

## Julia Trolp - Seeing Things Clearly

One late winter morning at the beginning of the year, I have an appointment to meet René Wirths at his studio in Berlin, to look at his latest works. I travel by subway to the rendezvous, the train screeching and rocking, full of people and smells. I get out and cross a busy, four-lane road. I am surrounded by traffic and noise, the city is all around me. I arrive at the studio and Wirths opens the door. He welcomes me dressed in painter's clothing. Inside it smells of fresh oil paint. I sit down and look at the painting leaning against the wall, on which the artist is presently working: a red bicycle on a white background. Completely clear and reduced, it exudes simplicity and calm. I have arrived in another world.

René Wirths is a painter and he has never used any other medium. He was already painting long before the art market trumpeted the "rediscovery of painting" for the umpteenth time. For Wirths, painting is and remains his way of perceiving reality and capturing it artistically. He is constant in his efforts: for years he has been creating one picture after another and the artist's oeuvre is growing slowly and continually. The realistic style of representation which marks Wirths work involves an intense and time-consuming painting process. The pictures are densified, layer by layer, the object being portrayed is brought out in detail with fine brushstrokes until, finally, the "thing" can be recognised with all its characteristics. Wirths does not however work in a strictly naturalistic style - the artist wants, above all, to capture the appearance of things. If one were to place the real objects beside the paintings, one could surprisingly spot the differences between model and its painted image.

For the artist, simple objects which he encounters in the course of his daily life, selected for their external appearance, are what he chooses to paint. But, as Wirths emphasises, the autobiographical aspect is not to the fore. The artist's relationship with the object is not of prime importance but rather the object must "be fit to be painted" because of its aesthetic character. Over the years, René Wirths has painted a large repertoire of objects. He has translated the widest possible variety of things into two dimensions on canvas and thus made them into part of his constantly growing vocabulary. With regard to the paintings which Wirths is now presenting on the occasion of his one-man show at the Michael Haas Gallery, the material of the objects serves as a link to join the individual canvases together. We see bicycles, chairs and wire which are rolled together. Metal is the common element. The paintings of these seemingly technical objects are rounded out with a self-portrait of the artist. Wirths thus engages with two of the great themes of painting history: the portrait and the still life.

What the objects most recently painted by René Wirths have in common, is that they are all shown against a white background; the real surroundings have been taken away in the picture. By rejecting complexity, it becomes possible to perceive the individual object phenomenologically and thus to press forward to "the thing itself" just as was demanded by Edmund Husserl in his philosophical doctrine of phenomenology at the beginning of the 20th Century. Phenomenology, the doctrine of appearances, sees that which is directly perceivable as the source of enlightenment. Husserl proposed that one should orientate oneself on "the thing itself" and let oneself be led only by what is evident. The description of the object serves as the method, whereby all prior knowledge and prejudice are to be set aside. In this manner, knowledge is achieved purely through perception. It appears to me that this philosophical doctrine is the basis of René Wirths work: the artist lets his work be guided by what is evident, what he really has. For the artist, the painting process is an acquisition of knowledge and thus becomes a phenomenological method which, in the painting itself, remains comprehensible for the viewer.

The removal in the paintings of the surroundings which serve only to distract from the object is taken a logical step further in the representational perspective: objects are reproduced in such a way that they appear to be parallel to the canvas. In this manner, the transformation of a three-dimensional object into a two-dimensional painting is simplified and as few perspectival foreshortenings as possible are created. For Wirths it is not a question of creating a fictitious space in the painting - he represents the objects as being almost flat and primarily underlines the drawing aspect. René Wirths does, however, make one change: the real object is shown slightly larger than life on the canvas although he always displays moderation in this regard. Chuck Close, another painter who also uses a realistic style, or Ron Mueck, who creates hyper-realistic figurative sculpture, both proceed differently. Both of these artists alter the size of their artworks in relation to the model to an extreme degree and their effect is largely due to this modification. But with Wirths it is different. By painting objects he transports them onto another plane of existence and makes them into pictures but physically, we can stand in a similar relationship with them as we do to the real object. Thus René Wirths method is less spectacular than that of the two artists mentioned above. For him the painting is the means to a new perception without shock. Where Close and Mueck build on sensation, Wirths prefers the viewer to encounter the artwork quietly. The composition of René Wirths paintings also demonstrates a clear method of proceeding: the objects depicted define the size of the canvas.

