

THE WORLD IN A GLASS

On the *Liquids* of René Wirths

For those who think that René Wirths can quickly be labeled a realist painter, it might be useful to first look at some of the more unrealistic aspects in his work. There are no shadows in his paintings, for a start. There are objects, pictured plain and big, and the reflections on them indicate that there is a source of light. But no shadow is created. How come? Maybe the artist wanted a very specific light, one that is not really natural. And concerning color, we might also have some questions. The painting *Milk* (2018) does not just show white milk as we know it from having a glass with a slice of bread. Rather, the liquid is, on close inspection, an area in which pink and green are mixed with other colors to produce something white-ish. "I needed those colors to bring the painting into swing," the artist remarks, implying that for a painting of a glass of milk to function, he needs to change the color.

Talking about the realism of a piece of artwork requires us to consider what kind of realism is meant. Does "realistic" mean that the painting just looks like a photo? Does it refer instead to how you see an object in its three-dimensional reality? Or does it point to the familiarity of a scene, showing something as we know it from everyday life? Wirths' series of *Liquids* (2018-current) present us glasses with drinks in them, just like you have seen and tasted before. Apple juice, black coffee, whiskey... The substance of the liquid is brought so close that you almost feel that you can touch or taste it. But then again, you do not usually drink olive oil from a glass – that is not a situation taken from everyday life. So in the painting *Olive Oil* (2019), we clearly have a staged, artificial situation. The artist has poured oil into a drinking glass in order to make the liquid visible, and in a certain shape. The glass molds it into the same form that he has chosen to present the other liquids as well. In the exhibition, there are nine works selected from a series that so far contains thirteen paintings, all showing the same formal "architecture" of a glass in the center of the canvas, filled with a liquid. Or should I say: filled with color?

When you put a black pencil or brush into a glass of water, you can still follow its outline through the liquid. In *Dirty Water*, you cannot. Is this the water that has been used to clean the painter's brushes? Probably, but the water does not look very cloudy, and you can see the color of the background through it. As a result, I am not quite sure what I am seeing in this painting. And that would actually be a good attitude in approaching this series in general. Not to be too sure. Maybe the painter is teasing us with little visual tricks, or mocking the so-called realism of his work. If we want to know what these paintings are about, we should look precisely at what each part of the painting tells us. In line with René Magritte, we might even say: This is not a whiskey. And this is not a glass of apple juice. The artist might be making the point that what happens in his paintings is his vision and a re-creation of reality in paint. Of course it is not real.

Some weeks before the opening of his *Liquids* exhibition, I visited Wirths in his studio in Berlin, where he was still finishing some of the paintings. I asked him if it is a special challenge to paint a substance that is fluid, as compared to the solid objects that he used to do? "Every painting is something different. My starting point is that for every motif that I paint, be it a liquid or something else, I should approach it differently. Every surface and substance requires a different application and transformation." Here

Wirths touches upon something that is relevant to the question of realism. “I don’t want my paintings to look like photos. Photorealism aims at transmitting one two-dimensional image to another.” To Wirths, that is not very interesting. He is also not interested in executing a painting “from the upper left to the bottom right,” knowing beforehand what he will do. He wants to discover something new in each image, while making it. And as long as that is possible, he continues with the series. For that reason, he cannot answer my question of whether the *Liquids* series will develop further.

The *Liquids* build on earlier works in which the artist also presented one singular object, frontal, and with full attention to details. But unlike earlier motifs, the glasses of the *Liquids* series are not squeezed into the rectangle of the frame, with barely any room around them. Instead, the background is more spacious, and has become a factor, or indeed a space, in itself. Also, it has color instead of being a neutral white. “When I started, it was soon clear that the color had to unfold; I had to give it more space. The background color flowed into the object. The transparency of the glass allows color to be fully present.” In each of the *Liquids*, two main colors define the setting – the background color and the actual liquid – and they are clearly conceived in their mutual relationship. In *Rosé Wine* (2019), the background is light, something like greenish gray, and the painting also has an overall light feeling. *Olive Oil* shows a contrast of greenish liquid against a dark gray background, and it looks more mysterious and deep. The effects of these two paintings could not be more different. “*Olive Oil* is the most baroque, from the perspective of light. The dark background produces a very distinct mood. There is some Caravaggio in there, if you like.” *Rosé Wine*, on the other hand, has an airy quality, which for Wirths is connected to the south of France and the summer season. The formal similarity between these two glasses is just a starting point. Subsequently, they give access to completely different worlds.

