

Marika Thunder

sensitive machines

Opening Oct 10th, 6–9 pm
Oct 10th–Nov 13th, 2025
Caprii by Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf

“It seemed as if the machine could not exist without the man, nor the man without the machine.”

Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* (1919) describes an outlandish execution apparatus with such obsessive detail that the line between human and machine begins to dissolve. The story is not merely about physical or mental punishment, but about the miscellaneous forms in which institutions shape the body and psyche, making visible the violence of order through a device that is both terrifying and oddly intimate. In Kafka's vision, the machine becomes more than a tool—it is a living organism, a mirror of human obsession with transformation, control, and endurance. Marika Thunder's first exhibition at Caprii by Sies + Höke takes up this uncanny space between flesh and metal; and intimacy and institution. Her oil paintings, drawn from photographs of cars and trains found in junkyards, render machines as anthropomorphic forms, corporealities in flux. Just as Kafka's apparatus inscribes law upon human skin, Thunder's machines embody the cultural inscriptions left by institutions she's encountered. Her previous paintings depicting schools, rituals, and social practices such as cotillion ceremonies, Yeshiva, or the fantasies of her childhood celebrity scrapbooks. Through vibrant and subversive painterly configurations, she reveals how these seemingly ordinary objects are charged with memory, anxiety, and the collective desire to self-actualize. Thunder approaches machinery not as inert matter, but as a mirror of human aspiration. Her images suggest that machines embody our most physical impulses: the drive to repair, modify, and enhance. The battered car frame becomes a portrait of exhaustion; the gleaming surface of exercise equipment, a motif she likewise often uses, a stand-in for the endless cultural mandate to relentlessly improve your body. We attempt to become better versions of ourselves through the very machines that exhaust and discipline us. Cars and trains are reimagined in Thunder's canvases as sensitive beings. This destabilization of cultural codes is central to her practice as the language of machinery becomes a vehicle for vulnerability, undermining the tired narratives of domination that continue to surround both machines and the bodies they serve.

In his writings on modernity, Walter Benjamin suggested that things, whether arcades, photographs, or discarded objects, retain an “aura,” a trace of lived history that reveals itself in unexpected ways. Thunder draws on this same logic when she turns to the junkyard as a site of excavation. The wrecked car or disassembled train carriage, stripped of function, nonetheless bears the memory of use, of journeys taken, of anonymous hands and bodies once in contact with them. By translating these fragments into paint, she restores their aura, allowing viewers to sense the collective unconscious that vibrates within the most banal or neglected forms.

Thereby, Thunder attends to the machine's condition as ruin and as a form in transition. Benjamin famously observed that in the fragment, the object reveals itself most truthfully, not as a pristine commodity but as a ruin charged with historical energy. Thunder's canvases inhabit this same dialectic. The twisted chassis or rusted engine is no longer simply scrap; in its damaged state, it becomes legible as a portrait of cultural desire and fatigue.

In this way, Thunder's paintings also meditate on the tension between progress and decay. If the machine has long stood as a symbol of modernity's promise including mobility, speed, and “mastery” over the physical world, her depictions reveal the exhaustion that inevitably follows.

The machine, like the human body, cannot escape breakdown. Yet in Thunder's work, breakdown is not an end, but an opening, a moment when the hidden aura of the object becomes visible. Thunder's exhibition reminds us that beauty resides not only in polished surfaces or perfected forms but in ruins, anxiety, and transformation inscribed in the everyday. By collapsing the divide between the human and the mechanical, she creates a space where viewers confront their own complicity in the endless cycle of enhancement and obsolescence.

By Claire Koron Elat