

**Feb. 13, 2018**

**Martin Wehmer (b. 1966, Blankenstein. Hattingen, Germany)**

**Artist's Statement:**



Martin Wehmer, *Card Women*, 2014, Oil on Canvas, 230 x 170 cm

*Back of the Starry Sky* (2018), the title Martin Wehmer selected for this publication, implies an alternative view of the universe – a parallel world hidden on some “other side” opposite to us. The otherwise almost limitless universe is given an end, a back side, that allows a returning view, and an imagined space beyond our sight and comprehension. Aside from a host of philosophical perspectives it can illicit, it as well provides an interpretive clue in the reading of Wehmer’s work based on the idea of what can be represented and what can only be imagined. As an artist deeply committed to the act of painting, Wehmer has considered carefully its continued relevancy in examining ways of seeing, using the painterly vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism, including complex pictorial structuring and color relationships, to explore figuration and the means of representation. So, while the architecture of his work clearly utilizes the lineage of Non-Objective Art, the works are still primarily situated in the context of figuration and representation. It is this delicate balance between the gestural abstraction and the structured physicality of his paintings with their thick, almost sculptural paint, and the means by which representation is defined that has been a primary pursuit in his practice. With this interpretation, the back of the starry sky can then be considered an undefined space that cannot be seen but

only speculated on, and possibly it is this theoretical landscape that Wehmer seeks to manifest in his painting.

Given the particularity of Wehmer's bridging of these apparently opposing interests from the history of modernist painting, it is worth noting that a central motivation in the development of early modernism in the mid- to late nineteenth century was to respond more directly to immediate surroundings and depict current social realities. Later, in the early twentieth century with the advent of abstraction and the gradual elimination of the represented object, the flatness of the two-dimensional canvas was self-referentially acknowledged and established as a primary issue. Abstract Expressionism and the related movements in Op Art and Color Field painting would continue this concern with activating an exchange with the viewer based on the direct physical presence of the work, and the phenomenological response that the act of painting could generate. Wehmer engages these two contrasting agendas in his work – a response to the physical world through observational representation against the removal of the subject entirely in favor of an art of painting that refers only onto itself – considering closely what can happen between these two poles.

This consistent oscillation between abstraction and representation is immediately observed in comparing the abstract geometric works from 2012 and his *Shafa* (sofa) series from 2015 and 2016 with the direct concreteness of the represented objects and subjects as found in his paintings of birds from 2015 and his "box" series from 2017. But beyond these easily observed transitions are more subtle plays of representation and abstraction that are found in his disjunctions between the canvas plane and represented plane. In a paired set of paintings (both titled *Board*, and both 150 x 260 cm, from 2015) Wehmer uses an "x" crossing segmentation to create two essentially abstract canvases. Yet, in one of the works, two of the exterior edges of the primary form in the canvas drift inwards to form a trapezoidal shape universally used to represent receding planes in analytical perspective. In giving the abstract form a pictorial representational depth, figuration and abstraction are collapsed and the work resides in an ambiguous position between the flattened space of abstract expressionism and a *painting of* an abstract expressionist painting tilted to one side. To accentuate this play on perspective, the form is almost identically repeated in the other work but here the perspective device is reduced and almost eliminated. While this side to side comparison is not directly made in other works, the abstract formations, mark-making, and geometric shapes (sometimes in the physical form of sticks of wood directly attached to the canvas) are channeled through analytical perspective repeatedly in Wehmer's works over the past several years. When viewed in sequence, as this extensive publication of recent work permits, the play between geometric abstraction and the represented object reveal a continuing concern with the foundational philosophies of modernist painting, representation, the picture plane, and how the physical reality of the world is addressed and engaged in the act of painting.

