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MODERN PAINTERS

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UNDERGROUND
MANTOBY
ZIEGLER
TAKES OVER
A CAR PARK

BY COLINE MILLIARD PHOTOGRAPH BY THIERRY BAL



This month an uncanny sculptural landscape is to take shape 14 floors below London's West End. Five tessellated masses of oxidized aluminum, faintly illuminated by monumental light boxes, will replace the elegant automobiles in a subterranean Burlington car park. Art in garages is nothing new to the British capital; in just six years, Hannah Barry's "Bold Tendencies," on the top floors of a multistory parking lot in Peckham, South London, has become a much-respected urban sculpture park. But the Mayfair project is another beast altogether. The immersive installation is a solo exhibition by Toby Ziegler and one of his most ambitious bodies of work to date. Like most of the artist's production, the ensemble is saturated with references—here ranging from medieval art to war porn. "There was a painting that I kept looking at, a small Brueghel called *The Cripples*," says Ziegler, lighting his umpteenth cigarette while I visit his Brondesbury Park studio. He turns to the computer and searches Google Images to show me Pieter Brueghel the Elder's celebrated 1568 painting: five grotesque beggars kitted out with prosthetic limbs and carnival wear, crawling on a measly patch of grass. "The first time I saw it, I immediately thought of a photo of me and my family, which was always in the family album—it was a sort of running joke, that we all look so dysfunctional," he says.



Toby Ziegler in his
London studio.

"WHEN YOU MAKE THINGS BY HAND IN THE REAL WORLD, AS OPPOSED TO THE EUCLIDEAN SPACE OF THE COMPUTER, THEY CAN NEVER BE PERFECT."



As we talk, Ziegler jumps from the personal to the historical, peppering his speech with family memories, news facts, and obscure art anecdotes. At some point he starts off on the gruesome photographs of Iraq war victims uploaded by soldiers on a show-your-own-porn Web site, next to pictures of naughty housewives. Minutes later, the artist is telling me about his idea for a new series based on cropped details of historical paintings and raves about the rug in the background of an annunciation. Ziegler's rapid train of thought is as multilayered as the sculptures and paintings he produces: loosely connected ideas flit in and out, long enough to make themselves noticed but not to become focal points. At the core of this rhizomatic network of interests lies a fascination with the way visual information is distributed, transformed, and degraded. Ziegler is an enthusiastic collector of images. His studio walls are lined with art books, but the Internet is his natural hunting ground. "A lot of my works are based on an art historical object but it's usually something that I've only encountered secondhand," he told me when we first met a couple of years ago. "The process of making them becomes about reimagining them completely."

