

***“The point for me isn’t to produce ‘delicious paintings.’”***

*Franziska Uhlig speaks with René Wirths.*

*FU:*

*René, you paint things or objects that would seem quite simple: a roll of toilet paper (Klopapierrolle, 2005/2006), a lettuce leaf from above (Salatblatt, 2006), a PET water bottle (Petflasche, 2014), or an apple (Apfel, 2013) or a breadbasket woven from strips of bast fiber (Brotkorb, 2013). And last year you did a self-portrait (Selbst, 2013). How did you arrive at these choices?*

*RW:*

*I paint whatever I declare to be worth painting. And our world is a world of things, so it offers me an infinite number of formal and painterly, graphic and - of course - semantic and content-related options. But ultimately, my choices are a matter of taste.*

*FU:*

*Nowhere in your studio does one see any drawings. So the second thing I’d ask would be: how do you go about preparing to do a painting? How do you get your mind around the object you’re portraying? And in general, how would you describe the spatial and mental setting at your easel as you work?*

*RW:*

*It’s true, there aren’t really any sketches or preliminary drawings to speak of. I also don’t take any photographs of the objects I intend to paint. I do without any medium-based preparation because it would just get in the way of perceiving those things directly. And that direct perception is precisely what I’m after. So I take these things along to my studio, observe them, and let them sink in. My work begins with looking at things as they are. And then, I transfer that directly to the painting. Most of the time, I do a preliminary charcoal drawing on the canvas. Then I’ll typically start with fairly thick brushes, using thinner ones from layer to layer or depending on how deep I delve into the surface of the object.*

FU:

*Despite the differences between the portrayed objects, your paintings impress viewers as being quite homogenous in character. When comparing them, one notices that it's really only the format that varies - or the format-related scaling with which you establish the size of what's being shown. There are depictions of small things like a potato (Kartoffel, 2014) and a light bulb (Glühbirne, 2014) that are transferred into a relatively large format, and then there's the example of the motorcycle (Motorrad, 2013), which you show only a bit bigger than in real life. Why isn't there a fixed concept of scaling, some factor  $x$  with which you determine the size of the object? And what considerations go into transforming and/or enlarging something?*

RW:

*By and large, I make my decisions intuitively. And it's not something I'd want to be all that strict about, either. The spaces where the paintings are to be shown, insofar as they're known to me, often do play an important role in choosing the format and scale. For large spaces, I tend to enlarge things a bit more, and if the spaces are smaller, the scale tends to get a bit smaller, as well. But apart from the exhibition space, there's also the limited size of my studio, of course. Only things that fit in there are paintable. And the painting, for its part, has to fit through the door of my atelier and also be small enough to get through the stairwell. So in this respect, a fixed enlargement factor would be too limiting. Another concern of mine, last but not least, is to avoid the paintings' formats' becoming somehow totalitarian and "superhuman." They're not supposed to hit you over the head - they're supposed to stand opposite you.*

FU:

*When you say you think about the prospective exhibition spaces when developing your works, and that it's important to you that they function as opposites for their viewers, what other expectations and situations in terms of the viewers also play a role in conceiving your paintings?*

*RW:*

*The first viewer of my paintings is always me. And as a being who's been socialized by a society, my valuation criteria are influenced by that society. So it goes without saying that I regard the viewers of my paintings through the mirror of my own self. Which is to say: the foremost requirement I make of myself is that I do justice to my own criteria.*

*FU:*

*I'd next like to talk about the perspective that's dominant in your paintings. The planar view in strict profile and/or from above, combined with their size, tends to send viewers to the middle of the room. In general, they seem to obligate one to stand at a certain distance, even though taking an up-close look would turn up a multitude of discoveries on the painting's surface. And because of the strictness with which the profile view is done, such paintings can seem more like specimens in the display case of some collection. One gets the feeling that these depicted things have been wrenched out of the category of the singular and narrative - meaning that the story here is not the individual cauliflower (Blumenkohl, 2013/2014) or the specifically chosen light bulb (Glühbirne), but something that goes beyond these things?*

