

Vanitas

by Martin Thierer

Flowers of almost supernatural perfection, arranged in exquisite crystal vases, captured in classical black and white – timeless elegance, preserved inaccessibly behind a clear, hard surface: this is what we see when viewing Thilo Westermann's hyperrealist reverse plexi paintings. He has entitled the series *Vanitas*, which may seem quite an obvious choice of title, but Westermann uses it with careful precision. By stating the obvious, he points to something which is far from obvious. Of course the viewer can ponder the transience of all earthly things while delighting in the perfection offered by the subject matter depicted, but the works put the focus on different issues.

In his art, Thilo Westermann reflects on the position of, and relationship between, artist and image in the current nexus of image-producing media. What makes an artist and which images can even be considered art? With the forward march of digitalization, these questions are becoming increasingly important. Does this kind of categorization even make sense any more at a time when virtually everyone is able to produce and reproduce ever better images in almost infinite numbers?

Westermann addresses this universal issue most elegantly by focusing on the theme of flower still lifes in terms of iconography – *the* classic motif for *Vanitas* portrayals ever since the first Dutch antecedents in the 17th century at the latest. In doing so, he devotes himself to one of the major themes in western art history and explores its relevance for art today, both in terms of whether it is even worthy of representation now and interestingly as regards whether we can draw conclusions on our contemporary image production from it. With media output having shifted into a virtual space, the issue of the meaning of materially perishable things in our world is becoming more important and topical than ever.

Vanitas – the term was coined in Classical Antiquity and from early Christianity onwards characterized and defined man's relation to his worldly existence in the philosophical-religious context. It was said that all man-made things by intrinsically being perishable, were doomed to failure, and first and foremost this meant art. The influence of the *Vanitas* idea was so far-reaching that in Renaissance Florence, thousands of art works suspected of being blasphemous in thrust were consumed by the flames of Savonarola's infamous *Bonfire of the Vanities*.

In the Baroque era, fueled by the atrocities of the Thirty Years' War and the devastating plague epidemics, *Vanitas* portrayals almost completely dominated European art. The melancholy that came from pondering the transience of all things beautiful was nurtured as a means of bringing life on earth closer to the divine afterlife. The constant struggle with one's own failure, and quiet desperation when faced by it, were extolled as virtues and celebrated in all of the arts. From this angle in particular the motif of transience of all earthly things was used to oppose Absolutist ostentatious arrogance.

In the genre of the still life the portrayal of objects associated with *Vanitas* symbolism was most notably perfected in Holland. Such paintings of course focused on the precious, special and exotic above all else, meaning that there was no limit to the opulence of what was depicted. Indeed, here we can already discern a shift given the foregrounding of brilliant painting techniques and the excessive exuberance in highlighting the *Vanitas* theme, for all the over-emphasis on moribund symbolism. With the advent of the Enlightenment and the onset of industrialization, a new mindset asserted itself once and for all in European philosophy. The belief in what could be accomplished by the human hand and the possibility of surpassing all obstacles thanks to the keenness of the human mind led to pictorial representations of successful lives, even of the triumph over one's own mortality. Admittedly, the awareness of the finitude of human existence still resonates in these artworks, but at the same time there is a certainty that human genius can create something that outlasts time – above all else in the arts and sciences. This opened up a range of new subject matter for the visual arts. It was only in the 20th century, with its world wars and new horrors, that the topic was addressed again, such as for example in Expressionism in the 1930s, in Arte Povera in the 1960s, in the photorealist paintings of Gerhard Richter, in the still life photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe or in Jeff Koons' sculptures and hyperrealist paintings, which belligerently attack traditional iconography.

Whether we are talking about *Vanitas* in the new or old sense, in Western society, defined as it is by a religion that is essentially iconoclastic and focused on the afterlife, it has always been necessary to justify the existence of a painting, of the mastery of craft and the pleasure in the material world surrounding us expressed in it – by referring to the passage of time, decay and death. Modernist, postmodernist and current art is still prone to prioritizing admonishment over the purely aesthetic. The rule of thumb is: the more beautiful the object depicted, the more abysmal the message it contains ought to be.

It is only the pictorial world of advertising, without question the field of image production with the largest sphere of influence and the greatest social relevance, which is not encumbered by these historico-philosophical difficulties. Here, the object is clearly to make the product represented seem as magnificent as possible and through the power of visual persuasion to dispel all possible doubts concerning its durability and perfection. Advertising makes up its own cosmos and since the 1950s has time and again offered inspiration but also occasion for critical analysis for the fine arts.

So what is it that is special about Thilo Westermann's approach to this already so extensively covered topic?

