KUNSTFORUM International, Vol. 267, May 2020

post-futuristic

Art in dystopic times

René Wirths

“I value quality over quantity.”

A conversation with Sven Drühl

The artist René Wirths has lived in Berlin since the early 1970s and studied with Wolfgang Petrick at the HdK Berlin. Beginning in the early 2000s, he garnered attention with paintings that were starkly reduced, formally clear, and striking in their simplicity. Against all narrative, gestural, or “bad-painting” trends, Wirths developed a precise artistic signature with high recognition value he has honed over the years with motifs centered primarily upon individual man-made objects.

Sven Drühl: Looking at your artworks superficially, a viewer might make the mistake of thinking you are practicing photorealism. But actually this couldn’t be further from the truth -- after all, you never work from photos, but rather always directly from the objects themselves. Could you explain the artistic and theoretical differences between your work and photorealism?

René Wirths: Well, we are all influenced by photos -- and I would argue that many of us perceive two-dimensional reality from all different kinds of image-media almost more intensively than we do our actual surroundings. Most figurative painters use media-generated images, and so it’s perhaps obvious to assume that I do, too. But no, I don’t, and if you look closely, you’ll notice it. The process of painting from a photograph would be the same for every image. I would find that boring. It is exactly the absence of technical aids that make my painting authentic and conclusive.

What does that mean in practice?

In practice this means, first of all, that I have to transfer from three to two dimensions. I have to penetrate the object as such and understand its spatiality in order to be able to translate it. Because every object has a different surface and form, it requires a new approach for each picture. My approach is more like that of a sculptor. Layer by layer, from rough to fine. I start with a fairly

wide brush and end with a very thin one. The sum of my observations about the thing and its image is documented in the final work, in the density of the paint application.

Painting serves the object, but the object also serves painting. Although my subject is always present, more than ninety percent of the time I am looking at the painting I'm working on. So, phenomenologically it is not only about the absolute thing-in-itself. Rather, more than anything it offers me a worldly access to the image-in-itself and its possibilities. In a kind of personal digestive process, I immortalize the thing in my painting. You could call it a fusion of finite bodies and infinite spirit. It is what Magritte called the question of the existence of things. Last but not least, I reassure myself of my own existence in the mirror of my pictures.

At a certain level of complexity, the various layers of the paintings are completely new inventions of the object. For example, if I look at the glass standing here in the studio, I don't see any of the diverse structures that will eventually be seen in the painting. You only pretend to represent reality, but you are actually reinventing everything? Could I put it like that?

I see myself both as an interpreter and inventor of reality. Because I don't paint from photos, I necessarily interpret what I see immediately. The light conditions in my studio, for example, change during the day. Especially in the case of reflective objects made of glass or metal, I have to abstract in order to credibly represent the object. Moreover, the strong magnification I portray requires both an intense attention to detail and a high degree of abstraction. When analyzing an object's surface, at some point I reach the limits of my perception. After all, I don't paint what is but rather what I see -- and what I do not see but rather project onto the object. Here is where all my individual and explicitly subjective decisions come into play! A good picture can be deceiving and disappointing, both in the best sense.

What are you interested in?

Foremost in passionate sensual perception! The painting should become a counterpart, preferably with a total physical effect. I am now gradually breaking free from a strict conceptual focus on the object I have practiced for more than ten years. More or less subtly, I now incorporate small changes that become apparent only at a second glance and that develop playfully during the painting process. The picture with the glass you mentioned is already further along in this respect,

because the *Liquids* series, which now consists of 18 parts, is based on an evolution. This means that the processes have become progressively more self-sufficient: The light reflections in the glass are increasingly dissolving into patterns and structures. Hybrids of illusion and abstraction emerge.

Do the objects you translate in painting jump at you rather spontaneously, or do you have a long list of things you absolutely want to paint? How do you select your motifs?

I don't have anything like a list in a Word document, but there is an imaginary list in my head. It is constantly changing according to my needs. Sometimes I mull over a motif for a long time; sometimes it is very intuitive and spontaneous. Until recently, I would have said that I walk through a world of things with open eyes and decide according to their form, color, surface structure, and symbolism. But after ten years of painting things, I realize that there are not as many objects I really want to paint as I once thought. I also noticed the necessity of development. I didn't want to go on like this forever. Today the *what* is no longer so important to me. The focus shifts more and more to the *how*. So I am developing series like *Liquids* or several different variations on the same motif. The decision not to constantly look for new motifs was very liberating for me.

Although human beings do not usually appear in your work, they are indirectly present as creators of the things you paint: mass produced objects such as musical instruments, sneakers, glasses, motorcycles, tires, bread baskets, water bottles, and so on. Is this fact of human production important to you? And would you say that by taking this detour that your works are also narrative?

I also paint organic things from time to time, but I indeed prefer motifs that originate from mass production, because this way human culture is represented in the image without directly depicting people. That creates identification. Actually, I have a very structural approach to the objects and the image. But because -- and despite -- of my conceptual stringency, I always proceed intuitively within a certain framework, and many things are beyond my control. If the sneaker is worn out, then one assumes a certain history, especially since it can be surmised that the sneaker is the artist's own. And if the water bottle is exactly half-full, this can be attributed to the arithmetic of the picture just as much as to the well-known saying about the half-full glass. The staging of the object within the picture and the above-mentioned painting style also reveal an individual perspective. I find it desirable when different levels of meaning and spaces of association open up more or less subtly

behind a strict and very formal surface. My paintings suggest clarity, but often also contain small riddles.