*RW:*

*I agree with you only in part. If any story at all is being told, then it's less about the thing than about the painting itself. The thing is simply there, and you can't - nor is there any need to - tell a story about that. But the very fact that it's there, that's the phenomenon! And for me, that's what it's about: painting as a way to point to this small and quite worldly thing as a means of ascertaining that I, too, exist. As for the perspective: as soon as I were to make a decision that diverges from the strict and also very simple profile view or total view, it would open up room for interpretation with regard to a subjective angle, perspectives, etc. - interpretations that I don't want to suggest. Every little deviation would turn up new questions. The strict total profile, on the other hand, enables me to ask the same complex question again and again*

*with each and every object, no matter how different it may be and to which this question applies equally: the question as to its existence and, as a reflection thereof, our own existence. In this way, there arises a large assortment of different but, on this meta-level, quite comparable paintings, a sort of archive of painted things.*

*FU:*

*The next thing I noticed in your studio was the situation you set up before the easel: there are improvised stands or supports that you use to position the things to be painted at eye level. So when you paint them, you don't approach them in their situations of everyday use; instead, you separate and isolate them. And as obviously practical as that is - it lets you observe them better - I still ask myself whether this isn't perhaps a constellation that's similar to what you told me about in connection with an early series of portraits: In that project, you painted someone close to you on certain prearranged days. You were interested in conversation and, generally, in the encounter with the respective person, and painting just provided the context in which that took place. So I'll ask you again about the extent to which that improvised stand might be a constituent element of the picture. Or to what extent, when you paint, is there something there - such as the conversations you had while doing those portraits - that points beyond the act of transference?*

*RW:*

*Painting doesn't consist simply in work and the production of results. It's part of my overall concept of life - including family, friends and hobbies as well as my lonely, virtually monastic work at the atelier. All of these things are interdependent and mutually enriching. In painting things from the outside world, what I find to be important are inner processes, processes from which I can derive calmness, strength and some space for reflection, processes from which I benefit in many other situations in life. And as long as I can get something out of these processes of painting, I'll paint. The - what did you call it? - the context, in other words, the temporary installation that I occasionally need in order to place the object in an ergonomic position that spares my back, is entirely pragmatic. Any interesting aesthetic aspects that*

*might arise are entirely coincidental, and such installations disappear immediately following the painting process; they're usually not even documented. I tune out everything else when I put a thing on a stand or frame like that, rather than observing it in its everyday context. That's part of these inner processes. In portraits of people, on the other hand, it's all joined by an entirely different kind of presence.*

**FU:**

*Viewed in this light, doesn't your work contain points of contact with the strategy of reportage? The reporter, in the act of reporting, keeps an eye out for immobile constellations and/or situations, describing them and documenting them, while you, on the other hand, are able to bring things to your atelier thanks to their product-like character and high degree of portability. But the way in which you harness them here in an installation-like framework that facilitates an up-close encounter, and the intensity with which you report what turns up on their surfaces, moves me to interpret what you do as a neutral variety of reporting, in light of the great gestural restraint you show as a painter. Is this the reason why you do without technical media that would help you transfer the image? After all, you could just do like Hans-Peter Feldmann did for *1 Pfund Erdbeeren* (2005) and take all these things along to your atelier as photographic reproductions, accepting the photographs as translations of these things.*

**RW:**

*Especially in a world that's as heavily multimedia-focused as ours is, one very personal concern of mine is to concentrate on direct perception of the tangible world as such and via my own sensory organs. For me, this kind of observation is something of an elemental mode of perceiving things. And I do it this way not to distinguish my stance from others, but simply because this is how I want to perceive the world - especially at this level of intensity. One could call this reportage, but I'd be more prone to call it documentation. Four, five decades ago, an approach like this wouldn't have been anything special. But today, it seems to me, we're coming to forget more and more how to engage in this kind of concentrated, immediate observation of the world. And we*

*really have to do it quite consciously. Because I'm certain that it's also important for our self-perception. My paintings are often thought to be photorealist works because hardly anyone can imagine going to the effort of such detailed observation anymore, if there are now easier ways to achieve a similar-seeming effect. But for me, it's neither about the effort nor about the effect - that would be boring! It's much rather about impassioned looking. As such, and in the more general sense of being attentive or not looking away.*

