

## Reading Christiane Baumgartner's Lines

By Sarah Kirk Hanley



Installation view of "Christiane Baumgartner: Another Country." Courtesy Davis Museum at Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA.

"Christiane Baumgartner: Another Country"  
Davis Museum at Wellesley College  
Wellesley, MA  
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*Christiane Baumgartner: Another Country*  
By Lisa Fischman, Claire C. Whitner  
and Richard S. Field  
Hirmer Verlag, Munich, and Davis  
Museum at Wellesley College, 2018  
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Artfully named, "Christiane Baumgartner: Another Country" was the first substantial survey of this influential German artist's work in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Including 79 individual prints, many of monumental scale, it provided American viewers an overview of her techniques and motifs from the past decade (dedicated visitors could find out about the earlier

work through the various monographs available for perusal).<sup>2</sup> Its attendant catalogue supplies a salient English-language reference for critical study of her oeuvre, including an extensive interview between the artist and curator Lisa Fischman, an essay by Claire C. Whitner, and a close discussion by Richard S. Field of the exhibition's headline print. These are accompanied by color plates of the artist's prints covering the years 2009–18 (some not on view in the exhibition), along with a biography, CV and bibliography.

Baumgartner does not identify as a printmaker, preferring to be understood as an artist whose chosen medium is relief printing.<sup>3</sup> This places her among a handful of major contemporary artists who work primarily in printmaking for conceptual reasons.<sup>4</sup> After studying printmaking as an undergraduate, she focused on video in graduate school

and eventually landed on her signature melding of woodcut and video in her breakthrough woodcut quartet, *Lisbon* (2001). Baumgartner discusses her interest in woodcut as both a foil and complement to her contemporary technological source imagery: its simple, handmade marks slow the viewer's perception, calling attention to the image and the imperfection of the line; while its delineated contrast of inked surface and blank paper is related, in her view, to the binary language of computers.<sup>5</sup>

Often monumental in scale, Baumgartner's woodcuts derive from photographs or video stills (usually her own) that she transforms through a process that involves reducing their resolution, expanding their scale, and laboriously handcutting the result into wood. They employ only horizontal lines, deftly varied for optical effect. Originally,

the lines replicated the video scan lines of her early source material, but they remained as a visual device even after she transitioned to photographic sources. She prints the blocks herself in small editions. Altogether the physical production of a single print can take months, though Baumgartner has said the most important moments in her work occur while she is working on the computer and conceiving the image: the execution is simply a necessary step in realizing the idea. (While she makes her woodcuts on her own, Baumgartner has also worked in screenprint, photoengraving and etching on a smaller scale, usually in collaboration with master printers.)

The Davis Museum's expansive main gallery accommodated over 15 major woodcuts, providing an overview of Baumgartner's subject matter and an opportunity to view these oversized works at various focal distances: up close, the lines stand apart as individual abstract forms; from further back they cohere into objects, scenes or events; at midrange, they flicker between these two modalities and confound the eye. We become conscious of viewing as a physical and mental task, as well as a form of play.

Anchoring one end of the room was the ominous 26-foot-long triptych *Luftbild (Triptychon)* (triptych, 2009–10),<sup>6</sup> in which panels of cloudy skies in grayish purple and pale blue flank a central black-and-white image of military aircraft in formation. Derived from a video the artist shot of a television broadcast about WWII, the image is disrupted by arcs of moiré-like interference patterns—accidental artifacts of the passage through various technologies, painstakingly preserved by hand as the artist cut the block.

