

GALLERIES • WEEKEND

For Peter Dreher, Every Day Is a Good Day

by **John Yau** on April 27, 2014



*Installation view, 'Peter Dreher: Day by Day, Good Day' at Koenig & Clinton
(all images courtesy Koenig & Clinton)*

Peter Dreher was born in Mannheim, Germany, in 1932, the same year as his fellow countryman, Gerhard Richter. Like Richter, Dreher was an adolescent by the war's end, an inheritor of an unwanted legacy, which haunts his work to this day. At the same time, Dreher might be seen as the antithesis of Richter, who began his career painting in a photorealist style, though this doesn't tell the whole story.

Richter, Sigmar Polke, Konrad Lueg and Manfred Kuttner were influenced by magazine reproductions of American Pop Art, particularly the work of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, but Dreher has cited the work of Giorgio Morandi and Jasper Johns as the catalyst for his painting series *Tag um Tag guter Tag* and others he has worked on during the past forty years. Like Morandi, Dreher is committed to direct observation of a highly circumscribed view, but with what might be defined as a conceptual bias. His work lands on the spectrum somewhere between conceptual painters (Roman Opalka and On Kawara) and observational painters (Lois Dodd, Catherine Murphy, Sylvia Plimack-Mangold and Josephine Halvorson).

Dreher is the plodding turtle to Richter's speedy rabbit. In 1972 — nearly a decade after Richter, Polke, Lueg and Kuttner coined the term “Capitalist Realism” for their self-organized exhibition in Dusseldorf — Dreher did the first painting in a series that he would later title *Tag um Tag guter Tag*, a small portion of which is on view at Koenig & Clinton (April 17–May 24, 2014) under the title *Day by Day, Good Day*. While the gallery has done a literal translation of Dreher's title, the series has also been known as *Every Day Is a Good Day*, which I prefer, as it evokes Yunmen's Zen Buddhist proverb as well as being John Cage's favorite statement.

Tag um Tag guter Tag now numbers over 5000 paintings of the same subject: an empty glass on a table. Done in oil, mostly on canvas, nearly all of the works are around ten by eight inches. Within the series there are two groups, the ones Dreher has done at night and the ones he has done during the day.



Peter Dreher, “Tag um Tag guter Tag, No. 0 ” (1972)

According to Johns, one reason he picked the American flag as a subject was because it is a thing that “is seen and not looked at — examined.” The changing relationship between seeing and knowing is central to *Tag um Tag guter Tag*. Is it that we see the drinking glass and the surface on which it sits but do not know them? Or is it that we know and can define the glass and table, but do not actually see the transparent and reflective surfaces?

According to Benjamin Buchloh, Richter is one of the few German artists to deal — however indirectly — with questions of historical memory, particularly having to do with the World War II, or, what he terms, “the caesura

of civilization.” It seems to me that Dreher is also dealing with World War II, but in at least two ways that differ from Richter’s preoccupation with historical memory. First, in *Tag um Tag guter Tag*, Dreher is reconsidering the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and his argument with Edmund Husserl, whom he succeeded in 1928 as Professor of Philosophy at the University of Freiburg. Husserl believed that consciousness is intentional and directed towards something, while Heidegger felt it was necessary to dismantle the language of philosophy, in order to understand how we can be aware of something without necessarily concentrating on it, such as the glass we are holding as we drink from it.



Peter Dreher, “Tag um Tag guter Tag, No. 2441 (Day)” (2012)

By directing his attention towards an empty glass, Dreher can be said to be dismantling painting, revealing it as a way of exploring the relationship between seeing and knowing. We see the glass, but do we know anything about its particular existence at this moment in time? What do the upside-down reflections in the glass tell of? Is the glass in a room with a window, and does that window open onto a bright sun in a blue sky with a few clouds? Does the reflection’s inversion suggest something about Dreher’s experience of reality? What about the paintings done at night, when we can see the studio’s overhead light fixtures reflected in the glass? Do we then recognize something about the glass’ existence in time, especially since we too live in time and face our mortality?

It also seems to me that in picking this rather ordinary subject and returning to it time and time again, *Tag um Tag guter Tag* is about trauma. In his essay “On the Natural History of Destruction” (1997), W. G. Sebald wrote about the allied bombing of German cities, pointing out that there was little writing in postwar Germany about it and its effects on the populace. Dreher’s father was killed at the Russian front, and the family house in

Mannheim was destroyed by Allied bombing, uprooting him.

In an [interview with Lynne Tillman](#) in *Bomb* 57 (Fall 1996), remembering the bombing and being homeless as a child, Dreher states that painting the glass is the only thing that calms his anxiety: “It’s very funny to say, it’s the only place and the only hours in my life when I really feel quiet. Maybe I don’t make the impression of being unquiet, but I am.”



Peter Dreher, “Tag um Rag guter Tag, No. 1552 Night ” (1997)

I thought about Dreher’s remark while I walked around the exhibition, which consisted of a grid of sixty glass paintings arranged in five rows of twelve on one wall, and a row of them spanning the length of the other three walls. Done between 1972 and 2013, there are around 200 paintings in the exhibition and, for all their similarity in scale, mediums, and look, they are distinct and different. And yet the glass, whose perimeter Dreher always traces onto the canvas before he begins, is literally the same and always different. There is no ideal, no perfect version; there is only difference. I thought about the reflective skies in the paintings done during the day, the edge of an adjacent building visible in the upside-down window, the immensity the artist was able to evoke in a small area of a modest-sized painting. I also thought about the fierceness, tenderness and devotion embodied within them.

The dots and dabs of paint underscore the visceral aspect of experience — that we see and feel our way through the world. A master tonalist, Dreher registers the slightest shifts and modulations of light. In painting the glass, the artist wants to discover that it is still there and whole when the work is finished. For Dreher, this commonplace object few of us would invest any feeling in has become an anchor, a sense that life can go on, that all is not broken forever.