*FU:*

*That's an invitation to turn one's attention to your selection of things from the tangible world, which you say you'd like to perceive as just that. Toilet paper, water bottles, light bulbs and similar objects could be categorized as things that get overlooked, things you hardly pay attention to in everyday life although they surround us constantly. You select thoroughly contemporary and everyday objects like this, but also things that can only be found at places like flea markets. The motorcycle and the record (Single, 2012), for instance. If one tries to think of what types of objects are not shown by your paintings, one would probably have to say objects of exceptional visual opulence. And one also gets the impression that, in selecting these things, you're after a very definite form of temporality.*

*RW:*

*I look for metaphors of timelessness that can be perceived independent of any particular zeitgeist or current discourses.*

*FU:*

*But you're also interested in nostalgic phenomena, aren't you - such as with the motorcycle or the record?*

*RW:*

*Sure I am! It's through a certain nostalgia that I feel myself getting older. And that's not about mourning bygone days; it's just me remembering. Nostalgic objects like the motorcycles, which also have something of a fetish-like quality to them, are timeless per se precisely because they've already received a seal of approval of sorts, much like when something gets acquired by a museum. And when I paint them, I*

*appropriate them. After all, looking intently also has something to do with lust.*

*FU:*

*Aside from nostalgic items, you choose things that exist in the world of industrial production - they're things we use constantly and regard as being entirely unspectacular.*

*RW:*

*Yes, and even the lettuce leaf and the cauliflower are such products - products of the agricultural industry. To me, selecting such objects isn't really about producing portraits of them; it's more about arriving at a vital perspective on the things that surround us every day and, paradoxically, drift out of our focus for precisely that reason. Seemingly unspectacular things can be translated into very exciting images.*

*FU:*

*Your mention of portraits speaks to an important key point. It would seem to be about the fine line that separates a still life-like perspective on individual objects and your perspective on the actual potato, on the actual water bottle, or on your actual self in the self-portrait.*

*RW:*

*Like I said: as a rule, what I'm after is not portraits of things, because I'm not that interested in the things as such, but rather in the process of painting and in the image itself. Take the roll of toilet paper, for example: this infinite, monotonous spooling of the paper - capturing that with plasticity and with the abstraction necessary to realize it at all in painted form. To do this, I need to have a vision of the painting; otherwise, I'd be entirely unable to inflict such eternal repetitions upon myself. So I proceed step by step and try to ignore how long these processes can take - which doesn't always work. The question of whether or not the objects at issue are industrially produced plays only a secondary role, if any at all, in my selection. But I am indeed conscious of the art-historical references that arise here and there, and I do like to play around with them. Now and again, I'll actually paint a true portrait of a person. In such cases, I seek the presence of that person. It was that way in the case of my mother, who passed away*

*shortly after her portrait was finished. In doing a self-portrait, what stands at the fore is, in principle, a question I pose to myself: how do I view myself in the context of my paintings?*

*FU:*

*We've already touched in passing on the fact that your paintings are missing a certain visual opulence of the kind employed by pop art. On your palette, you often mix colors with white and gray. The profoundly expansive quality that you bestow on things in their reality as images, as things portrayed, is tied back to the canvas or the wall, and thus to the painting's ground, by the tinges of white that you intersperse throughout your paintings. You also differ strongly from the realist stances of figures like Giorgio Morandi, Franz Gertsch and Gerhard Richter by introducing no further colors that would help the canvas, and thus the ground, to be forgotten. You don't fill this zone with anything narrative. Your colors seem to be a bit on the dry side, and one doesn't see any clear coat.*

*RW:*

*The main point for me isn't to crank out "delicious paintings." My painting doesn't glisten, and if anything at all does glisten, it's metallic reflections or other points of light in the portrayal. Painting and observation are quite closely tied to one another. Painting serves observation, and observation serves painting. The density of the applied paint describes the sum of my observations. Wherever I don't do any observing, the canvas remains white. I want nothing more from the paint, but nothing less, either. Which brings us to the next point: although I make reference to the panel painting, with its traditional rectangular dimensions, I also take into consideration the space that surrounds the painting. I don't want a painting to encapsulate its own hermetic world; the painting should be part of the world, a point of reference. A thick layer of high-gloss varnish seals off the painting, reflects that space back, and claims: I'm different! To me, such glossiness often smacks of vanity.*

FU:

*Your paintings are the product of a great deal of work. But the work that's gone into them is fairly unobtrusive. The surface of the canvas hardly shows anything like a gestural texture. And one never sees your signature anywhere. Is this an articulation of your own personal form of institutional criticism, and if so, to whom is it addressed?*

RW:

*Signatures are another thing that can seem vain. And they can even sometimes distract from the actual content of the painting. Nor am I a fan of printed labels. A label can help you create an image, but it can also prevent you from questioning the image you've thereby created. It's not easy to work under a label long-term. All these points are reasons why I don't sign my paintings in my paintings. But wholly apart from that, I don't really believe that my paintings need a signature - their recognition value is high enough as it is.*

FU:

*And on the back, is there a signature there?*

RW:

*You will, of course, find my name and the usual information on the back. As for your question on how I relate to painterly gesture: the basic idea is to adapt my painting to the surface of a given object. And every surface represents a new challenge, so it never gets boring. The way in which I observe and subsequently employ and layer the colors - that, to my mind, is what reveals my handwriting. As well as the tools I use and the tools I don't use. In my work, I'm not interested in dashing and occasionally ingenious-seeming gestures. Too much style and too much design aren't really my thing.*

FU:

*I have a few questions on how you position those who view your works. You work with exhibitions in mind: you know the spaces in which the paintings will be hung, and you've implied that you take this knowledge into consideration from fairly early on in your artistic decision-making. Does this go just for formal decisions such as on enlargement, or does it also apply to the things you select or to choices made with an eye to the*

*viewers' ability to identify with your works? Do you attribute your choice of the 7-inch single, for example, to your personal fondness for it, or do you take cultural preferences into account when making your choices?*

*RW:*

*If I know what spaces need to be filled at an exhibition, I'll typically develop whole complexes of paintings, combinations of different motifs. In doing so, there often arise content or form-related cross-references, as well as occasional contrasts. And by employing exhibition titles - titles like Autumn, Analog, the beyond and the here, for example - I can additionally shape and guide these.*

*FU:*

*In your work, I see myriad interrelationships between individual paintings, wholly apart from the question of format. For example, there are the wooden boards shown in profile (Brett, 2008) and cross-cut (Stirnholz, 2008), and there are the slice of bread (Brotscheibe) and a whole loaf in profile (Brotlaib, 2009). Are such relationships the result of your planning the situation in which they're going to be viewed? Is your working process oriented on the creation of a relational order among the depicted things within the space?*

*RW:*

*Yes and no. I definitely do devote some concrete thought to the question of which paintings might enter into an exciting relationship with each other within the space. But there are also relationships and references that arise by chance, and I like making use of those, too. The more pictorial motifs there are, the larger the individual complexes become: here the more profane, there the more symbolic, here the organic, there the technical, here the round, there the angular, and so on. And of course, an exhibition also sometimes gives you the opportunity to play around with relationships in terms of form and content. Now and again, there will be solitary works such as the self-portrait (Selbst) that aren't so easily worked in. At any rate, I couldn't paint the pictures for the exhibitions if I were unable to build up any sort of personal relationship with the objects. But I don't begin my*

*thought process with an end result in mind - I like leaving that a bit open.*

*FU:*

*So the process by which you paint is indeed based on an installative type of attitude, then? You think in categories of spatial networking and intervention?*

*RW:*

*That's not how I conceive the painting process as such, but of course, my thoughts and feelings don't end at a picture's frame. And I am very conscious of the way in which my paintings fill a space. Working with that is part of the overall endeavor. It seems so simple and, yet, it's still so complex. I often feel closer to sculptors than I do to painters. A photorealist, for example, will transfer something from a media-conveyed, already two-dimensionally available model into a painting, while I devote myself to the actual transfer of a spatially present object into a two-dimensional state. And the three-dimensional illusion that I manage to create even so feeds the whole thing back into the space, upon which it has its effect. My paintings form a given space in much the same way as wall objects do, so this does indeed lend a somewhat installative quality to an exhibition of several pictures, even if these are still conventionally hung.*