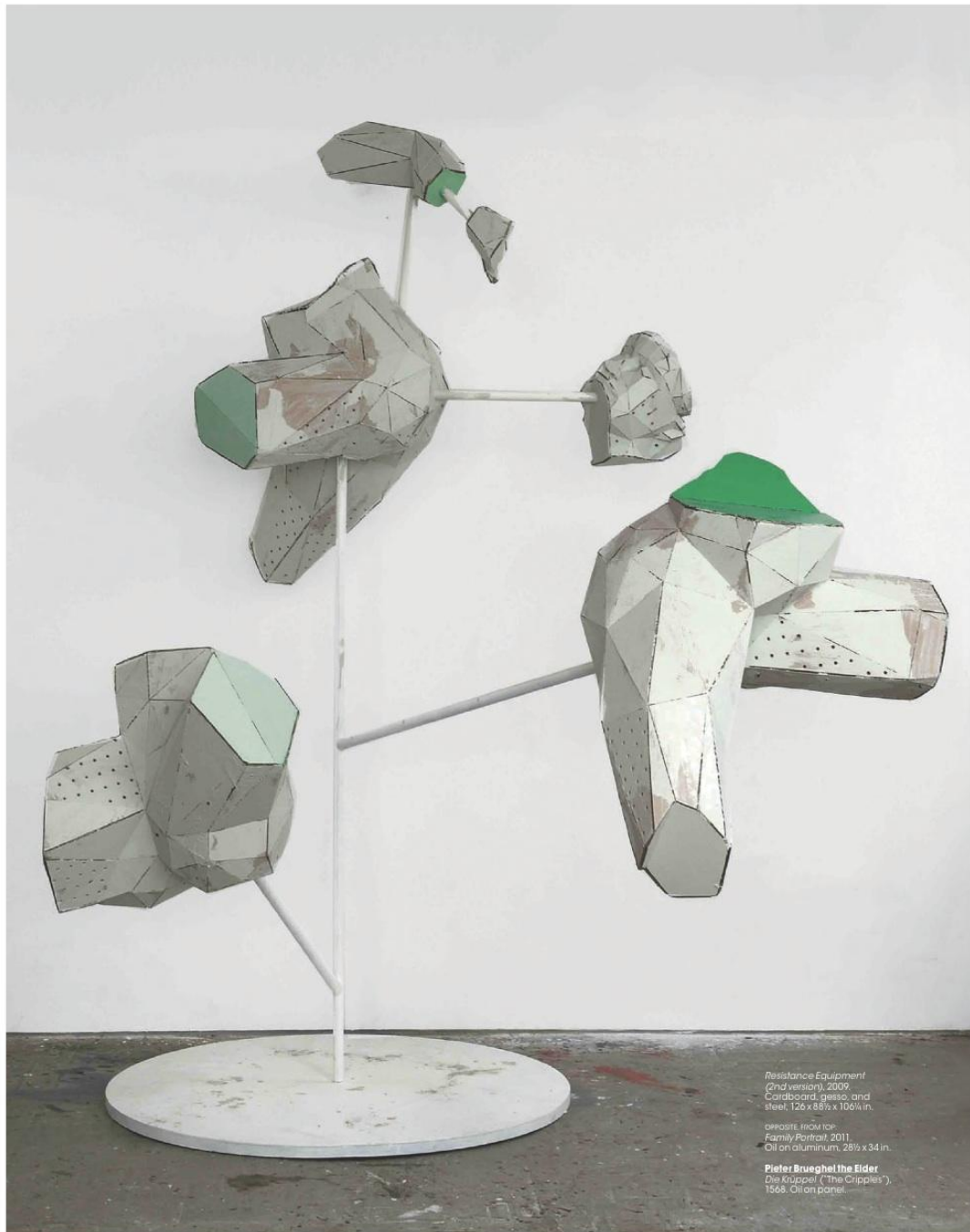
The Bruegel painting glowing on Ziegler's screen is one of the many pictures that have accompanied the artist in recent years. Because of its real or fantasized links with his family memorabilia, it was the starting point for a painting, *Family Portrait*, in 2011. In this oil on aluminum panel, the mendicants are partially erased and covered in peach-orange spots, as if one were looking at the picture after having just stared at the sun for too long. *The Cripples* are now to reemerge in the Mayfair car park, each Bruegel figure inspiring a specific sculpture. The painting offered a new challenge to the artist who, in his sculptures, tends to work from found images of three-dimensional objects. Ziegler's method involves the translation of

the picture into a virtual polygon-based model—"a very inadequate description of their form," he says—using 3-D software. There are also many paper trials, more tweaking on the computer, then the cutting and folding of a sheet of aluminum, later oxidized with salted water and caustic soda. "The works go through this strange process of vacillating in and out of two and three dimensions," he explains. But for Bruegel's characters, the process wasn't a reimagination as much as an actual invention of fictional solids. The painted fools of the past had to be coaxed out of their native flatness and pushed out into the tangible world.

Although Ziegler starts sculpting in the disembodied digital realm, where visual perfection can be achieved in a few clicks, his pieces are intensely physical. And they really come to life only at the fabrication stage, not as pure mathematical graphics, but as crusty entities, undermined by the flaws a handmade process necessarily entails. "When you make things by hand in the real world, as opposed to the Euclidean space of the computer, they can never be perfect," he says with undisguised glee. "They become completely fallible." The whole production happens in the studio, at a modest cottage-industry scale, which affords Ziegler both a degree of control and the desired level of serendipity. There's also an inescapable sense of nostalgia for the modernist ideal of truth-to-the-material in this work. The Bruegel-inspired sculptures might at times appear as monumental as marble statues, but they do not conceal their nature. "Oxidized aluminum plays a game with the idea of mass," the artist explains. "It has a stony quality and it kind of asks you to believe in the mass of the object, but at the same it totally betrays its hollowness. It asks you to believe in the form and then reminds you that it's an illusion."

