

Since the late 1990s, the painter René Wirths has repeatedly placed a single carefully chosen object at the absolute center of his attention for the period of time that he requires to complete a painting. His selection of motifs runs from the organic to the inorganic, including such simple and everyday objects as a roll of toilet paper (Klopapierrolle, 2005/2006), an apple (Apfel, 2013), a used leather football (Ball, 2008), a sneaker (Turnschuh, 2013) and a metallicly gleaming premium-brand motorcycle (Motorrad, 2010). But as present as each and every one of these objects may seem, depicted frontally or in strict profile, in larger-than-life dimensions and isolated before a white background, this is all the more a means to an end and/or the vehicle of a consistent analysis that, in its balancing of painterly potentials, gives rise to iconic paintings.

On closer inspection, these works evoke a broad multifarity of references – references which, covering a range reaching from classical and art-historical topoi to painting-related theoretical issues and visual culture, reveal the painter to be a true connoisseur of his field above and beyond his indisputable technical ability. Though one can hardly deny that René Wirths, with his deliberate allusions to figures such as Marcel Duchamp and René Magritte, inhabits the broadly defined genre of realist painting, these very allusions at the same time suggest that his formal composition and mercilessly analytical method of capturing reality are also elements of a highly conceptual approach. In his transference of the observation of an object from the so-called real world to the no-less-real pictorial world – capturing shapes, colors, material textures and surface qualities while simultaneously magnifying the motifs and translating them into the medium of painting – one can discern a transitory and abstracting aspect that would seem to contradict any definite attribution of Wirths' oeuvre to an “-ism.”

Wirths' paintings thus meander along the threshold between trompe l'oeil-like illusionism and the conscious emphasis of genuine medium-specific forms of expression at the crossroads between being and seeming, between objecthood and the

subjectivity of perception. This inherent dialecticism of his oeuvre is reflected by the title *Aus der Welt* (Out of this World); it serves to emphasize both the worldly quality of Wirths' paintings and the isolation revealed by their objects, which he tears out of their real-world contexts, surreally exaggerates, and transfers onto the white canvas in a painterly aesthetic language. This title can also be understood as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the fact that contemporary realistic painting (or painting that is otherwise beholden to the visible world) is perceived to exude the *haut goût* of the superficial, old-fashioned, and purely technical – a persistent prejudice that can often cloud one's ability to appreciate a deeper interpretive approach and most certainly falls short of doing justice to René Wirths' conceptual way of working and overtly self-reflective, painterly approach. This approach is manifested above all in Wirths' continual discursive confrontation with the theme of mirroring, rooted in the metaphorical narrative of the Pool of Narcissus from Greek mythology, which since the early modern period has stood metaphorically for the image that reflects itself, the artist, the observer.<sup>1</sup>

The rigid titles of Wirths' works betray a certain humor in their tautological underpinning of the (pictorial) subject.<sup>2</sup> Like the paintings themselves, such titles avoid any obvious narration and instead call that which is shown by its name, straightforwardly and in seeming affirmation. One could think that Wirths is alluding here to his explicitly admired doppelgänger-in-name René Magritte, who in his famous 1929 work *La trahison des images* [The Treachery of Images] made unequivocally clear with the painted words “Ceci n'est pas une pipe” [“This is not a pipe”] that the point is to distinguish between the reality of the depicted thing itself and the reality reproduced in the picture. Wirths would seem to presuppose this knowledge. In that he specifies the depicted object in its simplest form of linguistic expression and reveals nothing that could go beyond the facticity of the motif, he guides the unsuspecting observer's curiosity and attention – as a perceiving subject – back to the painting itself. Wirths'

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gerhard Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel. Traditionen des Christusbildes und die Bildkonzepte der Renaissance*, Munich, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Franziska Lesák, “Oberflächen – Formen der Übersetzbarkeit. Anmerkungen zu René Wirths' Bilderwelt,” in: *René Wirths. Zustände*, exh. cat., Düsseldorf, 2009.