*FU:*

*I'd like to pick up on your reference to photorealism. While your painting tends to be read as a very solitary stance within the art world, with the result that you're seldom represented in group exhibitions, certain working processes of yours that are based on illusion, on three-dimensionality, move you to compare your work with sculpture. This comparison turns one's attention to things like operations of layering and modulating colors, which give rise to a simulated relief effect of sorts. It's with reference to these that you talk about feeling closer to sculpture than to painting. When I think of the spectrum of things you depict, of this specific layer of the everyday world that you take with you to the studio in order to paint it, I always have to think of Arte Povera's discovery of largely overlooked materials. And I'd find it quite*

*interesting if there were someday an opportunity to see your works shown in an entirely different historical context, particularly alongside Arte Povera works. Could you imagine that?*

*RW:*

*Why not? After all, I think about myself in light of the most diverse historical contexts. And I've observed that Arte Povera, though it's long since become a historical movement, is still very much present in its effect on many artists, including young ones. In this respect, it is contemporary - regardless of the fact that several of its protagonists are no longer alive.*

*FU:*

*In Arte Povera, it's of course about adopting a critical stance toward traditional working processes in order to liberate oneself from a conventional understanding of sculpture and painting and, instead, establish an experimental attitude. This amounted to a critique of the art scene as it existed at the time.*

*RW:*

*And back in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Marcel Duchamp would never have painted a bicycle wheel like in *Fahrrad-Rad* (2007). In the case of that particular work, which is that of an avowed painter acting in a somewhat more conceptual manner, I'm kind of sitting on the fence. I do so for the simple reason that I like to paint and don't understand why I should forego this passion of mine on account of some ethically or morally related view of the art business or of capitalism as a whole. Sure, there are lots of things to be criticized, but they're not points that I want to address in this context. I don't do *l'art pour l'art*. And the art business as a phenomenon just isn't important enough to me. It doesn't generate any truly existential questions, and it's only interesting to a small group of people. And I think that in the past, my artist-colleagues saw entirely different imperatives in the sociopolitical contexts of their times than we have today. I couldn't have done what I do today in the same way back then. And I probably wouldn't have, either. Just like the Arte Povera folks set themselves apart with anti-materials, I set myself apart today by deliberately foregoing the*

*available media-based tools that would allow me to work faster and more efficiently. So by the same token, that's something you certainly can view as a critical stance toward present-day developments, particularly toward the overheated art market. But as long as I profit from it myself, which I do, the only overall stance on it that I can take up with any sincerity is an ambivalent one.*

*FU:*

*By way of delving a bit deeper with regard to your positioning, I'll follow up by asking how it actually came about that you decided to stay with the panel painting format? The field of painting is home to lots of experimental approaches these days. But at the same time, the potentials of classical genres are also being re-explored. Dierk Schmidt has seized on that most classical of painting genres, the history painting, and used several of its functions to produce quite fruitful results for his interventions in global geopolitical structures. Others borrow their visual vocabularies from modern art historiography - Thomas Scheibitz, for example, who's dealt in many of his works with the abstract-figural debate that dominated the discourse for quite some time. And Katharina Grosse and Friederike Feldmann aim at transforming the definitions of genres. Before this backdrop, one could take your use of the panel painting to be a statement. So what moved you to not go with experimental forms of painting and, instead, take on the genre of the still life?*

*RW:*

*As early as back when I was studying at the art academy, I began to feel that - in the wake of 150 years during which the formal limits of painting had been explored and pushed further and further - this pushing of the envelope had, for many individuals, come to be an end in itself. It seemed to me, back then, that it was often too much about sensationalism, about the desire to develop something that was new in a formal sense and, by virtue of that alone, also obviously new in terms of its content. There are some magnificent exceptions to this, of course. But for me personally, searching just for the sake of searching takes way too much energy. The rectangular panel painting affords me a*

*structural framework that's sufficiently large. And at the same time, one of the greatest challenges of all is to hold one's own amidst this unbelievably diverse and rich tradition of which the panel painting is a part, to stake one's claim and find points from which to start - points that are rich enough to spend a long time, ideally an entire lifetime, dealing with. It's part of the simplicity and peace that I'm looking for and that I feel I can grow old with. And in a certain sense, the things you deal with end up shaping you, as well.*

*FU:*

*So this very structured rhythm of working every day with great continuity is just as much part of your concept of painting as is your depiction of things?*

*RW:*

*Absolutely.*