

# Creating your own take

by Christin Müller

*“Strangely, despite the fact that the angle of vision our eyes offer is only two degrees, we actually always focus when seeing on the overall impression and do not do real justice to the details. Even very well-known things offer new perspectives when seen in a cropped version, and this is usually most evident with flowers, because generally only specialists take a closer look at flowers.”* Albert Renger-Patzsch (1923)

The movements that Thilo Westermann makes in his reverse plexi paintings are minimal. He works with the brush or needle millimeter by millimeter along the surface of the pane of plexi to give rise to an image. His hand moves so slightly that if you only look at it for a moment, you will hardly perceive the motion. And his nose is as good as touching the bouquet of flowers – the distance between his eyes and the emerging image is only 10 –15 centimeters. At this distance the painting is larger than life and develops a life of its own. The deep black background creates a concentrated stage on which the black-and-white motif evolves, ensuring that the real space of Thilo Westermann’s studio recedes into an opaque blur.

As if one steps closer to the paintings, the intrinsic life of the images becomes comprehensible in the large-sized one-off prints. Thilo Westermann has his reverse plexi paintings enlarged such that the painted motif takes on a life of its own when seen from the customary distance taken by viewers. The dots of the images can thus be discerned as non-machine-made, imperfect and irregular, placed there by the individual movement of a hand. The degree of enlargement is carefully chosen. The artist has chosen the ratio of enlargement such that the image flips from showing a recognizable theme and abstraction into a non-figurative blur of image dots. The viewer’s perception is thus undermined: With each step forward toward the exhibition walls the flowers increasingly dissolve and details emerge until at some point all you see is dots. With each step back, the subject matter re-assembles itself and resembles the original image, the small-sized reverse plexi painting.

This effect of the changing legibility of images is reminiscent of Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *Blow-Up* (1966). There, fashion photographer Thomas by chance photographs a murder that he first notices when enlarging negatives. In order to better understand the scenery he has shot, Thomas blows up the image to an ever larger size. Initially, the victim and the murderer come to light, but then the pictorial object gets lost in the abstraction of grey dots. In the present book, this game with image legibility resumes. Westermann has deliberately had his reverse plexi paintings and reproductions of details from his one-off prints printed in their original size. When leafing through the book, the overall image and the details thus come into conflict. It is as if one were moving closer to the exhibition wall and

then back again.

With his *Dispositive* Thilo Westermann takes a few steps back from his own images. What we see is the spaces in which he hung his images or would most like to hang them. As the title *Vanda Miss Joaquim, Vanitas (Rose Westerland) und Vanda Miss Joaquim 2 in Daniels Wohnzimmer, München 2014* (2014) suggests this is in Daniel's Munich living room: Above a white sofa, next to a black dial telephone, a minimalist wall luminaire and a white orchid, the reverse plexi paintings blend with the surroundings as if purpose-made to fit them. Is this some special setting staged for a glossy interior design magazine?

Another photograph takes us into Daniel's spare bedroom. Arranged one in front of the other or next to the other, we see the color pencil drawings *Purpurviolett, Purple Violet – Fuchsia, Fuchsia* (2014) and *Laubgrün, Leaf Green* (2012) and the reverse plexi painting *Vanitas (Phalaenopsis) 2* (2008) on a black shelf in front of oil paintings and next to a prominently placed picture frame with a hand-written text: "I do wish you enormous success with your career." This message bears the date, 1992, which is well before Thilo Westermann's drawings and paintings first existed. There's a parallel here to the quiet wit with which Louise Lawler photographed the immediate surroundings of masterpieces in private apartments, storage rooms and conference rooms.

In *Vanda Miss Joaquim 2 im Waldorf Astoria, New York 2014* (2014), *Vanda Miss Joaquim 2* slips into a gold frame complete with a photo mount. Outside the picture frame, the painting is echoed by the Asian flower pot with its filigree painting, the relief of leaves on the marble table, and the mirror on the wall. Nevertheless, the painted flower next to a real azalea with its pink blossom looks as if it has been snared in the frame. How much more confident *Vanitas (Vanda Miss Joaquim)* hangs above the ticket desk at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. While the visitors queue to buy tickets to enter the Matisse exhibition, the real bouquets on the desk join the painted flowers like a Holy Trinity. But on closer inspection, the picture gives itself away. Compared to the smallformat reverse plexi paintings and the print version of it, Westermann's *Vanitas (Vanda Miss Joaquim)* is too large. The wit innate to Thilo Westermann's calmly dense compositions thus congeals – into silent self-irony.

Back to the beginning: When we ask "How much photography is actually intrinsic to Westermann's reverse plexi paintings?" we turn the table. In terms simply of the materials, reverse plexi painting is not dissimilar to analogue photography. Both use a transparent medium on which an image arises. Moreover, photographers between the 1850s and the 1930s used glass plates coated with collodion or gelatine as negatives on which to record their black-and-white images. While the image taken by photographic means appears as a negative on the plate of glass, in this regard the wealth of details in Thilo Westermann's paintings is just as dense.

In terms of pictorial idiom, there is a close link between Westermann's pieces and the 1920s photographs taken by proponents of New Objectivity. At the very beginning of his photographic

career, Albert Renger-Patzsch, whom I quoted above, portrayed plants for the Folkwang-Auriga-Verlag. In 1924, a few years prior to the publication of his most famous book, *Die Welt ist schön*, he brought out the tome entitled *Die Welt der Pflanze. Orchideen*. Against a deep black ground, the plants, photographed close up, stand out like independent beings. Like the themes in his industrial images, Renger-Patzsch captured the orchids using even grey tones, a sharp focus and refined lighting in order to emphasize each plant's character and intrinsic values. In his reverse plexi paintings, Thilo Westermann transposes this unpretentious and precise style into the field of painting.

The orbiting expansion of Westermann's own oeuvre by means of photography and scanning offers him (and us) an opportunity to create a multifaceted take on his own world of themes. The density of his pieces emerges precisely when you explore his reverse plexi paintings, his one-off prints and his photo works parallel to one another as by then you will find out references and undiscovered details. In the present book, Westermann has expanded this photographic orbit once again, to include impressions of his studio, shots of exhibition preparations, images of private views and of celebrities snapping selfies in front of his pieces – just as the artist simply wants to immerse us in his own cosmos of images.

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