



Lawrence Gipe: *Lombardsbrücke*, 1938, 2006, oil on canvas, 60 by 84 inches; at Alexander Gray.

Lawrence Gipe at Alexander Gray

Lawrence Gipe has explored the relationship between authoritarianism and art practice since the late 1980s. He has appropriated and re-presented heroically scaled images of progress, technology and power in the manner of socialist realism, inviting us to consider the seductive promise of ideologically driven art.

The four understated paintings in Gipe's show at Alexander Gray Associates, all dated 2006, presented a change of pace, if not direction. The focal point was *Lombardsbrücke, 1938* (60 by 84 inches), a tranquil cityscape of figures walking toward brilliant sunlight. In another section of the gallery were two more oil paintings of about the same size, one of armed and agitated Qashqai nomads on horseback (*Iran, 1946*), the other showing two wooden ships packed with Jewish immigrants (*Palestine, 1946*). A small gouache depicting four Americans playing golf beside an oil pipeline in the desert (*Saudi Arabia, 1948*) provided a coda to this group.

The last three works are based on pictures taken by the American photojournalist David Douglas Duncan, who worked in the Middle East for *Life* magazine from 1946 to 1950. Gipe's use of documentary photographs accounted for the show's initial impression of restraint and detachment. However, this veneer was peeled away by the obvious irony of golfers teeing off beside a desert pipeline. The use of images from the 1940s reminds us that the problems in the Middle East have lasted decades, and the selection of pictures from an iconic American journal subtly alludes to the lengthy history of this country's interventions in the region.

Offering such readings fulfills one of Gipe's central intentions: he omits labels and personal statements from his shows to cultivate what art historian Ernst Gombrich once called "the beholder's share." This is intended as a calculated contrast to the programmatic images he typically appropriates and is a means of highlighting the malleability or, in Gipe's words, "the amorality" of art.

His method of appropriation emphasizes the distance between the "objective" lens

of the photographer and the "subjective" act of painting. By reworking small black-and-white photographs on canvas, brushstroke by brushstroke, Gipe invests the image with a new grandeur, craftsmanship and chromatic appeal. In the Hamburg street scene *Lombardsbrücke, 1938* Gipe has painted the sky with the luminosity of a Turner landscape and the passersby walking into the light toward the eponymous bridge with a shadowy ambiguity akin to figures in de Chirico's metaphysical paintings. This enhances the lyrical qualities of the original picture, which was reproduced in a prewar German photographic annual because it fitted Nazi esthetics. Gipe's painting is a radiant but disturbing vision that left the visitor wondering whether the shadowy figures were victims or fellow travelers of the Nazis and, taking in the whole show, whether more immediate issues were implied by exhibiting this painting adjacent to a group of works evoking tensions in the Middle East.

—Ann Compton