

Bartleby the Painter

In Herman Melville's 1853 story "Bartleby the Scrivener," an unnamed lawyer on New York's Wall Street tells of a clerk named Bartleby whom he once employed. Before the invention of carbon-copy paper and the copying machine, the job of such a scribe was to duplicate files, preferably so that a copy matched the original, word-for-word.

At a superficial glance, René Wirths could be mistaken for someone who produces the most realistic—one might even say photorealistic—images possible, of things such as a soccer ball, a soup spoon, or a glass filled with orange juice. But this would mean that one has already fallen prey to two errors: Wirths does not copy; he does not make another thing out of one thing—unlike Bartleby with his writings. He also does not paint from a photograph of the object. Rather, he creates a two-dimensional image of a three-dimensional object. He thus both represents the object in question, but at the same time dematerializes it by taking away its body. (We will return to this later.) Thus, each of Wirths' paintings also poses the question of our perception, of reality and illusion.

In so doing, the painter inflates the size of the thing so that it often almost completely fills the canvas. If it is primed in white, this, together with the strict top or profile view, gives the painting an almost laboratory-scientific quality; if it is colored, it is more like a portrait of the object in question. The background color places one and the same thing in a different context each time, makes it appear in a—literally—different light.

Wirths turns the thing, which at first interests him merely as a source of inspiration, into a picture. Although what actually matters to him is the process of painting itself. The journey is his goal.

And yet not just any object comes into question. Wirths says he holds on to things. "I do this quite consciously, because in them I reflect myself in my bundled individuality and physicality." The thing as a portrait of the painter. Therefore, the form plays a role, the surface structure, the lines. Often they bear traces of life, use, and wear. The small dents in the metal of the motorcycle, the scratches in the cutlery, the cracked leather of the sneaker. Like a sculptor of the surface, Wirths works out in a protracted modeling process what he sees when he looks at things and what, moreover, he considers necessary when he looks at the picture. "The density of the paint application is the sum of the observations," says Wirths. In the meantime, he leaves out what he finds distracting, such as brand names and labels, and adds others, such as lines or reflections—primarily to make the process of painting more interesting for himself. These little improvisational moments are particularly visible in the "Liquids" series of glasses filled with various liquids. Here, streaks appear showing reflections and refractions of light, which, viewed through the eyes of a so-called realist, seem as implausible as if one were hallucinating.

If you talk to Wirths about his art, one theme comes up again and again: Time. ("What seems to be the problem?" goes a line in *Blade Runner*; the answer: "death." The problem is the temporal dimension, and thus always the limitedness of human life. So the answer could just as well have been "time"). Time plays a role on several levels in Wirths' work. There is a certain nostalgia inherent in many of the things he paints. The audio cassette, the light bulb, the single-lens reflex camera—these are objects hardly in use anymore and in a few decades will no longer exist (or only in museums for twentieth-century material culture). For the people of the future, they will be as enigmatic as hay threshers and laundry washboards are for us. By painting these things, Wirths removes them from time, and ships them off to a kind of painterly archive, where they continue to exist. In this respect, his work is also a catalog of some everyday things from the end of the second millennium AD—things with a certain timelessness. A water glass is a water glass across the ages, and as such is just as mundane and everyday as it is unchangingly functional. The twenty-first century, on the other hand, with its specific objects whose shape and function change in rapid succession—for instance from the sphere of digitalization—has not yet found its way into Wirths' paintings, and possibly never will.

Herman Melville's *Bartleby* eventually stops working. His refusal to work, which he announces with the words "I'd prefer not to," makes him a hero of gentle but effective resistance to the expectations of the working world and the impositions of the times. One has read the tale as a commentary by Melville on the awakening capitalism that *Bartleby* opposes, or as Melville's own quibble with the increasingly commercialized culture industry. One has to think of René Wirths as a life-affirming, cheerful version of Melville's scribe. He reminds me of the gentleness and mildness, but also the determination, of this *Bartleby*. He paints slowly, almost contemplatively, preferring not to be rushed and allowing himself the luxury of inefficiency with the few paintings he does each year. (The exceptions are his portraits. He usually completes the paintings in the "Presence" series—which he began during the pandemic to bring friends and fellow artists into his studio—in little more than one day.) By using time the way he does, Wirths is free. He says, "I'd rather not have to paint a picture every week or even every day," thus escaping the pressures of the art world, where, as in any other industry, time is converted into money. And lo and behold: as if he had confused the entire apparatus with this braking move, Wirths has time on his side. "Time Is on My Side" was the title of one of his last exhibitions. His concentration, patience, and long-term perspective result in a body of work spanning two and a half decades.

In this respect, this title, "Time Is on My Side," reflects both *being*—the attitude with which Wirths goes his way and of which he is convinced that it will not only take him furthest, but also do so in the best possible way—and *doing*—the processes of creating his paintings.

Bartleby, the scribe who stopped writing, who at some point did nothing at all and turned his back on the world completely—ultimately dies in the end. René Wirths also thinks

about the end of his life. The moment he has to part with his body, he wants to be able to say goodbye to things—his reflection as bundled matter. The end of his doing means the end of his being. Fortunately, for us who look at Wirths' paintings, this process of detachment has not yet progressed very far. But it has clearly already begun, starting with the process of translating from three to two dimensions and continuing in the concentration on the thing in the picture instead of the thing in itself. Wirths thus conceives of abstraction and abstracting as a process in the context of which he deals with life and death, body and spirit, the all and the nothing.

We do not know what was going on in Bartleby's mind while he was refusing. René Wirths thinks while painting—about his own perception, painting, things, and thus obtains clarity about his place in the world. He marches to the rhythm of his own drum, which one must imagine much less as a military instrument than as a meditative gong. Strictly speaking, he does not march at all; he walks.