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