In the Mayfair installation, Ziegler has purposely left one of the sculptures partially open to further

FROM TOP: TOBY ZIEGLER AND SIMON LEE GALLERY, LONDON; WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; OPPOSITE: TOBY ZIEGLER AND SIMON LEE GALLERY





Fragment 1, 2011.
Aluminum and wood,
78 x 50 1/2 x 31 in.
*chrome, bronze
in Praise of Envy
(distended)*, 2007.
Paper, PVA, and pencil,
23 x 15 1/4 x 11 in.
Installation view of
'Toby Ziegler: The
Alienation of Objects'
at the Zabłudowicz
Collection in London.



disclose its shell-like character. When he shows me the piece in the studio, the artist mentions a ghost's sheet, Auguste Rodin's iconic monument to Honoré de Balzac, and the spectral photograph of its plaster cast shot in moonlight by Edward Steichen. The shape of Brueghel's beggar is only a residual memory, impossible to recognize unprompted. "I didn't want the sculptures to be that figurative," Ziegler says. "I wanted them to be quite lumpy and ambiguous."

Art history is for him a pool of images to tap into, a springboard he says—never an end in itself. "It's dangerous talking about their origins sometimes," he says, as if to warn me. "People get stuck with that, they think that's a key or an explanation, which it really isn't. I want people to have an experience with a thing, and hopefully it has all sorts of resonance, some of which is there because of the 'mother object,' some of which is there because of the way I've dealt with it, and a lot of it probably has to do with whatever experiences they've had."

Ziegler's ambivalence toward his art sources is a crux of his practice. And more often than not, the pieces he "quotes" are selected for reasons having little to do with the themes or ideas they represent. *The Cripples* chimes with the artist's ongoing interest in fragmented bodies and broken classical sculptures kept intact by metal rods. Like these, Brueghel's painting combines representations of organic and geometric shapes, the latter acting as a support, almost as a crutch, for the former. This dynamic subverts

much of Ziegler's recent work. In the artist's latest solo show at Simon Lee Gallery, a series of freestanding pieces inspired by Paleolithic stone carvings—one of the earliest examples of man-made figurative sculpture—relied on wooden structures, what the artist refers to as "a frame, a prophetic limb, a retort stand." Most of the oxidized aluminum sculptures in the 2010 exhibition "The Alienation of Objects" at the Zabludowicz Collection, involved wooden frames—ones that took on a life of their own. It "becomes a kind of network between the objects," Ziegler says. "[It] draws the space for these things to exist in and then connects them in it."

In the Mayfair car park, the sculptures' wooden frames echo the prosthetic limbs of Brueghel's beggars; they also resonate with the white parking lines painted on the floor, carving out a geometric volume from the urban grotto. Giant light boxes further define the installation's cavernous space. They all depict the same close-up, a "forest of horse legs," says Ziegler, borrowed from Piero della Francesca's *Legend of the True Cross* cycle of frescoes in Arezzo, Italy. Some light boxes are in color, others in black and white and vaguely redolent of Picasso's *Guernica* (looping us back to the Iraq war victims). "I wanted them to be windows and to depict another space," says the artist, "but for it to be quite a claustrophobic space." Ziegler at once nods toward Leon Battista Alberti's seminal comparison of a painting to a window in *Della pittura* and undermines it. His "windows" aren't what Thomas McEvilley, discussing the Renaissance man's concept in *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, describes as "a channel specially devised to facilitate avoidance of the here-and-now"—quite the opposite. Ziegler's light boxes function as barriers, they trap the visitor in the installation's surreal here-and-now, the unseen knights ready to trample any tentative fugitive. "Maybe this crop works because it's underground and because you've only got this bottom section of the image," muses Ziegler, when I ask him about his choice of picture. "And maybe it works because a lot of the figures are also missing their legs—maybe it's that crude. I don't really know, is the honest answer." **MP**

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FROM TOP: TONY ZIEGLER AND SIMON LEE GALLERY; ZABLUDOWICZ COLLECTION, LONDON; OPPOSITE: TONY ZIEGLER AND SIMON LEE GALLERY