Drawing on a retrospective overview of diverging modernist philosophic art goals that include both the production of an art object that refers directly to its own making and representations that respond directly to the here and now, Wehmer's revisionist

impulse unfixes the established categorizations that have defined abstraction and representation to produce canvases that utilize the languages and strategies of both, often fusing the painterly gesture within a formalized structure, commonly using strong linear shapes and forms. So, by way of example, recent works include fully abstract canvases with rectangular shapes, but other paintings from the same period, with only minor compositional adjustments, clearly represent the acute perspective views of overturned chairs and furniture. A variation on this is found in the numerous abstract works that use a strongly defined grid quartering of the canvas with sticks, that to my mind as least, almost physically construct a traditional window frame with glazing bars: an abstract painting inserted into a fabricated window frame. Clearly with these devices Wehmer is exploring the breakpoint between pure abstraction and representation as a means of revisiting central tenets of twentieth century painting.

While Wehmer is rigorous in addressing modernist art and sophisticated in his method and thinking, he doesn't pursue a formally reductivist agenda associated with Malevich's avant-garde Suprematist works or the conceptually based programs of late modernist minimalists like Stella and others, nor does it have the wholly distilled formalism of Color Field painting. A clearer touchstone, for his circular geometric abstraction at least, lies more directly with early abstraction and Orphism, particularly Sonia Delaunay's strong geometric concentric circles from the early twentieth century in European painting, in addition to the heavy impasto and solid slab coloration in Hans Hoffman's Abstract Expressionism work and the American hard edge West Coast abstractionists from the 1960s, with Al Held's crisp geometric and perspective based works holding some formal compositional similarities. But regardless of these possible artistic references, these ideological frameworks provide no foundation for an accounting of Wehmer's shifting interests and repeated returns to representation, and ongoing engagement of the figure.

In seeking to locate his broader practice within contemporary discourse, there is the question of the link between his energetic impasto brush and palette knife figurative work and Neo-Expressionism, which reopened the terrain of early modernist expressionism for painting in the early 1980s. And given the surge of painting energy in the "Neue Wilden" (i.e. new Fauves) German art movement that emerged as a vital reaction to the increasing formalism and asceticism of Minimal and Conceptual Art in the years just before Wehmer's studies in Freiburg, Germany, between 1987 and 1992, one might work to find an opening source to the rough figuration consistently present in his work in this movement, or if not in the more general return to expressive modeling and subjective and symbolic themes found in international Neo-Expressionism. However, I feel it really shares little more than a rejection of the reductivism of Conceptual Art and Minimalism in providing too little opportunity for the poetry of individual craft or too little subtlety in engaging social commentary. Additionally, any link with Neo-Expressionism is qualified because, simply put, Wehmer's paintings aren't really freely expressive; they aren't so much created through open expression, as constructed through reflection – the opposite emotive source. The particularities of Wehmer's technique involve careful selection and preparation of the pallet range and strategic control of the amount of paint to achieve the thick layering and blunt slabs of color. While accidental events and improvisation

undoubtedly occur and are utilized, there is the sense of the execution of a plan in his work. Regardless of their apparent spontaneity, occasional roughness, or fluidity, their method of construction underlies a program more careful than those associated with any form of Neo-Expressionism. As always, these types of methodological detail reflect other foundational outlooks and predispositions of the artist. In Wehmer's case, I believe, they reflect a sense of responsibility to consider the history and continued function of painting in a post-abstraction era, and proceed with a studied deliberateness.

There is obvious attention to the paint structuring from the perspective of abstraction, yet, this program is systematically put into the service of sculpting defined representational forms, often creating highly resolved renderings with surprisingly blunt application of paint, all of which betray extraordinary skill. As examples, *Qiao Si's Box* (2015) achieves a convincing metallic box interior with only a few wide slabs of paint, while *Kou* (mouth, 2016) is unrecognizable as an abstract form in black and white when viewed up close (or in detail, as in this publication) but resolves to a delicately observed rendering of a lip being bitten as the bold strokes merge when viewed at a distance. This trait is present in almost all the work, with the subjects dissolving into painterly abstraction when the viewer approaches the canvas closely.

