

BEAUTY BEHIND GLASS—ON THILO WESTERMANN'S WORKS

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The thematically broad oeuvre of artist and art historian Thilo Westermann centers on reverse glass painting. Diverse aspects merge and emerge from this medium. In the history of art, the technique of glass art has tended to be employed for pictorial themes meant to acquire a sacred aura in the light shining through them. In Gothic churches, they were intended to illustrate religious subjects of light conceived as God, which would visibly unfold in color for the faithful. In the case of Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* (1915–23), which is nearly colorless and designed only graphically by means of soldered stripes of lead, the glass itself appeared in its material quality as a transparent foil. Like a magnifying glass, along with the drawing fixed in lead, the work was supposed to reveal the invisible forces of eroticism affecting the viewers' lives. Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock, by contrast, painted on glass; amid the brush traces of their gestural painting, viewers become visible in space and are integrated into the constantly reemerging, quasi-dynamized images. Gerhard Richter, in turn, uses the mirror effects of his gray- or red-colored panes of glass to create a perplexing visual experience for the audience. Henri Matisse once took up religious traditions with his stained-glass ensemble for the Chapelle du Rosaire in Vence. But his *Tree of Life* (1951) in the altar windows there is removed from its immediate liturgical setting; this picture within a picture is designed as a kind of curtain that asserts the beauty of its colors against the ecclesiastical context:

"I want the chapel visitors to experience a lightening of the spirit. So that, even without being believers, they sense a milieu of spiritual elevation, where thought is clarified, where feeling itself is lightened."¹

The translucent artistic medium of glass as a support is used by Thilo Westermann in a fundamentally different way in that he first covers the reverse of what will ultimately be the visible painting with black paint and thus strips the glass of its transparency. Working from the layer applied there, he creates the dot structure of the motifs that will later appear radiantly bright when a layer of white paint is applied. What at first looks like the halftone grid of a reprographic illustration is in fact the result of laborious manual labor. The artist has thus taken up a method described by Cennino Cennini around 1400 in his *Libro dell'Arte* in order to show how a glass reliquary can be enhanced by etching a drawing into a layer of gold leaf behind glass.² Westermann replaces the glimmering gold leaf with deep black. The visual motif that is produced indirectly in this way takes on an unreal quality from the blocking out of light and shadow; the materiality of the support and the paint divests it of any anchoring in space and time. The gaze encounters the mirror-smooth, angular glass in front of the homogenous black. Insofar as the black primer of the reverse of the glass, as well as the white sealing of the transparent dot structure of the motif can only be seen "behind glass," they remain aloof from any visual experience of their haptic qualities, immaterial and without "facture," to cite a term Hungarian art critic Ernő Kállai employed in 1927 to distinguish photography and painting and to describe the "immaterial, mysterious beauty" of the photogram.³ Thus, Thilo

Westermann has adapted the ancient technique of reverse glass painting—which in his case must actually be called reverse glass etching⁴— to the modalities of visual perception in the age of glowing dots, which flicker everywhere on television screens and the monitors of digital media. He uses the potential of combining motifs and pictorial spaces that belong to different levels of reality—for example, the interplay of the surface structure of a wall covering with the thematic diversity of a pile of books stacked in front of it, in that of the courtly portrait of Stéphanie de Beauharnais, Grand Duchess of Baden, with the botanical portrait of a *Bougainvillea*, or by pasting the motifs of his works into images of possible collection contexts; in turn, these images continue to spin out new narratives.

Westermann's reverse glass paintings and unique prints, enlarged sixfold, differ from digital mass media photographs not only in terms of technique, but above all visually: they preserve a tension between motif and background, the latter fundamentally distinct from the former and instead connected to the history of drawing and printing. Walter Benjamin famously distinguished the former from painting:

“The graphic line is defined by its contrast with area. This contrast has a metaphysical dimension, as well as a visual one; the background is conjoined with the line. The graphic line marks out the area and so defines it by attaching itself to it as its background. Conversely, the graphic line can exist only against this background, so that a drawing that completely covered its background would cease to be a drawing. This confers on the background a specific role that is indispensable for the meaning of the drawing, so that in a drawing two lines can be related to each other only through the background—a feature, incidentally, that clearly distinguishes the graphic line from the geometric line.”⁵