Your art requires time. You create ten to fifteen paintings a year. Many people might consider this old fashioned. Today, many artists have studios where, with the help of many employees, high-priced products are made in large quantities. I deliberately say “products” instead of “artworks,” because very often this all seems like a medium-sized company. With your way of working, you could not exist in such a system. Is that a deliberate refusal? How do you deal with the fact that people in the art market are subject to this high-production pressure, which is diametrically opposed to your way of working?

The question is, *What do I really want from life?* I want to remain the author of my artworks and not to run a company. I take the liberty of being alone in my studio and to concentrate on one single object for a very long time. I do not consciously refuse to develop along certain lines; I simply try to stay with myself and take care of my health. That itself is a complex mission. I had an epileptic seizure almost twenty years ago due to stress; that showed me my limits. Since then I have been very careful. I like to work and I like to work a lot, but I don’t want to end up burned out or to rely on speed or coke to increase my workload. I also don’t think that’s at all hip. I would like to grow old and wise and live a good life until the end. You can see the time and devotion I put into my paintings. These are values! I come from a family of craftsmen. Quality is more important to me than quantity.

Is that true only for art, or does this have broader implications?

One can transfer this to the world economic system, of course. If growth is to continue at all, then only with qualitative growth! This would be a step towards more sustainability. In this sense, the way I work is absolutely contemporary: slow art, so to speak. I admit that I am perhaps making a virtue out of necessity. Because most of all I want to paint. I cannot and do not want to neglect other essential aspects of my personal priorities for my career. After all, I have children I am thrilled to be able to take care of and attend to. Sometimes I also feel like a romantic who still believes in the passionate modernist image of the artist, in the individually produced painting that has an aura effect. Of course it is anachronistic, just as anachronistic as doing yoga, playing the piano, or going for a walk. But, of course, it takes much longer to get noticed as an artist if you can’t play

simultaneously in all the medium and large art arenas. I am very grateful that my galleries have supported me on this path so far, and I hope that the occasionally absurd art market will continue to provide niches for artists like me.

Let's please come back to a specific painting that also has to do with family. You painted a portrait of your late mother, Gisela, which occupies a kind of singular position in your work. For this portrait, she sat in your studio for a long time, in a very classical way. I find that remarkable. On the one hand, you have to endure this closeness in the process, and at the same time it's something completely different to paint a person than an object. And your own mother, no less! Can you say something about the significance of this painting for you and how it came about?

When I painted my mother ten years ago, she was already in the late stages of cancer. We knew she would not live much longer. At the same time, my wife, Nicole Wendel, was pregnant with our second child. It was a high-risk pregnancy requiring a more intense level of care. And I also had to somehow continue making art. I felt torn to do justice to everything and everyone, and I thought about how I could organize it. So I asked Gisela if she would sit for a portrait, and she immediately agreed. It took almost five months; we met whenever she could fit it into her schedule. I painted other pictures in parallel. It was a very precious time we had together, sometimes in intense silence, sometimes in intense conversation. The painting became a kind of ode to my mother, who was a very strong woman, who was able to compensate for my father's alcoholism and early death for both me and my brother. She died two months after I completed the painting.

Do you still own this important painting, or were you able to part with it?

The painting was sold before it was finished. We both were not that concerned about the painting itself. When a picture is finished, I can easily part with it, because the process of bringing it to life ends when it is done. I have taken it in, and now it must be released into the world to continue its life. The memory of this very special time together remains.

In fact, all your paintings are highly abstract -- image invention in the purest sense. The objects are merely the occasion for the painting, and the conceptual frame is the limitation. For a long time, it

was a white background, the object goes to the edge of the picture. This has changed in recent years. The objects have more space around them and the paintings have become more colorful. Have you broken a kind of conceptual framework? What is changing?

As I mentioned, this rather minimalist setting for figurative painting that had long applied to my paintings and which could be justified conceptually had become too narrow for me. I was looking for an opening; I wanted to set myself up more broadly. Almost exactly two years ago, I was making a painting of a stone when a collector friend asked why I wouldn't try painting colored backgrounds. A very basic idea, actually, but for someone who had imposed an almost monastic austerity on himself over many years, that was a huge step. So the stone got a colored background and the picture got a completely different look. It was suddenly much more of a picture in the traditional sense.

Can you explain that a little? What did it change?

It has set things in motion. The colored backgrounds needed more space to unfold. And they made it visually more appealing to use transparent objects, since that made the two directly relate to each other. It has always been important to me that all formal means in my paintings were interdependent. Even with intuitive decisions, I make sure that they are logical in the sense of the picture. And something else changed: although I generally retain the strict, mathematical pictorial architecture the objects offer me, I increasingly make room for improvisation. This development is perhaps comparable to the development from thoroughly composed classical music to freer forms of new music, or from folk music to jazz.

What do you mean by improvisation? It's a term I tend to associate with Pollock or Tachism rather than with your work.

Improvisation has developed for me where forms and structures grow out of the process of painting that do not serve to depict the object and that cannot be planned in detail beforehand. In my studio, there are several parallel stages of development between supposedly realistic depiction and a noticeable abstraction. I have never made a strict distinction between abstract and representational painting. In thinking and designing, I often feel much closer to the abstract-conceptual. In a lecture

in the 1990s, Robert Ryman described Concrete Art as actually the more realistic kind of painting, throwing the concepts open and freeing each from their dogmas. At least that's how I like to read it.

Can you give us a glimpse into the future, where your paintings are headed?

I want to design my own life, and since I'll have to give up everything material in the end anyway, I can well imagine that I won't be painting objects anymore. Of course, I don't know exactly what the way there will look, but being able to have such a project before my eyes lends me a certain orientation. It places each painting and creative phase into the context of a larger dimension. A nice thought!

Translation: Maka/Magill Translation, Berlin