

Cross-Faded Nature

Photographs are always *Lichtbilder* (images of light), as the products of the new medium were first known in German during the 19th century. To this day, a photographically produced image will unleash its variety and complexity in direct proportion to the amount of light or areas of light represented. At the same time, a photograph triumphs over the perception of the human eye through its capability of capturing the occurrence of light. Like Frank Stella's well-known slogan, with which the American artist referred to the naked reality of his colors and pigments, "What you see is what you see," a camera can capture images of light that we cannot experience: fades, overlapping, refractions, which are indebted to another passage of time than the momentary blink of an eye!

It is precisely at this juncture where Michael Wesely operates. He is most interested in those aspects of a photograph that are not visible to the human eye, but which nevertheless, paradoxically, show us what we know. Yet, Michael Wesely does not turn a photograph into an abstraction, but remains true to the illustration of landscapes, street scenes, interiors and objects. As a result, on one level, the motifs of his photographs at the *Galerie am Stein* are quickly listed: a tree in backlight, two people in a bathtub, a bush and a patch of grass, as well as visitors to an exhibition. However, this says nothing about the real character of these photographs. Their uncommon charm and their complexity lies precisely in the open-formed contours that exist in the photographs. In each case it is a blurring of the boundaries of bodies and objects, which have been created from extremely long exposure times that open up new perspectives within known terrain, such as nature or interiors.

In its photographic manifestation, a tree set in motion by the wind over a longer period of time appears to be interwoven as if by cosmic sunbeams. The branches are no longer just foreground, but now and then they appear as background superimposed with light, against which the sun has passed through. In the case of the patch of grass, a moment of artificiality – a formal game of green structures and color nuances – originates from the extreme contrasts of sharpness and diffuseness. In turn, the spots of light in the photograph of the bathtub create bodies for which there is no analogy in human perception, consequently crossing a line into the realm of the magical. The museum image, taken at the Gerhard Richter exhibition in Berlin, ultimately provides further insight about the artificiality of these photographic works. In an interplay with Richter's painting, Wesely's photographs reveal themselves to be just as open and variable compositions as the paintings in acrylic and oil made by the other artist. In his work, Gerhard Richter moves between the two borders of illustration and abstraction. Richter often takes known motifs or those traditionally found in photography, and transforms them into layers, forms and spots to such a degree that a visual, painterly language of his own is created, which completely departs from the original pictorial motif. Michael Wesely does not react any differently: His "views" are only loosely connected to the real pictorial subjects and dissolve into a nearly abstract language of light.

This "painterly" approach also connects Michael Wesely with 19th century French "plein air" painting; namely, an art movement that focused precisely on this alternation of the effects of light. Claude Monet comes to mind, who demonstratively turned away from narrative picture motifs in his late work, and instead took haystacks, rows of trees and segments of building façades as his pretext to examine changing lighting effects in detail. In a preserved letter, Monet described the two different things that he felt to be most important to him in painting: the reproduction of "l'instantanéité" (momentariness) and "l'enveloppe" (the sphere surrounding an object). Monet actually managed to represent his motifs entirely as shimmering forms, as objects of light whose sundrenched contours have become open and vague. For this reason, Gustave Geffroy, a well-known critic and Monet's later biographer, celebrated the artist as a "painter of the invisible."

In his works, Michael Wesely returns to this exciting point of art history, further investigating the illustrative potential of photography by taking advantage of a camera's variable exposure times – a technique that has been used astonishingly little up to now. While Wesely's works previously dealt with his large series depicting Potsdamer Platz, the reconstruction of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, or the many street scenes that were primarily dedicated to elapsed time – where social or urban processes shifted into the foreground – the concentrated view of the four photographs at the

Galerie am Stein focus much more strongly on the effects of light; on a temporary, and what can almost be called an impressionistic atmosphere. The spectacle is no longer concerned with the restructuring of the big-city, but with the new “face” of nature, the body and people in space. Simple, very familiar motifs and subjects seem to change in Michael Wesely’s images, taking on the character of surrealist apparitions. They are virtuoso recordings, which go far beyond the idea of illustration to reveal a painterly dimension within the photographic.

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