

Sheets, Hilarie M., "Reviews: New York – Frank Thiel," *ARTnews*, June 2006.

ARTnews

Frank Thiel

Sean Kelly

For more than a decade, Frank Thiel has been photographing the dramatic decay of the industrial areas in the former East Berlin and the rebuilding of Berlin as a unified city. In "Void Territory," Thiel focused on the distressed walls of dilapidated buildings and found magnificence in the ruins.

In the main gallery, nine large-scale, tightly cropped color images showed vast fields of peeling paint. In one, curls of green paint cling to a wall like fluttering young leaves. Another picture has the subtle beauty of a Robert Ryman painting, with white flakes casting pale shadows on a smooth white surface below them. In the show's unabashedly gorgeous and perceptually tricky centerpiece, it is hard to tell if beige paint is peeling off a sky-blue wall, or blue paint off a beige wall. These images allude to the world of abstract painting in their attention to color, texture, scale, and composition. At the same time, they are adamantly documentary photographs of two-dimensional surfaces made three-dimensional by their disintegration.

The decorative colors in these images suggested they were of interior walls, while three photographs in a smaller gallery—pictures of pocked cement or cinder block coated with tar and torn black paper—were clearly of exterior surfaces. They brought to mind the paintings of Anselm Kiefer in scale and tone, as well as the pioneering black-and-white photographs by Aaron Siskind, whose close-ups of paint-splotched walls fluctuated between representation and abstraction. Viewers need not know that Thiel is originally from East Germany to find his images powerful, but the artist's history, and the history visibly embedded in these walls, move his work beyond esthetics.

—Hilarie M. Sheets



Frank Thiel, *Stadt 12/30 (Berlin)*, 2005,
chromogenic print mounted on Plexiglas, 93" x 72".

Sean Kelly.