priests and crucifixes appear regularly in his work. (Raised Protestant in a largely Catholic town, Mr. Bayrle was struck by the stridency of the images in religious art but also Russian icons.)

A “Golden Madonna” (1988) consists of fuzzy photocopy collage of a mother and child with gold leaf on wood. In another canvas from the early '80s, an aerial view of highways — a metaphor, perhaps, for the “information superhighway” — is turned vertically, so it looks like Gothic cathedral vaulting. The collage-on-canvas “Ascension” (1988) and the video “Interchange” (2006) conflate images of highways with the silhouettes (superform-style) of the crucified Christ.

Machines can be spiritual too. A series of recent sculptures called “praying machines” — perhaps playing off the early 20th-century “bachelor machines” of Marcel Duchamp — take this to a rather obvious conclusion. Resting on steel supports and accompanied by recordings of people reciting the Catholic rosary in German, French and English are car engines from Porsche, Citroen and Lincoln, which are running. These perhaps hark back to what Mr. Bayrle has described as a formative experience — sneaking into a local Catholic church and hearing a group of women reciting the rosary — or later, listening to Buddhist monks in Asia meditating to droning wind instruments.

The use of Christian images and icons feels contrived, however. More successful is Mr. Bayrle's ubiquitous superform, which feels like a prescient version of the German postindustrial sublime in the slick photographs of Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff or Candida Höfer. In these works, you can lose yourself in the cleanliness of products, the infinity of humans at a rave, the eerie artificiality of lit spaces or the cars on an autobahn.



A signature motif: From left, “Butter Eater” (1968/2002); “Red Square” (1982/1996), a giant Maggi bottle made from Maggi bottles piled in pallets; and “Toilet” (1967), in a room of “Shoes” (1967) floor covering and “The Laughing Cow” (1967/1997) wallpaper. Credit Thomas Bayrle/2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; Bryan Thomas for The New York Times

For Mr. Bayrle, to be hypnotized by mass production, by the 24-hour churning of machines, can be numbing — or sublime. But art's job — like walking into a field of a million dandelions — is presumably to wake us up from that stupor. Mr. Bayrle reaches for this ecstatic experience, and on many occasions in “Playtime,” succeeds.