

Balance

Observations on the paintings of Wolfgang Wirth

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Among the genres of art, painting is the form of expression with continuity and long tradition, and has therefore, in spite of all the innovations at the beginning of the 20th century, remained the dominating form of expression, for opposites and contradictions manifest themselves in painting itself; or differently stated, a picture never shows at once what it shows, what it is, and precisely under cover of the impression of spontaneous harmony conceals different layers of interpretation. This thought came to me the first time I contemplated a picture by Wolfgang Wirth; it was the landscape „Friends (Norway)“ from 2002. The composition of the picture alludes to the classical elements of a romantically constructed landscape; the gaze is directed gradually into the depths. Two seated figures in the foreground at the left edge of the picture fulfil the function of traditional repoussoir figures and observe, as representatives within the picture for everyone outside, the heroic scenery of an obviously Scandinavian landscape, which seems to be represented as somewhat more colourful than nature made it. Thus the motif retains a balance between presumable personal holiday reminiscence and the stereotype of models in art history. The colours, however, bring the picture out of its balance. Looking from the point of view of the figures with their backs turned to the viewer, the question poses itself whether they are there to observe the landscape as nature or its colours as a phenomenon of light.

It is similar with the pictures „Lake (China)“ and „The Sea Cave“, both from 2006. In the latter, the conception is carried so far that two empty boats now seem to stand in for the viewer of this archaic cave and seek to intensify the suggestion of the physical absence of the passengers that they have brought to this end-point. The view of the painter is here identical to that of the viewer: from a zero point beyond the picture, both gaze into the depths of the gradually opening sea. The direction of the light within this cave is opposed to the direction of the viewer's gaze; it reaches him through its reflection in the depths and effects anew a moment of artificiality that divests the composition of the picture of all documentary character.

Finally, Wirth developed perhaps the most bemusing motif within the spectrum of his works with the picture *Young Man* from 2006. In the middle of the picture we see a young man in the outfit of a tourist, dressed only in T-shirt and shorts. His gait suggests the posture of balancing (an impression reinforced by his clearly outstretched arms) so as to maintain his equilibrium at this place that cannot at first be precisely identified. Although his step seems firm, the gesture of his hands reflects a certain tension which becomes especially intelligible when we recognise that the figure is apparently strolling here with his eyes shut. It appears this is the first time in his work that Wirth presents a figure frontally, with his face to the viewer. The recognition that this figure, however, seeks no direct visual contact with the viewer shifts the entire scene into a state of internalised absence. Considered formally, the figure is even strongly consolidated in the composition. He is moving in a canyon-like landscape of cliffs, with vertical stone formations to the immediate left and right of his out-stretched arms that seem to afford him an unshakeable hold, confirmed by the firmness of his step. Thus the shut eyes and consequent blind walk

offer the interpretative possibility of discerning a motif of imagined reality. What seemed in the well-set composition to be the exploration of a primeval landscape is suddenly transformed into the impression of a fictive world that appears in a new light under this aspect. The portrayed event is turned in thought or imagination, and so is considered as a picture in a composition of colours and forms, foreground and background planes, for which the figure, aided by the colour of his clothes, constitutes the central point of reference.

In the picture *Young Man* Wirth reveals a conception of painting that divulges its complexity only after a close analysis of the work. In front of the purportedly naturalistic scenes constituting the motifs of the pictures appears within the objects a painterly quality that suffuses the nameable elements in an exclusively visual emanation. The picture *Young Man* is in many respects a document of this and at the same time a metaphor. Wirth's pictures seek a balance, represent one, but also do this so as to lead the viewer out of a secured equilibrium by showing that not everything appears as it is. Out of this interplay, which can be opened only by reading the artist's grammar, Wirth creates his pictures.

Translated from the German by Jonathan Uhlauer