

SCHWARZ CONTEMPORARY

'Marlon Wobst - WELT', SCHWARZ CONTEMPORARY, Berlin, 19.4. - 25.5.2024

Painting in the End Times - by Mitch Speed

To be a sane person in the twenty-first century, is to know that we're living through end times. It's not *the* end of *the* world. And to the dismay of doom prophets, it's not not even the end of humanity. But it's definitely the end of the world we've known. Depending on where you are, the scene outside may or may not reflect this probability. Berlin, for example, looks more or less fine. But Berlin is Berlin, and the rest of the world is the rest of the world. The space of painting can consolidate our attention around a more all-encompassing vision of the current situation. It can do this because it is the space of dreams and nightmares. Not that the difference between those things, like that between endings and beginnings, is so easy to recognise.

The figures in Marlon Wobst's new paintings are dwarfed by water, darkness, and huge amounts of ambiguous matter. Three tiny people jog out from the lower right-hand corner of *Himmel (Sky)*. Characteristic of Marlon's work, each has their own color, like little bonbons: salmon pink, charred brown, greige. As for clothing, these little people aren't shy. One is content with sports socks, another a red thong. These could be bathers, rushing toward water. Then again, they could also be fleeing. After all, there isn't a drop of water in sight. Just an expanse of earth tones, progressing from shadowed brown down below, to a cloudy horizon feathering into powder-blue sky. Contemplating a brown mass which breaches the painting's left edge, I thought of dust storms, and clouds of flying excrement. Things like that happen in dreams.

When I noticed how that brown mass rhymes faint pink flurry down below, on the painting's lower edge, a reminder seemed to be issued; whatever larger meaning these images might contain, they fundamentally bring us into the uncertainty of painting, where large meanings have all the integrity of oil paint in turpentine. If painting is anything, it's an insistence on creativity in response to nothingness. First, the painter is

faced with the white canvas, which is both saturated with possibility, and evocative of the always imminent possibility of death (“Don’t go towards the bright white light!” we shout at people who have fallen into comas, in our desperation to save them from the reaper...). But if you’re a painter, your only choice is to go into the bright white light. Day, after day, after day. Your life depends on it. Maybe your family’s too.

With their bright colors and featureless faces, Marlon’s pictures until this point cultivated a charged tension between boisterous activity, and a slightly eery absence of intention. In other words, no object or expectation. Just play. Play is here also a metonym for the act of painting itself. Whereas child’s play is undertaken solely in pursuit of the natural right of pleasure, these paintings undertake the adult variation on this theme; pursuing free play via the unplanned – or barely planned – image, they also take part in a constantly unfolding reminder of play’s human necessity. As the child psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott put it: “It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living.”

In this new body of work, however, something has shifted. The new figures are either more idle, or smaller within the pictures. They remain charged presences. But now the source of their power lies elsewhere: either in a haunting slowness, or how the figures are overwhelmed by pure atmosphere. In both *Morgen (Morning)* and *Abend (Evening)*, many personages wade through water. They are still free of faces and thus identities. Now, though, the brushy shapes of their bodies fade and overlap with those of sky and water. So the images broach the oceanic – a state in which discreet living entities (human or otherwise) dissolve back into nature’s totality. In this way, too, the images begin courting abstraction, and admitting new histories of picture-making into their evolving bodies: glinting impressionism, amorphous colour-field painting. Just as humans are inevitably pulled into a greater, unknown whole, these new paintings move into the greater whole of painting, as a history, a language, a continuum.

When narratives do appear, they do so as blackly comedic foils to all these undercurrents of death and dissolution. In *Büro (Office)*, two very small people sit at desks, in opposite corners of the large canvas, which is a sea of dark brushwork. “So,” you can imagine one figure saying to the other, “This is the end.” “Indeed it is,” the reply comes,” as the conversants stare nervously across the void.