Their extremities, such as in the case of the black chair, the edge of the chair back and the legs, each touch the edges of the canvas. Using this simple but clever method of composition, Wirths not only thematizes the depicted object, but also extends his artistic considerations to the canvas. Thus the works go beyond a purely painterly engagement, and move towards the conceptual. In contrast to the classic still life as we know it, for example, from Dutch 17th Century painting, René Wirths paintings show only a single item and not a crowded arrangement of objects. The voluptuousness of that period is alien to Wirths, his style is more akin to that of Caravaggio who, in 1596, dared to depict a single fruit basket with no other ornament. In the foreground of the painting we see a superbly painted, delicate little basket, containing many different fruits complete with greenery. The background of the painting is light throughout - a simple coloured background which does not attempt to define a space. In this instance Caravaggio, the great provocateur, who angered the rather conservative minds of his time with his brutally naturalistic portrayals, painted just that which he deemed important - the fruit basket and nothing else.

That this painting is reminiscent of René Wirths method is however not only evident in his elimination of the surroundings, but also in the composition of the picture: Caravaggio has placed the fruit basket almost at the bottom edge of the canvas, with only a narrow, dark brown strip visible below it, letting the viewer guess at a wooden table. In this way Caravaggio creates a direct dialogue between the object depicted and one edge of the canvas. Wirths goes a step further with his works, in that he takes all of the edges into his artistic considerations and virtually stretches the mundane objects that he paints into the canvas.

Alongside Caravaggio, one should also mention another artist who later on, in the 18th Century, appealed for simplicity in art: Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin. Led by the spirit of the Enlightenment, he painted still lifes which were deliberately free of all contentual meaning and which focused solely on the painterly reproduction of the object (picture example 5). For Chardin, it was not a case of depicting great religious messages or illustrating the pomp of the royal court, but of perceiving the pure appearance of a simple object, in other words, "the thing itself". And it was about the pleasure of painting - an element which Wirths also constantly emphasises.

Alongside the series of "metallic objects", there is also one self-portrait of the artist in the exhibition. Although it is, on the one hand, an isolated piece, it nevertheless throws a "painterly nod" to the other pictures, linking them all together: in the reflection which one can see on the metallically smooth surface of the white bicycle's lamp, very small and overlooked at first glance, one can recognise the artist at work in his studio (picture example 6). At this point we look back quickly at Chardin's still life, which demonstrates a similar effect in the surface of the metal chalice - the distorted reflection of an apple lying beside the drinking vessel.

In René Wirths self portrait, the artist is shown at work in his studio. Yes here, unlike in the pictures discussed above, the background and thus the real surroundings of the figure have been depicted. That section of the artist's studio which we can recognise is determined by the dimensions of the figure: just like in the other pictures, the person defines the limits of the canvas and touches on its edges. Wirths thus shows us himself in this picture and one of his living spaces - his studio. We recognise that person who cleanses real objects in a painting process and then shows them to us clearly on the canvas. That person becomes visible who, like a monk, disappears for days on end into his cell and disconnects himself from reality for a certain length of time, in order to dedicate himself to intense, almost meditative, activity. Daily life, the city and the noise have to stay outside the studio, so that one can paint as Wirths does. That the artist however never loses touch with reality is evident in his paintings: he builds up a distance between himself and the world to ultimately come closer to it. Things have seldom been as clear and precise as they are in René Wirths paintings.