The combination of the glass, the liquid inside, and the background involves a range of painterly challenges. There are axes of composition which are repeated in the different paintings. For instance, in each one, there is a strong vertical on either side of the center, a bit like lightning flashes. They represent the reflection of light upon the glass. But the reflection here seems more solid and present than one would notice on a real glass. And then there is the bottom of the glass, a few centimeters thick, in which forms start to bend, and a whole impressionistic color play unfolds. The little air bubbles in the glass, for instance, appear like free-floating eyes, looking out from the painting. The bending bottom line of the glass reflects the color of the liquid from below. In the upper part of each glass, just above the surface of the liquid, there is a play of circular lines. They delineate the roundness of the glass. It is interesting that in many parts of the paintings, shapes have a double function: they support the illusion of the glass image, with its curves and transparency, but they also tend to make a mark themselves. Thus, one can sense abstract thinking within and across these so-called realistic depictions. “Occasionally, I think about Rothko,” the painter says, “looking at the main color fields and how they behave. Seeing a glass with a liquid is just one possibility. For me, the paintings are about three aggregate conditions: solid, liquid, and gas.”

“In my paintings, there are hardly unmixed colors. Often it begins with a pink,” Wirths remarks when we look closely at the milk painting. To start with a color that is close to the color of skin could imply that he

is not just considering an object or a liquid. There might be thoughts about the human body, each glass metaphorically showing an individual with his or her own color, substance, and taste. Or you could say: each glass presents an existence. "It is noteworthy that the amount of liquid in the glass is about the same percentage of liquid that human beings have in their bodies," he remarks. "I did not think of that while painting, but such reflections come afterwards." The process of reflection on the character of the object tends to grow in importance, especially when the artist is working on a series, dealing multiple times with the same form. "I like to think that there is some unconscious, collective knowing that influences how we look at a painting. After finishing multiple works, for me it became clear that the paintings were about three aspects of human existence: body, spirit, and soul. They have become iconic images."

Wirths' series touches upon an interpretation issue in painting. The idea that a depicted object is the actual subject matter of the painting cannot make complete sense. Certainly with the connection of the liquids to food or drink, the sensations of the viewer will play a part in the appreciation of the works. But I do not look at them to know something about liquidness. I can stay home and see different shades of red in the wine in the bottles I have. Or open the olive oil I brought back from Greece, to examine its grade of green. Instead, I look at Wirths' paintings because, through the painted objects, and the formal architecture, they tell me something about a view of life, about coherence, the artist's attitude, and his aesthetics and beliefs beyond the image. The works transmit an appreciation of visual pleasure mixed with precision and strictness. It seems to be the work of a person who wants to establish order and balance first, before going into detail or taking more freedom. The glass functions as a skeleton that the artist dresses up differently while exploring moods and states of mind. Wirths grew up in working-class environment, and in his approach, there is loyalty to a grounded spirit. Things should first of all look factual. This might explain his choice of subjects over the years. He embraces the banality of consumer goods, everyday objects, to tell us that what we are looking at can be quite special. And also: things should be executed well, even though skill alone is not enough to make artwork tick.

A good painting is one you want to keep looking at. The *Liquid* paintings fulfill that expectation. In fact, it puzzles me that I enjoy looking at them so much without having a clue of what they really represent. They tend to transform: at some point they stop being just household glasses, and start to appear more like abstracted cylindrical forms, shapes that are containers, floating in a space of color. Yet they do not float unambiguously. The horizontal that delineates the top surface of the liquids creates a baseline in every painting, which suggests that the object is standing firm and in balance. Thus, weight and weightlessness are both part of the painting. There is no further architecture around the glasses that would help us define the spatial setting. In the material of glass, Wirths has found a perfect motif. It has its own beauty and presence, but it is also ready to adapt and disappear from sight, acting as a container of color.

Wirths transmits his worldview, beliefs, and sensibility through material objects that we all know and use in daily life. Looking at the focus, caution, and concentration that he puts into the works, you can see that he treats these objects as if they were important. At the same time, it does not look like he is a materialistic person. There is no hedonism, shininess, or greed in the paintings. I think he chooses to

paint objects because he likes to stick to some kind of objectivity. Human beings wouldn't allow that. They would be too close, too specific, too personal. He needs a certain distance in order to depict the world as he sees it. And through this detour, he can address human affairs. On the canvas he is drawing, touching, modeling, and looking, until he gets a special access to the objects. Paradoxically, through color and glass, this leads to a dematerialization of the objects, in the end. The glasses are not there to make us thirsty, or to invite us to immerse ourselves in the substantial characteristics of coffee or juice. They are there to make us to stay put and look, to spend time contemplating, focusing on this one thing and seeing the whole universe reflected in it. You cannot have your juice and drink it too.

--*Jurriaan Benschop*