If one considers Thilo Westermann's works against the horizon of this phenomenology of the graphic arts, a connection emerges both to the drawing, which turns its support as a negative plane into an imaginary space, and through its use of a needle, to engraving and etching. The specific contrast between the support and the graphic marking is, however, produced by these two techniques only indirectly, by reversing the incised negative into the positive of the print of the respective printing plate. As in drawing, the material presence of the printing ink is brought out. In Thilo Westermann's reverse glass paintings, by contrast, the black of the intangible background is determinant: from it emerges a motif composed of white dots. Therein lies the specific quality of his deviation from the tradition of the techniques of drawing and print, since his “drawing” is visible only as a negative representation in the black color coating of the glass. This carries within itself a metaphorical meaning: The motif comes to light in a negation of negation, is worked out of the black nothingness of the background, remains a void, without material presence, behind glass. Unlike the drawing and the print, which undergo a positive rapprochement with the motif by making it visible, Westermann's motifs appear behind glass by virtue of their absence, in the doubly negative depiction, shining out from the black behind the glass, floating incorporeally in the nothingness of this background, like an astral body, and in the unique print even unreally enlarged. In this quality of negative images, in this mode of absence, one sees, for example, clipped cut flowers in icy crystal vases: the vegetal splendor of blooms of highly cultivated plants whose beauty is doomed to die but transcended into the beauty of art by the lifeless black-and-white of the reverse glass paintings and unique prints. The crystal

vases that Westermann places like a throne at the feet of the cut flowers in his reverse glass paintings are at the same time the coffins into which they will enter, as Georges Bataille formulated already in 1929 with unerring clarity:

“For flowers do not age honestly like leaves, which lose nothing of their beauty even after they have died; flowers wither like old and overly made-up dowagers, and they die ridiculously on stems that seemed to carry them to the clouds. . . . In fact after a very short period of glory the marvelous corolla rots indecently in the sun, thus becoming, for the plant, a garish withering. Risen from the stench of the manure pile—even though it seemed for a moment to have escaped it in a flight of angelic and lyrical purity—the flower seems to relapse abruptly into its original squalor: the most ideal is rapidly reduced to a wisp of aerial manure.”⁶

But not only is ephemerality inscribed in Westermann’s reverse glass works, but so too is the otherworldly promise of a beauty that can be the image and the measure of a good life, as incomparably articulated by François Cheng in his *Cinq méditations sur la beauté* (2006), and formulated in his lecture “Qu’est-ce que la beauté?” (2020) on the literary television show *La Grande Librairie*:

“Beauty is not a simple ornament; beauty is a sign by which creation indicates to us that life has meaning. With the presence of beauty, suddenly one has understood that the living universe is nothing but an enormous neutral and undifferentiated entity, that it is driven by an intentionality. You said that it is difficult to find beauty, but the presence of beauty is everywhere: a simple flower, that’s a miracle. Why does a flower that blossoms into petals attain this degree of perfection, of form, of color, of perfume? That is never astonishing enough.”⁷

¹ Henri Matisse, “Interview with Charbonnier” (1951), in *Matisse on Art*, ed. Jack D. Flam (New York: Phaidon, 1978), pp. 138–41, esp. p. 140.

² Cennino Cennini, *The Book of Art*, Translated from the Italian by Christiana Herringham. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1922, Chapter 172, pp. 154–57.

³ Ernst Kállai, “Bildhafte Photographie,” in *Das Neue Frankfurt* 2, no. 3 (March 1928): pp. 42–49; reprinted in Wolfgang Kemp, ed., *Theorie der Fotografie*, vol. 2 (1912–1945) (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1979), pp. 132–35, esp. p. 133.

⁴ On the process of reverse etching on glass, see Wolfgang Brückner, *Hinterglasmalerei*, *Ethnologica bavarica* 3, special issue of *Bayerische Blätter für Volkskunde* (Munich: Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, 1976), pp. 78–79; Frieder Ryser, *Verzauberte Bilder: Die Kunst der Malerei hinter Glas von der Antike bis zum 18. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1991), pp. 25–27; and Stefan Trümpler and Yves Jolidon, *Reflets enchanteurs: l’art de la peinture sous verre / Glanzlichter: Die Kunst der Hinterglasmalerei*, exh. cat. (Berne: Benteli, 2000), pp. 226–31.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Painting, or Signs and Marks” (1917), in *idem, Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (1913–1926), ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 83–86, esp. p. 83.

⁶ Georges Bataille, “Le langage des fleurs,” in idem, *Documents*, ed. Bernard Noel (Paris: Mercure de France, 1968), pp. 44–53, esp. p. 48–50. English translation from Georges Bataille, “The Language of Flowers,” in idem, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927– 1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 10–14, esp. p. 12.

⁷ François Cheng, “Qu’est-ce que la beauté” (What is Beauty?), *La Grande Librairie* (January 29, 2020). In the third and fourth meditations in *Cinq méditations sur la beauté* (*The Way of Beauty: Five Meditations for Spiritual Transformation*), Cheng explains the relation of the beautiful (*beauté*) to the good (*bonté*): “the beauty we have in mind here is the one that falls within the domain of Being, that bursts forth from within Being as an impulse toward beauty, toward the plenitude of its presence, in the direction of open life. . . . I hardly use the word love, because the principle of love is contained within the principle of beauty, because love follows naturally from beauty, and because beauty moreover manifests what comes of love: communion, celebration, transfiguration.” François Cheng, *The Way of Beauty: Five Meditations for Spiritual Transformation*, trans. Jody Gladding (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 2009), pp. 38, 75.

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