

Surfaces – Forms of Translatability

A Commentary on the Pictorial World of René Wirths

“All the relations which are so important to us are those from *shapes in a mirror*, not the true relations. These proportions are optical relations in a mirror. The statement ‘No world exists, if no mirror exists’ is nonsense. But all of our relations – as precise as they might be – are descriptions of human beings, *not of the world itself*: They are laws of these supreme optics from which no possibility can take us any further. This is not mere appearance, not deception, but an encoded text in which an unknown entity expresses itself – something entirely clear to us, created for us, for our human relationship to concrete objects. In this way, objects are concealed from us.”¹

The latest ensemble of works by René Wirths consists of nine pictures created exclusively for his one-man exhibition at the Galerie Schönewald und Beuse in Düsseldorf with the laconic title “*States (Zustände)*”. The predominantly large-scale pictures were created in his Berlin studio during the period between May 2008 and February 2009.

René Wirths classifies himself as a painter. The preoccupation with this creative activity is closely interrelated with the question as to what exactly becomes a picture and how exactly this occurs. Wirths is an artist who exercises the craft of painting as a “life concept”, as the artist-subject is subtly mirrored in his pictorial world, not only as someone guiding a paint brush, but also as someone whose experience of temporality² is incorporated into the concrete portrayal through the actual process of painting. “The work of art captures momentary experiences, it initiates and sustains the oscillatory motion of the back and forth, thus bestowing duration to perceivable time.”³ As regards the history of art, the pictorial world of René Wirths stands firmly in the heritage of Western painting and follows the logic of historically demarcated limits of traditional panel painting.

Correspondingly, the studio – as the locus of artistic creation possessing both concrete and physical qualities on the one hand, and intellectual and abstract qualities on the other – is attributed great significance. Everything begins at this site so full of significance in the double sense of the word.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche: “Nachgelassene Fragmente (Posthumous Fragments) 1880-1882”, in *Friedrich Nietzsche. Critical Study Edition*, Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (eds.), Munich / Berlin / New York 1995, Volume 9 (1999), Fragment 6[429], pp. 308 ff.

² “Hence, Paul Valéry conceives of it as ‘an internal phenomenon’, i.e., as a mental, affective and physiological experience, as a mode of self-reflexive experience”. Karin Krauthausen: “Kunst als unendlicher Schaffensprozess und Ornament der Dauer. Aspekte der Zeitthematik bei Paul Valéry” (Art as an Unending Creative Process and Ornament of Duration. Aspects of Temporality by Paul Valéry), in Karin Gludovatz and Martin Peschken (eds.), *Momente im Prozess. Zeitlichkeit künstlerischer Produktion (Moments in Process. The Temporality of Creative Production)*, Berlin 2004, p. 78.

³ Krauthausen, *ibid.*, p. 84.

Motivation

René Wirths begins with the search for a suitable object that appeals to his personal tastes and demonstrates specific structural characteristics, in order to dedicate himself to the object beyond an often considerably long period of time in the aftermath. At this point, one could of course comment that every process involved in painting requires a certain amount of working time *per se*. In this context, however, the most significant factor is the concept of 'extended temporality' as a privilege where consciousness can resonate and is able to take liberties – at least in respect to the period of creation – as if Wirths were wishing to isolate himself from the precipitous flood of images. Therefore, the process of painting actually begins well before the first stroke of a brush: with the observation of 'life', of one's own environment, of all objects which immediately surround oneself and await their 'discovery'. And the same process preserves this intensive empirical analysis, translating it into the aesthetic surface of the pictorial objects, while the equally sustainable process of painting is also manifested within that surface.

Exhibiting

The new works exhibited in the Düsseldorf gallery – although this also holds true for previous works by Wirths⁴ – seem at first glance to be concerned with the concrete objects themselves, which we as recipients perceive (or believe to perceive) on the surface of the picture. This momentary impression is reinforced by means of the titles chosen by the artist, which correspond to the given object and thus provide a linguistic/tautological reinforcement. René Wirths painted nine pictures: *Hand (Hand)*, *Beam (Balken)*, *Feather (Feder)*, *Ball (Ball)*, *Squared Timber (Kantholz)*, *Eye (Auge)*, *Shoe (Schuh)*, *Little Paper Boat (Papierschiffchen)*, *Skull (Totenkopf)*. The effect of the object's presence is intensified by the isolation of the respective object, as the latter completely occupies the physical dimensions of the picture, indeed, it actually determines the size. Within the specialized parameters of the picture *Beam (Balken)*, with its long horizontal protrusion (40 x 100 cm), this becomes the cunning of a *fata morgana*. With their minimalistic colouring and their nearly invisible brushwork, each of these paintings has a unique oscillation between realism and illusionism in common.