For the themes of his recent work, Wehmer returns repeatedly to a relatively small group of subjects that include human figures, chairs and furniture, hands (praying or holding cards) and legs, animals and birds, jet planes, and boxes and folders, with occasionally more particular objects selected like horse bridles, saddles, boots, guns, and gym shorts. The figures fall short of portraits, lacking slightly the defining details needed to identify them as unique individuals but still refined enough to go beyond generic representations of the body. With titles like *Women* and *Men* frequently used, even for paintings with a single figure, there is an implied universalism. This generalizing gives these works openness, without betraying Wehmer's personal connections to, or thoughts about, the subject. Often they are in the middle of some act: hands brought to the head in apparent distress, hands brought together in prayer, hands brought to the mouth in shouting, or with bodies leaning over in slumber. Presented with solid toned backgrounds that isolate the figure, a compositional strategy used in almost all his work, it imbues a kind of iconic value to them, and seems intended to invite open interpretations.

More specific social commentary can be seen in a few works, notably the work *Occupy* that was produced in 2012 around the time of the Occupy Wall Street movement that draws on the Anonymous activist group's mask logo, and the series of works that have individuals (mostly women) with paper particle masks, which are an increasingly common sight in major Chinese cities as concerns about air pollution rise. But even in these cases where a particular social issue can be identified it is not entirely clear if the theme is intended to be a direct commentary or a metaphor: less identification with the agenda of Anonymous than a reflection on the struggles for equality, and less about specific air quality concerns than the humanist instinct for safety, or possibly a critique of the silencing or masking of the female voice in society.

This apparent openness in the directing of the works is accentuated for the Western viewer by Wehmer's frequent use of pinyin (the romanization system used to represent Chinese characters) in the titling, which would not be easily understood without some basic background in studying Chinese -- so, "niao" ( 鸟, niǎo, bird ) is used for a painting of bird, and "ma tui" ( 马, mǎ, horse; 腿, tuǐ, leg) is used for a painting of a horse's legs, etc. Even when the title is in English it serves as little more than simple identification of the subject (*Ear, Tiger, Butterfly*, etc.) indicating that Wehmer seems intent on not directing the work in any way through titling, and allowing the work the widest interpretive potential.

In 2008, Wehmer moved to China, establishing an active studio practice in Beijing, working in relative isolation from the German and European art communities for almost a decade. One might expect to find more direct references or traces of contemporary or traditional Chinese art in his work, but there seems to be relatively little direct influence from the arc of Chinese painting after the end of the Cultural Revolution and the emergence of modern and contemporary art. The quickly morphing evolution of Chinese art since the 70s is an area of keen interest and study for Wehmer, and his engagement with the local community is significant, and has included sessional teaching at several Chinese art colleges, but little of this activity seems to direct or alter the path of his artistic practice specifically. Grounded in the post-abstraction period of European painting, his trajectory is surprisingly independent of surrounding art activities. Yet, he is committed to forging an exchange with the community, exhibiting often and using Beijing and China as a primary forum for his work. The number of Western artists to take this path is relatively small, and it reveals a resolute understanding and commitment to his practice that few other artists would likely be able to maintain. Possibly the conditions in Beijing create an open space that actually fosters rather than hinders his artistic exploration.

The broad methodology and painting philosophy for his work has been established for some time. He has brought to the Chinese art scene a mature practice that actively seeks to revitalize the act of viewing the canvas as a dynamic visual experience based on complexly structured surfaces that refer back directly to their making on a two-dimensional flat plane. The works never seem to become settled or permanent, still reflecting a tactile life that stretches beyond the paint setting – each action of the artist still traceable on the surface, with the canvas still vital and alive. Wehmer, at the same time, engages in an ever expanding range of techniques and approaches that realize these abstract modernist pursuits along the wide spectrum between pictorial realism and formal abstraction. In doing so the represented form exists in the ambiguous but charged space between being shown and being implied. Has Hofmann, who Wehmer has acknowledged as an influence, famously stated that "the ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak."<sup>1</sup> In this way, Wehmer's simplification of representation is an intentional effort to remove unnecessary detail to achieve a unified form between gesture and representation. This unfixes the subjects from being pinned to an overly defined

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in *Zen and the Art of Stand-up Comedy* by Jay Sankey (New York Routledge, 1998)

visual interpretation, and allows them to float as open symbols of our contemporary world that can be contemplated, like the unexplored view from the back of the starry sky.

Gordon Laurin  
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