While the flowers, condemned to wilt, and the artfully shimmering but decidedly fragile crystal vases point the viewer almost aggressively in the direction of the themes outlined above, the relevant and interesting examination of the topic today lies above all else in the very particular way in which the artist makes his works. As Westermann's pictorial universe continues to develop in a variety of media,

it is best to start by looking at the paintings that were the launchpad of the *Vanitas* series, and which he continues to make the same way to this day.

Westermann uses the old technique of reverse glass painting – a craft that in contrast to other ways of painting works in a negative process (as it were from back to front) – in a way that creates a level of realism in the depictions of objects which we otherwise tend to be familiar with only from photography and its forms of reproduction.

For any viewer, these images are manifestly and instantly more than mere imitations of photography or simple photorealism. The small format, gleaming surface and plasticity of the image medium create works that have the feel of sculptures about them; each image appears as a consequence to be a precious gem, a piece of jewelry, that in the past would surely have found its way into one of the cabinets of curiosities.

The fragile blossoms and gleaming vases depicted are ideal compositions that Westermann has perfected down to the minutest details. The compositions seem like three-dimensional objects encased in glass – inaccessible and illustrious, which immediately suggests the use of the term hyperrealism. In so doing, Westermann not only rivals photography, but most certainly also competes with the idealizing aesthetic of the now technically perfected modern image production per se. He creates trompe-l'oeils, not just of photographic images, but of the entire technical process connected to them, and he correspondingly builds each image from tiny black dots in front of a white background. This is a weeks-long, detailed process and may even lead him to scratch even finer dots from blackened surfaces which he then provides with a white background. The structures created hereby are reminiscent of rastered print images. Our eyes convert these to the grey mid-tones of the black-and-white photography we are familiar with. But it is not just the rastering, which is only discernible when you inspect the works very closely, but also each image's small format and reflective surface that seem to convey mechanical origins even close up. When you finally realize how these paintings are made, you invariably find yourself standing before these hand-made works of art in awe. You quite simply realize what immense concentration and time is needed to produce them.

These works convey a traditional view of the artist that places nurturing, reflecting on and perfecting one's own technique at the heart of artistic practice, and which strives to create something timeless and durable.

Starting from this masterful crafts achievement, Westermann then enters into a dialogue with himself, by continuing the work on his pieces in different media. To begin with, he juxtaposes each of his small-scale paintings to a print, enlarged many times, which is glued behind Perspex using a Diasec process and which at first seems like a further reverse plexi painting. To this end, Westermann has the original paintings scanned, enlarged, printed and mounted in an elaborate procedure. He deliberately does not use photography for this process in order to avoid any optical distortion. This creates a purely

mechanically generated copy of the hand-crafted painting. It is in this enlargement, a unique copy, that the dots making up the image first become noticeable to the naked eye, revealing the artistic style through their ever so slight irregularity. Here, Westermann no longer uses printing techniques solely for duplication. Rather, the super-high-resolution enlargement is turned into a means of scientific demonstration, in order to show the painterly origins of the perfect artwork created by hand in what Walter Benjamin termed the 'age of mechanical reproduction'. As though under a magnifying glass, the merits of painting are revealed in the – equally perfect – technical reproduction. Every painted dot turns into individually crafted piece of data. In the case of rasterized templates, enlargement would render a monotonous sameness visible, whereas what we are presented with here is an entirely independent, autonomous image that can now be perceived in an entirely different way. Surprisingly enough, the chosen medium is not, as is so often the case, relegated to the rank of a mere vehicle for celebrating the superiority of painting over print. Instead, Westermann productively uses the potential innate in the technology to reach perfection at a larger scale.

In contrast to his figurative paintings and large format prints, Westermann also addresses the topic of color in his non-figurative drawings. While earlier works in the same technique still used abstracted shapes, newer works see him meticulously cover line after line of the white, primed surface in microscopic dots of one and the same color. The pieces are simply given the name of the color of pencil used. Intriguingly, it is neutral, chemical terms that are used to describe colors, but emotionally charged words such as *Flesh* or *Leaf Green*. When looking at the works, the semantic level, already given strong associative connotations by the titles, is further charged by the look-and-feel of the way in which the color is applied. We see a monochrome surface, which is not however uniform in appearance. Instead, the works create the impression of organic surfaces that seem diffuse and cloudy at first, but gain a striking sense of depth when approached.