message is not to be found in texts or subtexts accompanying the work, but rather in the very medium itself: in one's view of the artwork as such, in the process of seeing, in taking one's time and giving oneself over to it, in approaching the painting very closely. The viewer, by embarking upon the path of attentive, perceptive seeing, discovers traces of and clues to the process of painting that lead right back to the atelier. And it is there that René Wirths' precise artistic practice is carried out in a time-intensive process that uses paint and brush to translate visually perceived corporeal reality into two-dimensional facticity on the canvas. In keeping with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's essay "Eye and Mind," one could say that the artist lends his body to the world in order to transform the world into painting.<sup>3</sup> And it is in an even more concrete manner that Merleau-Ponty describes the nature of perceiving things in the following quotation from his major work *Phenomenology of Perception* as the attempt to gain an expanded understanding of the world on the basis of the realization that we likewise bear the fundamental structure of that very world within us: "A thing is, therefore, not actually given in perception, it is internally taken up by us, reconstituted and experienced by us in so far as it is bound up with a world, the basic structures of which we carry with us, and of which it is merely one of many possible concrete forms."<sup>4</sup>

So even if René Wirths' paintings may frequently seem overwhelming and brilliant, it is on the micro-level that the painter's quest for knowledge actually takes place. Selected objects are first taken "out of this world" and – insofar as they are not already there to begin with – into the atelier, that place where Wirths commences his intense study of the respective object's structures, ultimately leading to that object's painterly deconstruction.

Unified in their concentration on just one motif, which is "inserted into" the canvas so as to be centered and fill the area, Wirths' works are done in formats large and small.

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<sup>3</sup> "It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings." In: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in: *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, trans. Michael B. Smith, Evanston, 1993, p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, London, 1962, p. 326.

They can be seductive in their painterly brilliance – like the (male-connoted) object of desire embodied by a bright-red Moto Guzzi Le Mans 850 in *Motorrad* – or fragile and graphically executed, requiring one to take a second look or involve oneself more intensely. The latter category includes eyeglasses (*Brille*, 2012) and a bicycle wheel (*Fahrrad-Rad* [Blizzard], 2007), two works that, in their conceptual reserve, would seem to lend themselves well to opening up a survey of the broad discursive field inhabited by the artist's oeuvre. The delicate depiction of the pair of glasses, for example, can be understood not only as a reference to the object thus called, but also as a crypto-portrait of the artist. This pair of glasses, itself a pair of windows on the world, reflects the painter in two respects: first in the actual reflection of the artist in his studio, and second via its quality as a unique object, adapted to – and thus also referring directly to – its owner and wearer. For him, this vision aide serves as an individual means by which to control blurriness and deviation from the norm. Both of these are notable aspects that one reencounters in Wirths' works in the form of a blow-up effect<sup>5</sup> – the objects' enlargement in keeping with the larger pictorial format combined with the painted reproduction of surface textures. As a significant tool for capturing reality, and thus images, this pair of glasses – just like the painting *Kamera* (2012), created the same year – thematizes the act of seeing as such. As representations of transitory apparatuses, these works symbolize the threshold between oneself and the world, between perception and being perceived, between real objects and painted motifs.

In a way that is quite impressive, paintings showing a pair of glasses, a camera and a staple gun (*Brille*, *Kamera* and *Tacker*, all 2012) let loose associative chains of discourses and interpretive approaches from the realm of visual culture. Thus, these works can be read as more than just “dialectical images” in the sense of Walter

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<sup>5</sup> In filmmaking, “blow-up” refers to an enlargement done by transference of the moving image from a small camera negative to a larger format. Worth noting in this context is that in the commonly done enlargement of footage from a 16 mm camera to 35 mm film, for example, all weaknesses and flaws present in the smaller film format – such as specks of dust, scratches, grain and blurriness – are commensurately magnified.

Benjamin's "caesura in the movement of thought,"<sup>6</sup> "when past and present enter 'lightning-like' into a constellation"<sup>7</sup> – for as such, they are also visual realizations of George Didi-Huberman's thoughts on a dialogue-like relationship between the image and its viewer.<sup>8</sup> The viewer's becoming aware of the moment of the painter's agency in the atelier sets up relationships that span time and space.

