

## WHAT REMAINS

A cardboard box, a sneaker, a plastic bottle—René Wirths presents us with many things that remind us of advertising boards, things we encounter in our daily lives and to which we have likely paid scant attention. But in contrast to the commercial image, Wirths' works come without a catchy slogan. The subjects—executed in oil on canvas—seem familiar. The recognition lies not only in the objects' simple, realistic representation, but in the identification with them and our own environment. At first sight, Wirths' pictures seem easy to consume. The more simply the images' motifs, the more difficult it is to recognize the artist's motivation. Why does René Wirths make the effort to portray everyday objects with such precision, in labor-intensive works that can take weeks to complete, in a time of increasingly fast-paced digitization? It seems easier and much faster to just take a photo. But the artist clearly does not concern himself with the fleeting image. He is rather interested in the processes before and behind the picture, which he questions by means of painting.

The source of Wirths' inspiration is his immediate environment. The whole world is full of things. It can be their surface, symbolism, shape, design, a personal reference, or a combination of all of these things that renders an object worthwhile for René Wirths. In the studio, the artist encounters his subjects directly. There is no photographic template, no projection. By staging the objects on a white background, the painter removes them from their original context and subjects them to his pictorial representation, which prevents narrative elements from entering the picture. The subject of Wirths' analytical observation is rather the thing itself. This observation occurs in part through the choice he makes to portray objects in explicitly frontal or profile view, creating an image that is emotionless and documentary—supposedly objective. But is it really? If we were to compare the real object or a photo of the object with the respective painting, clear differences would arise. But we are so dominated by digital media that we immediately associate a photo with reality. We are thus deceived by the artist: “I am concerned with the small and subtle difference in perception. I am always glad when people eventually ask themselves what the difference is between what they see and what they know.”<sup>1</sup> The painted picture acts as a memory of the artist's processes and experiences in the studio. How can we, as viewers, access this information? One approach may be found in the intensity of Wirths' painting, which circumscribes the sum of his personal observations.

The visual perception of the world is initially based on neuronal processes taking place in the receptors of our nervous system during the acquisition of information. An automated process begins: the sensual stimulus triggers unconscious data-comparison with our individual experiences, insights, and spontaneous feelings. We do not, of course, regard the world as it really is; we only interpret it. There is not one reality; the world has infinite realities. Wirths attempts to eliminate, to the degree it is possible, the inherent subjectivity in the process of perception by his taking a neutral, phenomenological view of the world's things. He seems to want to penetrate to their essence, and to that of the world itself. This essence for him does not inhere in the things, but in his pictures.

René Wirths' paintings are materialized testimonies of his encounter with objects. The artist himself: "The process of painting and observing, the activity of recording, is at some point complete. What remains is a testimony, a remembrance of the spirit of this process, the image. For me, as a painter, the *processes* are essential, which is why I can easily separate from the pictures afterwards. I've incorporated the image into my mind."<sup>2</sup> René Wirths' painting process becomes a metaphor for life. What remains for us, then, is a picture whose existence is not necessarily comprehensible but whose spirit is preserved for posterity. The image as a testimony of the past or transience in turn symbolizes timelessness, death: *Nature Morte!* In the mirror of the things of this world, we recognize ourselves as living beings.

DAS WAS BLEIBT (WHAT REMAINS), the title of the two exhibitions at Kunsthalle Bremerhaven and the Haus am Lützowplatz in Berlin refers to the spirit of images in general and to René Wirths' paintings in particular; they reflect his visible world. This catalog shares the title and will also remain when the two exhibitions themselves are history.

Andrea Fuest

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<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Louise Bartsch, *Interview with René Wirths*: [www.renewirths.text/Interview\\_2010.pdf](http://www.renewirths.text/Interview_2010.pdf).