The process of fine stippling, which in the previously mentioned reverse plexi paintings has to be carried out with the greatest of concentration, is much freer in these works. The continuous stringing together of dots, without needing to assign them a special position or value, gives the process an almost meditative quality. Subconscious thoughts and feelings flow into this process, personal aspects become visible, a kind of logbook of the time the artist has spent on and with the work is created. In terms of the imitation of mechanical precision, Westermann deliberately points out the limitations of the technique he uses here. It is not technically possible to create something that is truly mono-tone, but it is precisely here that the enormous advantage of making images by hand becomes visible, for it allows subjective feeling to be rendered directly evident. Westermann's pursuit of technical perfection is precisely not an attempt at overcoming the thrust of art. Instead, his extreme balancing act in approximating the image generation process to technical production enhances our focus on the last discernible differences.

It is simple to simply juxtapose gestural brush strokes to mechanical rasterization. To examine the

steadfastness and power of persuasion of a medium using its own means – dot for dot, as it were – is brave.

Thilo Westermann enters new terrain with his project *Escada meets Thilo Westermann*. Enlarged details of his *Vanitas* paintings cover the fabric panels of a unique capsule collection for summer 2015 of international luxury fashion label Escada like fractals. Following a suggestion by fashion director Daniel Wingate, Westermann and the Escada design team created garments that leave a distinctive impression through the interplay between the cuts and the patterns printed on the fabric. The magnification achieves a high degree of abstraction, creating autonomous, three-dimensional objects, which, when worn and in movement, draw attention through their iridescent appearance.

Translating motifs from his *Vanitas* series into items of fashion, a discipline which is generally seen as the most transient and superficial of art genres (if it is seen as an artistic genre at all) allows Westermann to bring the second aspect of *Vanitas* into focus, namely people's vanity. And in this constellation, vanity on the part of the viewer and the buyer and not the narcissism of the artist, which art criticism delights in insinuating and discussing otherwise.

Of course, this also brings with it the unique opportunity to test the transience of one's own creations in a 'self-test intrinsic to the piece'. Are these items of clothing merely fashionable accessories or do they stand the test of time, surpassing current trends to become ageless classics, or even collector's items? In either case, the clothes will also return to being images, in shop windows and magazines, on runways and red carpets from New York to Tokyo. In doing so, they will gain a certain life of their own, which in turn will generate additional levels of reflection.

Westermann elaborates on appearance and reality, vanity and ephemerality, finally taking this game to the extreme in his photographic series *Dispositive*, which is deliberately named after Michel Foucault's term *dispositif*. The artist stages his works in all kind of rooms and spaces, in museums, hotels, collector's living rooms and so on, in places where representative, expensive and meaningful things are expected to be found. Whether this is done virtually, by creating a digital montage, or by actually hanging the pieces in real life is impossible to say from looking at the photographs. Here, Westermann gets ahead of art history and the mechanisms of the market, showing the viewer how and where artworks are placed today when an artist is 'doing well' according to the general consensus. He anticipates possible future ownership of his works and proto-documents these in images as can be found in popular art and interior magazines. Images, then, that institutions would use to fill their advertising brochures and with which creative directors would layout their newest home story. The suggestive power of these photographs is extremely high; it is a kind of shortcut that allows Westermann to build on something that has not come to pass yet and to develop his artistic biography in fast-forward.

All of the different facets of Thilo Westermann's fast-growing pictorial universe are assembled in this book, with reality and virtual appearance existing alongside each other harmoniously. Traditional reproductions of his works are juxtaposed with photographs of authentic situations in his studio, at exhibition openings and presentations and with 'serving suggestions' generated digitally; paparazzi photographs meet deluxe fakes. We see reproductions of virtual images of pictures that are in turn reproductions of pictures and so on and so on...

What we get is a highly polished artist's book that showcases all aspects of Westermann's work splendidly, while breaking with the traditional format of a catalogue of works through skillful layout shifts that suggest a magazine or journal character; media which would usually report on short-lived superficialities. To Westermann, these provide a new possibility for playing with his chosen theme of *Vanitas*.

For all the levels of self-reflection innate in them, for all their roots in art history, the key question in Westermann's works may be whether they even need a theoretical justification. Does it not suffice to simply observe that these pictures are beautiful? They captivate us with their distinct aesthetic and no viewer will be able to refrain from wanting to look at them more closely.

For centuries, aesthetically appealing artworks had to justify their existence through content that admonished the viewer, that was critical of the world in which they arose. May it not be high time to leave the iconoclastic ideas aside and place the aesthetic value of artworks at least as high as their content?

Andreas Gryphius, grand master of the melancholic *Vanitas* theme, warns in his poem *All is vanity*: "That which is eternal no human wills to see!" From the art-historical viewpoint, we should perhaps merely add the postscript: Nevertheless, beautiful pictures of transient things will always remain popular – as Thilo Westermann has just shown so impressively.

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