

Emily Ansenk

## The Thing Itself

A crumpled sheet of white paper torn out of a ring binder, never used, yet discarded. What a pity! But the paper is not real. It fits within the borders of a painting, slightly larger than the paper itself. The white background is flat, lacking depth: a smooth white surface against which the creases and wrinkles in the paper are almost palpable. The image recalls René Magritte's apple in the painting *Ceci n'est pas une pomme*. There, we see a large apple against a plain white background, with a finely calligraphed inscription saying, "Ceci n'est pas une pomme" (This is not an apple). Magritte was reminding himself—and the observer—that the apple was not real. Nor was the pipe in his even more famous work.<sup>1</sup> They are painted, two-dimensional representations.

The objects depicted by the Berlin artist René Wirths (1967) make the same statement: I *look* like a chair, a bicycle, a ball of wool, a piece of crispbread, but I'm simply a painting, layer upon layer of oil paint on canvas. Wirths is indebted to Magritte; there is no question about that. He has more in common with the master, he explains, than simply the same forename. Wirths has always felt an affinity with Magritte's "spiritual universe . . . the surreal pictures as well as the word-pictures and enigmas. His works are simple and complex in one."<sup>2</sup>

My first encounter with René Wirths's work took place in 2007, at the Galerie Michael Haas in Berlin, where I saw the sheet of crumpled paper (*Papier*, 2006; ill. p. 18). I was sold on the spot, not just because of its realism, but even more because of the sense of alienation it expresses—the white on white, the blown-up image, and the compelling evocation of texture against the plain, neutral background. This goes even beyond hyperrealism.<sup>3</sup>

It is conceptual art rendered realistically, with a certain degree of abstraction. You experience that abstraction most of all when you examine the painting close up and realize that the different layers of paint form a structure of their own—a world of lines and flecks which seems unrelated to the image that imprinted itself in your mind just a moment before.

Wirths is a modern realist who draws inspiration from the surrealist Magritte and his contemporaries of the German Neue Sachlichkeit movement—Franz Lenk, Georg Scholz, the Dutch Dick Ket, and others—artists who depicted ordinary objects and found their subject matter in everyday life. But Wirths' huge billboard-like images also allude to American Pop Art and artists like Konrad Klapheck who, back in the mid-1950s, depicted objects—a bicycle, a motorcycle, a sewing machine, a typewriter—with simplified details and plain backgrounds. In Klapheck's work, the *object* is the object.<sup>4</sup>

Even though the artefacts in René Wirths's paintings demand our attention, his art is essentially about the process of painting. The images, depicted larger than life, engage us and compel us to look. The battered football cries out to be kicked. You are tempted to reach out and touch the motorcycle's fuel tank, or sink your teeth into the chunk of bread. Removed from their normal context, Wirths's *things* gain an extra dimension. Banal, seemingly irrelevant objects, that someone once manufactured and someone else bought, are placed on a pedestal to beguile passers-by. For Wirths, however, they are merely something to paint. He selects objects that please his eye, that possess a tactile quality and are made from materials that challenge him as an artist. Yet it is more than just their texture or appearance that inspires him; he chooses them too for their aesthetic qualities and their symbolic or personal associations. In his own words, "I like both, the profane and the symbolic things, for their different perspectives and meanings, which make the whole thing more complex and very human."<sup>5</sup>

Wirths's pictures are not based on photographs. He works from the -objects themselves, "posed" in his studio and illuminated by natural light. He paints exactly what he sees before him, from one angle only, without aspiring to achieve a lifelike representation. He cannot be described as a true photo- or hyperrealist: his approach to his subject matter is different. Photorealism is based on the use of photographs and aims to translate a two-dimensional object to a flat surface. Wirths, however, zooms in on the object itself, and literally and figuratively penetrates through all its layers. His work is less smooth, his signature remains visible, and his interpretation of reality alters the appearance of that reality. He leaves much to the observer's imagination, allowing us to fill in details and see his work through our own perspective.

