

The Contemporary Artist

by Aoife Rosenmeyer

Is Thilo Westermann a contemporary artist? He is working in the current day and is engaged with the ongoing discourse around art presently being made. His work may look atypical, but can be aligned with the 21st century artistic tendency to examine how images are communicated and disseminated, within which printing and reproduction are key topics. Secondly, for all their apparent veracity, Westermann's figurative drawings are not direct reproductions but the kind of composite collages of many images that would make a digital manipulator proud. And yet, and yet. As Martin Thierer has described, Westermann's still lives persist in a tradition that reached its apogee hundreds of years ago in the Baroque period. It may not be entirely abandoned today, but when artists return to the still life it is always with a nod to its earlier heyday.

So Westermann's work is not contemporary, if by contemporary you mean, neutrally, it is of its time. If, however, you consider Giorgio Agamben's definition, his practice is suddenly, exemplarily, contemporary. Agamben's essay *What Is the Contemporary* was published in English in 2009, and takes as its starting point a work by Friedrich Nietzsche, and particularly its apt title, *Untimely Meditations*. Agamben is in accord with Nietzsche's appraisal of the contemporary: "those who are truly contemporary," Agamben states, "truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands."¹ Thus being contemporary is a state of being disconnected from one's time, being at a remove, in order to be capable of truly perceiving it. This distance, or disconnection, is a state of *anachronism* – and this too perfectly describes Thilo Westermann's work. Not only due to the un-dateable subjects of his figurative reverse plexi paintings, but given the skill and effort brought to bear on those works. The development of his precise painterly craft, which requires weeks' work to complete a piece only 20 or 30 centimetres tall, is entirely *démodé*, at odds with the pace of modern life. Were Westermann swept up in the course of current, instant image making, he would be blind to the age. Agamben's state of being contemporary is not an attempt to evade the present, to escape its pressures or unpleasantness, but the very opposite: by virtue of being anachronistic, the artist can see and be critical of what they see.

Agamben's essay continues by considering how to achieve contemporary perspective, interrogating the mechanics of perception to this end. If being contemporary means not to be blinded by the light of the present, but to be able to see its darkness, then how does one see darkness? In neurophysiologic terms, darkness is not an absence of stimuli, but the activation of other cells in the retina and thus of another kind of seeing. A more active one, you could say, and an active looking is what is necessary to see beyond the assault of images (and sounds and other inputs) with which we have to live today. For

Agamben, the two kinds of seeing are inseparable; brightness harbours its own 'intimate obscurity'.ⁱⁱ Darkness is also key in the tradition of still life; often flowers, fruits or foodstuffs seemed to emerge from the darkness of an interior, as if to emphasize their fleeting existence and their fate to return to dust like all mortal things.

Westermann's reverse plexi images are true to this tradition, they even accentuate it, as his arrangements of flowers and crystal vases come out of pitch-blackness. Though they have the physical properties of flowers resting and vessels standing on surfaces, placed as they are between clear panes they are also in a state of suspension, as if nowhere in the world. Floating in a galaxy of their own, perhaps? Yet even this location is considered in Agamben's essay. The solitary star in a dark night sky is not alone, rather surrounded by an expanding universe that we cannot perceive. Nascent galaxies are speeding away from us at a velocity greater than light, so we cannot see the rays that shine in our direction. Only the contemporary perceives the light in the infinite (or growing) darkness.

And there is still more in Agamben's short essay that can productively inform a reading of Westermann's work: that being contemporary renders the present archaic, in the sense of locating its point of origin. This is not an exercise in retreating backwards in time to locate some original erstwhile happening, but an excavation to find within the present its essential origin that we can no longer experience, but which is still part of us, as the child's life informs that of the adult it becomes. Finally, the caesura the contemporary (artist) makes with the present enables them to view the present in relation to the past, creating a more dynamic connection between the two.

Let us return to Westermann at work. He selects a pencil, he makes a minute mark on his prepared surface, he repeats the gesture. He does so at length, at painful, painstaking length. This process for his colored pencil works is absurd, for the result does nothing but marks its own process and the existence of a single color. Westermann is working on a piece of aluminium dibond that has been coated white and sanded numerous times so that it will take the pencil color. When the work is completed it is exhibited, like the still lifes, clear of the wall, making these images also screen-like, at a remove from a solid support. The action is the kind of repetitive movement that a machine could do, let alone what a computer and printer could achieve together; by doing it himself Westermann is revealing his human inadequacy, his variability and the minute variations in his pencil. The finished works are candy-like blocks of color – it's hard to resist the pretty pink flush of *Fuchsia*, *Fuchsia* (2011) that entices, only to exasperate upon closer inspection as it thwarts every modern urge to be productive, swift, professional and polished.

But of course Westermann's still lifes use the same principle: all his current work results from the application of minute marks to create a composite whole, with one series creating a figurative result, the other an abstract one. This method of cumulative mark-making was first borrowed from printing to create the still lifes, part of his investigation of how to make his depictions of objects appear as

tangible and real as possible. There is no denying the apparent solidity of the roses, lilies and peonies in miniature, yet the artist simultaneously shatters the illusion by enlarging and fracturing the image, returning it to a collection of constituent marks.

Both these series are of their time; Westermann's works are informed by a culture in which images are both fleeting and of paramount importance. The media we are continually fed require a continual stream of images both glossy and beautiful, even if they are destined to disappear as fast as they appear. These images are the manifestation of economies of desire, and must be continually renewed and bettered. Thilo Westermann is attuned to the languages of attraction but resists the imperative to make evanescent images. And thus he is thoroughly contemporary, working in but at a remove from his time. If the great still lives of the Baroque period celebrated the perfection and the fleeting duration of all that is worldly, Westermann reconsiders that period as a means to hold fast to something lasting while all around him is fleeting. As Agamben put it: "It is as if this invisible light that is the darkness of the present cast its shadow on the past, so that the past, touched by this shadow, acquired the ability to respond to the darkness of the now."ⁱⁱⁱ

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ⁱ Giorgio Agamben: *What Is the Contemporary?* In: *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*. Trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. Stanford 2009, p. 40.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 53.