*Luftbild (Triptychon)* was balanced on the opposite side of the gallery by a quartet of six-foot-high monoprints (described as “woodcut/paintings” in the catalogue) from Baumgartner's 2018 series *Happy Hour*. Each pictures the same hazy seaside sunset in a riot of hues, blended together in chromatic concoctions like the cocktails for which they are named: *Kir Royale*, *London Fog*, *Tropical Orange* and *Sex on the Beach*. Acknowledging that this subject matter is “almost on the edge of kitsch,” Baumgartner has explained the prints as a meditation on perception: how the setting sun burns into the retina, and gets distorted while swimming, going into or coming out of the water.<sup>7</sup> For her,

they also embody the German concept of *Sehnsucht*, a compound word that bridges both seeing and searching, and denotes a longed-for ideal that is out of reach.<sup>8</sup> The elegiac *Luftbild (Triptychon)* and the ebullient *Happy Hour* series neatly book-end the stylistic and thematic trajectories articulated in this exhibition.

The earliest works reflected the artist's ruminations on human sources of “distortion or menace, to weapons, to war and destruction.”<sup>9</sup> The 15 blue-and-black woodcuts of *Totentanz* (Dance of Death, 2013), whose fascinating tendrils of cloudy light come from the same WWII documentary as *Luftbild*, shows a frame-by-frame depiction of the smoke trail of a downed fighter plane with an eerie bluish glow. The aqua tonal block behind the black raster lines preserves the feel of the television screen. In its haunting beauty, *Totentanz* both acknowledges the appeal of gawking at scenes of destruction from a position of safety, and encourages the viewer to slow down and absorb their import.

Baumgartner's canny aesthetic choices were similarly apparent in the nearby juxtaposition of the menacing *Manhattan Transfer* (2010) with the sparkling seascape *Another Country* (2016).<sup>10</sup> Both are



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based on photographs she took within minutes of one another while walking along the West Side of Manhattan on her first visit to New York City—a proximity of time and place that is striking in consideration of the two pictures' diametrically opposed gestalts. *Manhattan Transfer*, which shows a helicopter behind a chain-link fence, is a chilling composition evocative of military surveillance or mobilization. (Were it not for the title, one might not guess the location is the 30th Street heliport in Chelsea.) Several years later, as her focus shifted away from machines and weaponry and toward natural phenomena, Baumgartner returned to this batch of pictures. *Another Country*, a depiction of New York Harbor, is dominated by scintillating open water; barely perceptible human constructions—the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and the Statue of Liberty—emerge on the horizon only after extended viewing.

*Another Country* is indicative of the Romanticism that has dominated Baumgartner's work in the past few years,<sup>11</sup> as she has become increasingly occupied with the might of natural forces, attended by a deepening exploration of color inking. In the catalogue interview with Fischman, she cites the nine red woodcuts of *Deutscher*

*Wald* (German Woods, 2007) as both her first landscape and use of color.<sup>12</sup> These elements appeared sporadically thereafter and now dominate. *The Wave* (2017) and *Phoenix* (2018) are indicative of this full turn: the first, an image of inexorable aquatic momentum caught mid-churn; the second, an ambitious, seven-foot-long woodcut of a volcano erupting in black, scarlet, crimson and indigo. Speaking with the artist in 2018, Jonathan Watkins calls attention to an oblique reference to the great German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich in Baumgartner's four *Nordlicht* (North Light) woodcuts (2018): the source photos were shot on the Baltic island of Rügen, across the Strela Sound from Friedrich's hometown of Griefswald, whose environs he often painted.<sup>13</sup> The rapid dissolution of light at sunset, pictured through the trees in these four woodcuts, is the kind of crepuscular, evanescent atmosphere Friedrich so often invoked. A concise, black-and-white *memento mori*, *Nordlicht* pictures the fleeting nature of time and of life.

In the 2016 diptych *Weisse Sonne* (white sun) and *Schwarze Sonne* (black sun), our home star first glows bright against an obscure dark landscape, and then in black, as if in eclipse—an all-powerful entity that both creates and destroys.