Considerations having to do both with the visual culture discourse on the respective dialectical relationships between the gazes of the artist, of the image and of the viewer, and with René Wirths' way of working are exemplified by the painting *Kamera*. This work reveals a true-to-detail painted depiction of an analog SLR camera of a very specific make. The word analog likewise applies to Wirths' way of working, which – unlike that of photorealists – explicitly does without using photographs as starting points. In this sense, the painting can also be understood as a commentary on photography's significance for painting and on the two media's reciprocal influence upon one another. While the artist's depiction of the camera body painstakingly translates the material-specific qualities of its surface and the shape-related shadows cast by the object into painterly structures, the colorful mirroring effects on the "camera's eye" seem almost surrealistic. From the center of the lens, the faceless head of the artist peers out at us, its lack of facial features denying us the essential characteristics of a portrait. Layered and in part overlapping reflections of windows and window frames make for a coded image of a world stood partially on its head.

In the back-and-forth between the viewer's dialogue-like involvement in the image and works that seem to hide behind their own sheer visual presence, the painting *Fahrrad-Rad (Blizzard)* can probably be placed in the second category. In *Fahrrad-Rad*, Wirths confronts the viewer with the cool precision and graphically appealing structure of a sophisticated technical device (a bicycle wheel), the linear spokes of which break the

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, 1999, p. 475.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 945.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Was wir sehen blickt uns an. Zur Metapsychologie des Bildes*, Munich, 1999.

white of the background in many places.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the work's very title, which translates into English as "Bicycle Wheel," betrays its direct relationship with Marcel Duchamp's synonymous first readymade and kinetic object of 1913. Even though René Wirths' painting was made nearly a century later and – unlike Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel – bears witness to a virtuosic creative process, both adhere to the principle of subjectively choosing an object that is supposedly unworthy of classification as art and/or the sole motif of a painting.

In its representational quality and formal simplicity as one of the many objects in René Wirths' oeuvre that pays homage to the circle as a geometric shape, this motif of the wheel exemplifies the artist's output. Its shape's supposed perfection in *Fahrrad-Rad*, easy to assume in its seeming formal precision, reveals itself upon closer inspection to actually be an optical illusion that is strongly influenced by our life experience. That which holds true for the physically existing object – namely, that a wheel is round – diverges from this physical reality in the reproduced image and, in doing so, reminds one of the fact that, in the creation of this image, a transfer from the eye to the canvas took place via the hand; to accomplish such transfers, Wirths employs no tools that do not genuinely belong to the medium of painting – doing without photography or projection, for example. From this transfer, as well as from its re-dimensioning as a blow-up, there arises an unfocused and abstract quality that pulls the object out of this world and – thus robbed of its original function – into pictorial reality. This is made clear by a video showing a graphic (re-)animation of the painted object, quite literally bent out of shape and wobbling precariously as it rotates.

Wirths involves an additional temporal dimension in how he deals with organic pictorial motifs such as cauliflower, an apple and a loaf of bread (Blumenkohl, 2013/14; Apfel, 2013; Brotlaib, 2009) in that he makes visible the aspect of decay that is inherent in everything organic. Here, Wirths visualizes not only the length of time it takes to create

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<sup>9</sup> "In the case of the bikes, I was also interested in the graphical aspects, the many penetrations that lend the white of the background a completely different effect than an object with a large surface area." René Wirths, in: Charlotte-Louise Bartsch, "Interview with René Wirths," 2010.

the painting, but also, taking up the classical topos of the “memento mori,” alludes both to the art-historical tradition of the still life and to the ephemeral nature of all worldly things.

With reference to banal, organic and inorganic everyday objects, nostalgia-packed things like tape cassettes (Cassette, 2012), the 7-inch single (Single, 2012) and the light bulb (Glühbirne, 2014), as well as to brand-name and fetish items that have come to be considered cult objects, the artist not only conveys and examines the commonalities and distinctions between being-in-the-world and being-in-images, but at the same time explores various avenues of being’s dissolution.

Thus rendered “simply complicated” (Thomas Bernhard), Wirths’ objects – basal and borrowed from the real world – approach us as solitary presences in their haptic quality and painted textures. What they reveal and unfurl, however, is a complex fabric of contemplative possibilities and associations that go far beyond the sensate experience of merely viewing.