Wirths works on prepared canvas. He starts by sketching a preliminary composition in charcoal, and then works it up with layer upon layer of roughly applied paint. Once the image begins to take shape he uses finer brushes to add definition and detail. How far he proceeds at this stage depends on the subject of the painting. The more layers of paint he applies and the firmer the application, the more thoroughly he has "explored" his subject matter.<sup>6</sup> His rendering of the skull, for instance (*Schädel*, 2010; ill. p. 96), is far freer than that of the flower stem in the glass (*Wasserglas mit Blumenstiel*, 2010; ill. p. 102).

It seems that Wirths enjoys the challenge of adapting his technique to evoke the feel and texture of the material he is painting. His brushwork and the structure of the paint layers in the worn-out leather sports shoes, for instance, are quite different from those in the gleaming metal of a bicycle or a motorcycle. Wirths has also painted his own reflection—more than once—in the surface of a shiny object. The white background separates the physical from the non-physical and symbolizes the "nothingness" between the objects and the surrounding space. Wirths feels that any other color would be pretentious or too aesthetic. He consistently aims at simplicity.<sup>7</sup>

In November 2010, I attended the crowded opening of Wirths's exhibition *Jenseits und diesseits* (Beyond and Here) at the Galerie Michael Haas. The artist divided his time between his guests and his pregnant wife. Their son Valentin was born soon afterwards. His mother was present as well, twice in fact, in person and on canvas, portrayed against the usual pristine white background, with every hair and every wrinkle meticulously rendered (*Mutter (Gisela)*, 2010; ill. p. 98). For some time she had known that she was seriously ill, and was going to die soon. For Wirths that was good reason to paint her. I asked why he occasionally turned from painting objects to more personal subjects, like a hand or a portrait or a symbolic image. He explained, "I had to paint my mother because I knew that she [would] die soon and this was a chance to meet regularly, a chance to spend time together." In the same period, he also painted the skull, the star, and the flower stem in a glass of water which, he said, were symbols of life.<sup>8</sup> The strikingly lifelike portrait of his mother is not his only departure from object to person. He had previously painted his hand as a portrait of himself, revealing the ravages of time.

Wirths' relatively small oeuvre is gradually increasing in size. His work has often been presented in galleries, among them Galerie Schönewald in Düsseldorf, Galerie Daniel Templon in Paris, and Galerie Michael Haas in Berlin, but the exhibition at the Kunsthall in -Rotterdam is his first show in a museum. The Kunsthall, an exhibition space for classical and contemporary art in the broadest sense of the word, has presented several exhibitions on the theme of realism over the years, for a very diverse public. *Dutch Realists after 1950* was shown in 2001, and *Painting now! Back to Figuration* in 2007. *The Adventure of Reality: International Realism* was one of the highlights of 2010.

*The Thing Itself* at the Kunsthall includes almost fifty paintings by René Wirths, most of them made over the past five years. The eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant developed the theory that things in themselves ("*das Ding an sich*") are unknowable to human beings. Objects appear differently to each of us, as our perception is subjective, colored by time and place, information and experience. By adding a personal dimension to the objects he paints, Wirths sheds a new light on everyday artefacts. This exhibition of his paintings gives us an opportunity to explore a world of different realities—and to get lost in René Wirths's paintings.

- 1 "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" forms part of "La trahison des images" (The Treachery of Images), a series of Surrealist oil paintings by the Belgian artist René Magritte, dating from 1928–29.
- 2 Email from René Wirths to the author, April 19, 2011.
- 3 Hyperrealism, also known as photorealism, is an art movement that arose in the 1960s and 1970s. The term refers to the realistic representation of images.
- 4 Klapheck, K. Ullrich et al., *Menschen und Maschinen: Bilder von Konrad Klapheck* (Recklinghausen, 2006).
- 5 Wirths 2011 (see note 2).
- 6 Interview with Marie-Émilie Fourneaux, <http://www.luxe-immobilier.com/fiche-artiste-en-221-rene-wirths.html>.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Wirths 2011 (see note 2).