



MICHAEL WETZEL

AN EXQUISITE END OF EMPIRE / TIM DAVIS

Once upon a time (1981?) we were worried about saturation. In the heady days of high Postmodernism, Frenchmen with names like generals were standing leg up on the steaming corpse of the unsimulated world, declaring that there was no way to see past the complex web of imagehood, and through to the real. MTV seemed a symptom of our shrinking attention span, as if Marinetti and Brakhage had replaced Brinkley and Huntley. “The Media” really did seem to be between us and something. A new art was born out of this anxiety. Found objects became appropriated images, and we knew that Warhol and Duchamp had been oracles to show us the things of this culture, re-presented almost artlessly.

But there was a flaw in the grand and sympathetic logic of high Postmodernism. It turns out we were more adaptable to the stormy mass of information than we thought. The internet is a sign of that adaptability, and probably marks the birth of a new Googled Age. Humans are search engines, capable of digesting what had seemed unhealthy banquets of information and staying hungry for more. So the personal memoir has replaced the autobiographical first novel, documentary has a wider impact now than during the FSA, and the media no longer seem between us and the real, but just another huge tacky audience for its endless splendors.

So what do artists do with all this information? A cell of new appropriationists has unmasked itself, but the friction of recontextualization has softened since Baudrillard. The ideology has leaked from that practice, reducing it to just another style. Darwin would note that the number of diet niches artists have to feed from has expanded. With fewer ideologies, content is less charged, less dire, and artists can make of it what they will. What will they? The work of Michael Wetzel marks an interesting adaptation.

Wetzel’s paintings tend to be described as “exquisite.” But “exquisite” is a word whose meaning has shifted from the Latin for “carefully chosen,” to a synonym of comely or fine. Their surfaces are comely, coated with Netherlandish glazes that demand a glossy remembrance of the painting’s delicate, persistent materiality—almost like seeing your own reflection in a lover’s cornea. His exquisite veneer is *carefully chosen*, though, in the way it leads us to content.

Writing about Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire declared, “An artist is an artist only because of his exquisite sense of beauty, a sense which shows him intoxicating pleasures, but which at the same time implies and contains an equally exquisite sense of all deformities and all disproportion.” Wetzel is our most astute Baudelairean painter. *Exquisite beauty leading to exquisite deformity* describes a gristle of painting tradition running from van der Weyden’s Deposition through Mannerism to Goya, Courbet, Bacon, Freud. But Wetzel deforms our moral feeling for the meaning of a painting as much as its physical subject. In recent bodies of work, he has shown us the salons of our Connecticuter and Westchesterian CEO gentry, wracked out in personal shopper chintz and the glower of entitlement. These rooms are rides in a pained theme park of moneyedness, like a Merchant/Ivory set without the hot guys. The decorative taste in these rooms is so dubious that the paintings look at first like “collectables,” which, of course, they are.

But out the windows, the landscape has not complied with the decorator’s touch. Armadas of tartan are assembled. Polo players riot into equestrian battles straight from academic history painting. A man’s home is his castle, and in Wetzel’s cosmology, we are not allowed to forget that the castle is the center of a feudal system of violence, fealty, pageantry, and fear.

In the 2004 Whitney Biennial, the only political content can be described as drawings of the 60's. This cynical nostalgia was a disappointing shock. How could the art world, despite its endless breadth of money-fueled benevolence, be so unresponsive to the roiling political climate? By 2006, the artists had responded. There was political content, but it mostly felt like art; art about politics. Was the gravity of the sanctioned, post-ideology art economy too great to allow works of art to be more than art, and to really change the way we see the world? Wetzel's paintings incorporating the wallpaper designs Jackie Kennedy chose for the Queen's Sitting Room in the White House infect the way we understand how politics and art might meet on equal terms. They are the perfect political art for our assimilative age; not standing there to be counted, and neither treating political information as just another diet niche in the endless veldt of possibilities, but constructing works that are as absorbent of information as our nerve nets have become. Their glamorous surfaces are like the mucilage of carnivorous plants, seducing us to nose through the pretty, dripping thing until we are trapped. And in contrast to classical and contemporary techniques of appropriation, the mining of the culture for hybrid and collaged information is not foregrounded. There is no heady hip hop in Wetzel, no dandy DJ culture, no desperate MFA-studio-borne sense of needing to respond to the flux and feint of headline spawn.

The skittering saturated Kodachrome of the Zapruder film has become the very vocabulary of the Kennedy years. And we artists are a cult of Zapruderites, elevating our spastic tourist views of the culture into monuments of misalignment. Michael Wetzel has adopted the poise and precision of Jackie Kennedy instead of her husband's Regular-8 memorial, letting us look deep into the corners of Camelot, even as it peels away and strangely phosphoresces. The Baudelairean distortion here is not an external one of form or a cultural one of information, but a cracking in the essence of decorum. Wetzel's Jackie Kennedy assassination, a slow infectious gassing, is a *fin de siècle* gesture of Empire's decay.

And out beyond the *fin de siècle* we find Wetzel at the end of Empire, where it crashes into Empire's inverse, Paradise. "I have already told you of the sickness and confusion that comes with time traveling," H.G. Wells wrote at the end of *The Time Machine*. Wells' nauseous vision of the future, where all that persists is a beachhead of giant crabs and persistent lichens, hangs over Wetzel's latest works. I just watched *An Inconvenient Truth* in business class on a jumbo jet, filling a barrel with plastic wrap and the troposphere with chlorofluorocarbons. It was not hard to feel Empire and Paradise collapsing. The monkeys in Wetzel's new paintings are emissaries of the suicidal indifference of nature. They sit in trees and watch us making their world irrelevant. They stare at us—their collectors/critics/conquerors—with the clinical omniscience of Foucault's "medical gaze," which, coming from a bunch of monkeys, is doubly dehumanizing. Foucault thought doctors "invested...with powers similar to those exercised by the clergy over men's souls." But these clinicians gaze at Rome burning. Their passive dispassion to the fate of civilization is the same as their hollow-eyed acceptance of our incursion into paradise. They take us in, coldly and without judgment. And lack of opinion, during a grave crisis, is the ultimate judgment.

It is the sort of judgment Michael Wetzel builds into the nervous system of his paintings. Their worlds are so perfectly ordered, so inspiringly vivid, that the complex criticality of their meanings really resounds. Where Winslow Homer put us in the storm-tossed skiff, Wetzel makes us watch the typhoon from a solid, distant, defunct lighthouse. As Empire ends, Paradise turns to watch it topple. Only the painting will remain.



QUO VADIS III, 2006
OIL AND EGG TEMPERA ON CANVAS
52 X 38 INCHES