Colman, David. “Frank Thiel,” *Elle Décor*, November 2009.

ELLE DECOR

art

Frank Thiel, outside the cinema Kosmos, in Berlin.

Frank Thiel

With ethereally beautiful and abstract images, a German photographer makes pungent social commentary on the unification and rebuilding of his homeland. By David Colman

One need only look around at the state of the world to note that evolution does not automatically involve human betterment. "Oh, now, but surely," you say, "look at technology, medicine, art. Look at architecture, the marvelous edifices that mankind has erected through the millennia—the Pantheon, the cathedral at Chartres, Lever House. These buildings are surely an improvement!"

Well, look a little closer, as photographer Frank Thiel has done in Berlin, a place where progress has had a pretty tricky history. Holding a camera up to the steady reunification and rebuilding of the city, Thiel has developed a poetic but pointed take on the process. It's a vision that builds on a foundation laid by other postindustrial German photographers such as Bernd and Hilla Becher, Thomas Struth, and Andreas Gursky. But unlike those artists, whose supreme detachment translates into a richly ambiguous commentary all its own, Thiel tackles the subject of the new Germany head-on.

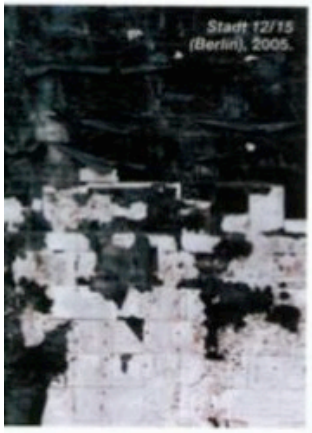
He started with the 1990 demolition of the Berlin Wall, which was difficult to address dispassionately, then moved on to soldiers at Checkpoint Charlie. Those images, part of Thiel's postunification "Allies" series, bulge with the uneasy and all-too-recent history they conjure.

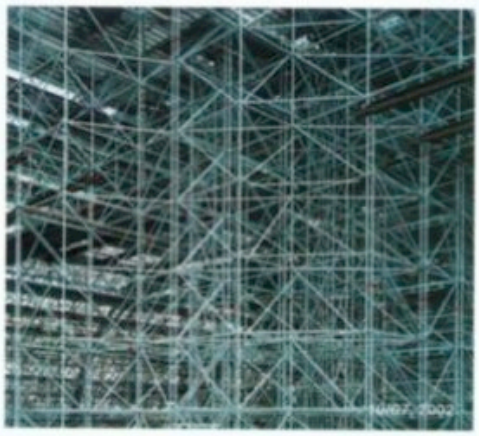
"People are always trying to label me as a Becher student, and they are a main influence, of course—there's no point in denying it," says Thiel. But he notes that he never studied with the couple and bristles at the suggestion that his work somehow echoes the Bechers' cold-eyed approach. What's more, Thiel says he dropped out of art school because the faculty encouraged students to keep a critical distance from their subjects. "I decided to learn by doing things instead of being at the academy," he says, a bit proudly. "Teaching creativity is complex. It's an ideology: Either you believe in it or you don't."

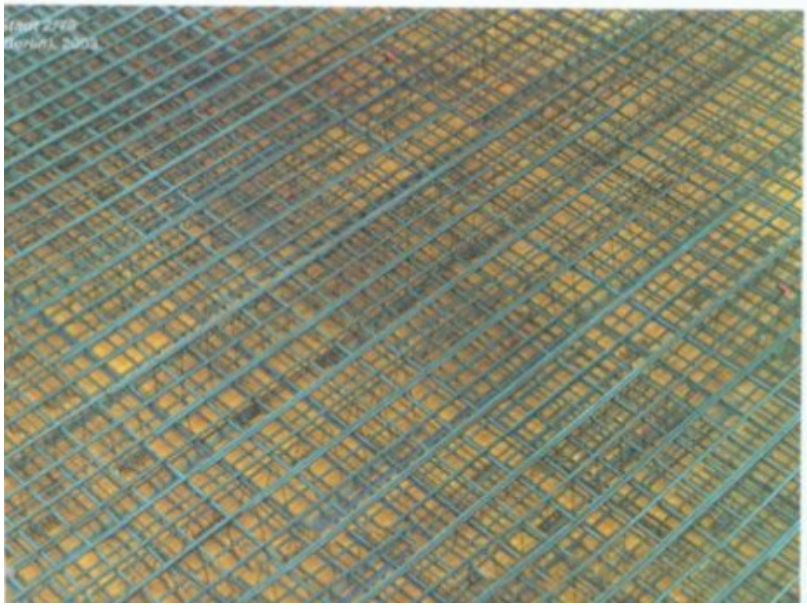
As the 1990s wore on and the construction cranes and wrecking balls became a more banal sight, ▷

84 ELLEDECOR.COM


Stadt 12/10 (Berlin), 2004.


Stadt 12/15 (Berlin), 2005.





Thiel's photographs of buildings going up and coming down grew increasingly abstract. His show last spring at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York took this silent approach-cum-reproach to a new level. Titled "Void Territory" (a term reminiscent of the verboten no-man's-land that straddled the Berlin Wall), the exhibition shows how Thiel went close-up to his subjects in a forlorn area of the former East Berlin. He zeroed in on the peeling paint and derelict walls of old factories with images that are so crystal clear one almost feels compelled to grab a scraper and get to work. But with the flaking paint sealed forever in photo emulsion, the pictures play more into the great Japanese aesthetic tradition of *wabi-sabi*, that melancholy feeling of seeing something going beautifully to seed.

It's a mood and a tone that perfectly capture Thiel's ambivalence. On one hand, he is passionate about wanting Germany and Berlin to move on and thrive. He also feels the need to see, and relay, something fantastic and sublime. Yet he can't help his role as self-appointed monitor chronicling the social and financial interests and the conflicts forever erupting from their friction.

"Berlin has 60 billion euros of debt—it's a very serious situation," he says, ticking off a laundry list of the city's cultural and real estate crises, none of which, in his opinion, are being addressed properly. "But I didn't want to photograph poor people or homeless people, or just go cataloguing ruins and empty spaces. I wanted to find a different way to talk about it. And why not a beautiful way?" ■


Stadt 2/29 (Berlin), 1998


Stadt 12/38 (Berlin), 2005.