The veristic eye of the painter and the precise technical execution initially seduce the observer into testing the painted object in terms of its verifiable substance. As a result, this extremely restricted mode of interpretation begins to erode. Let us examine the picture titled *Feather (Feather)* more closely. In a perspective stretched lengthwise and magnified many times over, a white feather rests

⁴ If one considers the pictures, which René Wirths has produced since 2005, the systematic continuity in respect to the generation of images, which he strives for, becomes very evident.

upon a white background. The quill is positioned centrally on the horizontal axis of the picture, while to the left one sees the smooth edge where the fine and dense branches of the feather run off to both sides. These end at the upper and lower borders of the picture, which accentuate the curved dynamic of the feather. It can be generally stated that the pictures of René Wirths do not display any spatial depth; there exists no distance between the portrayed object and its background. Another source of creative tension arises from the aforementioned principle of magnification. The feather – usually a frail organic structure – acquires a specific quality through the monumentality of its portrayal. It is the alienation which occurs after an object, which we imagine to know so well based on its typical nature, is suddenly transported into another state as a result of a new, unnatural dimension. It is that moment when the feather abandons the body of the bird, enters the world of empirical objects and begins a new existence. This influences the picture in the respect that the picture itself assumes an empirical character, and thus, defines itself as an object. Notwithstanding, the feather is able to communicate to us a more precise picture of itself, which results from the very artificiality that has been achieved.

Different levels of observation intersect in the pictures of René Wirths: For one, the perspective of the artist focused on the immediately visible object, then the method of portrayal which he utilizes to manifest his perceptions.

Julia Trolp has identified a connection between the pictures of René Wirths and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl: “The process of painting means gaining knowledge for the artist, thus becoming a phenomenological method whose effect upon the picture also remains comprehensible for the observer”⁵. Pictures as evidence of artistic perception, during the process of which the artist investigates phenomena in the material world and translates these into representational schemata. Quite consciously, Wirths makes no use of technical means of assistance, utilizes no projectors, no photo tools. The real object accompanies the artist in his studio most of the time, up until the moment when he finally commits himself to pictorial representation. The moment arrives when he must abandon the object of reference in order to shift his attentions to the acts of perception and depiction. Monumental portrayal as a method of painting demands another kind of concentration from the artist. The object has indelibly etched itself in his memory, so that perceptual images can be summoned forth and translated into pictorial representation.

The actual creative act of painting is a time-consuming, non-automatable procedure, for every observed object requires a particular approach and the various phenomenal data require different modes of portrayal. In the work of Wirths, this processual and perceptually gauged act of production plays a vital role in determining the mode of appearance demonstrated by the picture. The artist paints layer after layer, first with a rough brush, and then with a fine one, until a satisfactory condensation of the painted image evolves. This procedure continues until the limits of

⁵ Julia Trolp, “Die Dinge klar sehen” (Seeing Things Clearly), in *René Wirths*, ex. cat., Galerie Michael Haas, Berlin 2007.

perception themselves have been arrived at and the point has been reached where the work of art can be considered to be complete.

Viewing

Among the significant qualities of pictures by René Wirths, the viewer would most certainly count the astonishing immediacy with which he portrays familiar objects. The viewer can relate to the works quickly, can identify with the art. As familiar objects are the central motifs involved here, the viewer can resurrect both memories and mental images of the past and the transient, as if the pictures were bearing the traces of a temporal cycle, which allows the pictures to appear as remnants from the past during the very moment of their viewing. Conscious references to the genre of still life, or *nature morte*, cannot be overlooked here, although they are more or less mere triggers, one of numerous things which one considers when viewing the picture.

The spatial arrangement of the pictures also contributes to this process, as both size and format vary. The moment after the pictures have been brought into reference with one another – both in the studio and during exhibitions - associative spaces are generated and an interplay of unexpected relations between the illustrated objects is activated.

His pictorial motifs are concerned with such final questions as the irreconcilability between the individual and society, life and death, art and daily life, without prescribing a one-dimensional interpretation – this is left open for the viewer.

The portrayal should not be the reason for concentrating on the object functioning as the basis of the depiction; much more importantly, the *representational nature of the portrayal, aesthetic experience and interest in painting itself* are the essential aspects.

Aesthetic interest is based upon the desire to internalize the actuality of one's own being with perceptual means.

Or, in other words, without aesthetic consciousness, it is impossible to have consciousness of the present within which one exists.⁶

The pictorial ensemble of René Wirths has created surfaces whose aural force never fails to attract viewers and fascinate them. In this sense, René Wirths' artistic regimen becomes comprehensible as a broader plan for life. It not only helps the artist to understand his own being and to place it in question; it also offers willing viewers the opportunity to participate in this experience or to learn from it.

Franziska Lesák

⁶ Martin Seel, *Ästhetik des Erscheinens (The Aesthetics of Appearance)*, Munich 2000, p. 39.