*Weisse Sonne* marked Baumgartner's first application of unique painterly color to the matrix during the printing process, an approach she pushed further in the *Cosmic Fruits* suite (2016).<sup>14</sup> Each of these nine, nearly abstract woodcuts features a trio of indecipherable glowing orbs, in a different array of zesty hues. This new monoprint approach dominates more recent works, such as the aforementioned *Happy Hour* suite and *Phoenix* (2018), which was printed from a single block and inked *à la poupée* in dabs and gradient blends that tumble and expand over the surface. The image offers both mini and macro explosions—the small chromatic blasts of ink and the titanic plume of dust and ash pictured by the matrix.

In her smaller work, Baumgartner explores the power of downscaling, intimate acquaintance and freely drawn line. These were hung in an adjoining hall-like space. One thoughtfully assembled wall showed five small unrelated woodcuts of nondescript high-rise buildings viewed from a distance. Their salon-style presentation allowed the viewer to compare monochrome to color and to note how choices of paper, inks, image resolution and line thickness affect similar subject matter. The cinematic suites *Strip* (14



photoengravings, 2011) and *Medway* (9 photogravures, 2013) provided a glimpse into Baumgartner's work with sequential imagery—a strong focus in her early career in works such as *I Sekunde* (25 woodcuts, 2004), *Final Cut* (portfolio of 12 screenprints and 4 woodcuts, 2006) and *Solaris I–IV* (4 woodcuts, 2008).<sup>15</sup> They mark what is perhaps the single most consistent concern of her career—the freezing of time-based images. *With and Without Thinking—Ultramarine* (6 color aquatints, 2018) was the sole representation of the investigations into automatist mark-making she began in 2009 (though many of these are drawings, she created a similar suite of color aquatints in 2013, *With and Without Thinking—NYC I–4*). She has described these as a form of escape from the discipline of the woodcuts, as well as her entrée into color,<sup>16</sup> but the installation provided little to assist the casual viewer in making sense of this distinctly different imagery.

In the catalogue's main essay, Whitner takes issue with earlier writers who have seen in Baumgartner's work a link to the German woodcut tradition, concurring with Christian Rümelin, curator of the 2014 Baumgartner retrospective "White Noise," who wrote that the artist "broke with . . . every tradition and every . . . connotation of woodcut."<sup>17</sup> In place of Dürer or German Expressionism as influences, Whitner posits that the rich printing and publishing history of Leipzig, where Baumgartner has lived and worked most of her life, has informed the artist's focus on information transmission. She identifies Baumgartner's early artist's book *Goethe, Faust* (1997), in which legible text from the play is juxtaposed with the artist's abstracted, letter-like forms, as predictive of her later interests in seriality, the passage of time and, most significantly, "the pivot between abstract forms and those that convey meaning and how the viewer imposes order and meaning on these images."<sup>18</sup>

Writing on *Another Country*, Field discusses Baumgartner's concern with perception and visual information, as well as the work's position in the long trajectory of woodcuts of the sea, from Jacopo de' Barbari's *View of Venice* (1500) to Vija Celmins's *Ocean Surface Woodcut* (1992). Field delves into ambiguities between Baumgartner's digital source and hand-made matrix, and carefully analyzes the confounding interplay of printed black and negative white that somehow

together produce an image in the mind. Viewers are, he writes, led to "question the very trust we put in all forms of representation, especially . . . high-resolution digital images, which are so vulnerable to manipulation."<sup>19</sup>

These are prints that resonate with various anxieties of our digital age: the degree to which we can trust images, the rapid dissemination and dissolution of information, the ubiquity of media, and the impact of all these things on how we view the world. From themes of man-made destruction to the power of nature, Baumgartner's work cautions against hubris and encourages us to consider how images shape our reality. Yet for her, all matters have two sides: in works such as *Another Country* and *Happy Hour*, she points the way toward hope and "the promise of a better future."<sup>20</sup> ■

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#### Notes:

1. Her one previous solo exhibition in the US was "The German Woodcut: Christiane Baumgartner" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 30 Sept 2017–19 Mar 2018, which focused on a group of works drawn from the collection.
2. In addition to small gallery publications going back to 2003, there have been two important catalogues: Christiane Baumgartner – White Noise, published in conjunction with her 2014 European traveling retrospective (see review in *Art in Print* Sep–Oct 2014) and the present catalogue.
3. Claire C. Whitner, "Among the Engravers, Etchers, and Gougers: Christiane Baumgartner and the German Printmaking Tradition," in Christiane Baumgartner: *Another Country*, 32. See also Thomas Marks, "I don't call myself a printmaker"—an interview with Christiane Baumgartner, *Apollo* online, 26 Mar 2018, [apollo-magazine.com/interview-with-christiane-baumgartner/](http://apollo-magazine.com/interview-with-christiane-baumgartner/).
4. For further discussion, see Sarah Kirk Hanley, "The Lexicon of Tomorrow: Print Based Installation," *Art21 Magazine*, 8 Apr 2011, [magazine.art21.org/2011/04/08/ink-the-lexicon-of-tomorrow-print-based-installation](http://magazine.art21.org/2011/04/08/ink-the-lexicon-of-tomorrow-print-based-installation).
5. Lisa Fischman and Christiane Baumgartner, "Interview with the Artist: Christiane Baumgartner in Conversation with Lisa Fischman, April 7–8, 2018," in Christiane Baumgartner, 13.
6. The artist also made a version with the central panel only titled simply *Luftbild* (2009).
7. Artist's talk at Wellesley College, 20 Sept 2018. See [youtu.be/z42A7oyOdz8](https://youtu.be/z42A7oyOdz8).
8. Fischman and Baumgartner, Christiane Baumgartner, 18.
9. *Ibid.*, 16.
10. See Benjamin Levy's review "Another Country" in *Art in Print* 6, no. 6 (March–April, 2017): 4.
11. Thomas Oberender first noted the Roman-

ticism in Baumgartner's work in an essay in Christiane Baumgartner: *Out of the Blue* (Haarlem: Johan Deumens Gallery, 2010). German text online at: [oberender.de/578\\_deutsch/3\\_text/19\\_2010/118\\_im\\_innenen\\_der\\_systeme\\_spuren\\_der\\_romantik\\_in\\_den\\_holzschnitten\\_christiane\\_baumgartners\\_in\\_out\\_of\\_the\\_blue\\_christiane\\_baumgartner\\_johan\\_deumens\\_gallery\\_haarlem\\_nl](http://oberender.de/578_deutsch/3_text/19_2010/118_im_innenen_der_systeme_spuren_der_romantik_in_den_holzschnitten_christiane_baumgartners_in_out_of_the_blue_christiane_baumgartner_johan_deumens_gallery_haarlem_nl).

12. Fischman and Baumgartner, Christiane Baumgartner, 21.

13. Jonathan Watkins and Christiane Baumgartner, "Baumgartner in conversation with Jonathan Watkins at Alan Cristea Gallery," in connection with "Christiane Baumgartner: Liquid Light," 21 Mar–21 Apr 2018, Alan Cristea Gallery, London; online: [alancristea.com/artists/54-christiane-baumgartner](http://alancristea.com/artists/54-christiane-baumgartner) ("Films") and [vimeo.com/272321777](http://vimeo.com/272321777).

14. Fischman and Baumgartner, Christiane Baumgartner, 22.

15. For images of some earlier works, see the artist's official website: [christiane-baumgartner.com/work.html](http://christiane-baumgartner.com/work.html).

16. Watkins and Baumgartner.

17. Christian Rümelin, "The Woodcuts of Christiane Baumgartner," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 14, no. 3 (2015), 226–227; as quoted by Whitner, 36.

18. *Ibid.*, 38.

19. Richard S. Field, "Another Country: Ambiguities Present and Past" in Christiane Baumgartner: *Another Country*, 50.

20. Fischman and Baumgartner, 18.