



Willem Weismann interviewed
by curator Paul Luckraft,
27 October 2016

Paul Luckraft: Can I start by asking about your response to the physical properties of the Invites room?

Willem Weismann: I always like the opportunity to do something with a space, and wanted to make maximum use of it. When you're making large paintings on canvas there are usually limitations on when and where you can show them. Even with the three large paintings here, I was wishing a bit that I had more space!

PL: So this show might have the feeling of bursting at the seams?

WW: Well it seems I always have to restrain myself! I use more or less life-size dimensions. In small reproductions you are just looking at a picture, whereas in front of big paintings you are really physically confronted, and it fills your whole field of vision. It becomes a body-to-painting relationship, which is much more overwhelming.

PL: You've mentioned video games were a reference in this series.

WW: In adventure games you navigate and make your way through different areas. You see a street and think 'can I open this door?', 'can I pick up this thing?' or 'can I talk to this person?'. The interpreting of an image coincides with playing the game. You have to look at what is there and see what you can work with.

PL: Are you suggesting that the viewer of your paintings is playing a similar game?

WW: In general that's what you do when you are looking at a painting; try to make sense of it on different levels. Although in a video game, you are looking to progress, and you have a very literal goal. In painting there is hopefully not such a clear path!

PL: In these works is there a puzzle to solve, a singular strand people could follow, or is it more a case of open exploration?

WW: Well, there is no solution, so maybe it's more like a kōan. But there are many things that riff back and forth between the paintings. The metal door, for example, is echoed by a curtain in the second painting that has a similar flame pattern, and in the last painting there is the lava, which also shares this motif. Whenever you put things together in a painting they have a relationship and start to suggest a meaning. I guess I just try to put enough elements together to create a network of references that is quite fuzzy and stretchable. People come up to me and ask: is this thing you painted here referring to this or that?, and usually I say it's both.

PL: Are your figures in this series a continuation of a particular set of characters you have used before? Or are the figures more like objects, interchangeable with chairs or filing cabinets?

WW: They are not re-occurring, but I do paint people in similar circumstances. For me they are on the same level of importance as all the objects. There are no lead characters, but it is a human environment.

PL: That's interesting in relation to cinema, where the set is only activated by the actors perhaps?

WW: The figures are part of the set in my work. And across these paintings they move to being more like objects. In the first one the six figures are alive and animated. In the second canvas there is just one, who is looking at a mannequin. In the final one there is just an empty suit of armour.

PL: Often in your work people are absorbed in an activity, partially hidden, and secluded in their own imagination somehow.

WW: Well, it's also that I don't want the viewer to engage with them too much. I like putting up a screen, so that people don't instantly think: who are they? You can't relate to them fully because you can't see their faces.

PL: The whole show seems to be about moving through different layers, digging down and back though time.

WW: What I find really interesting is the objects people make in order to make sense of the world. And when we look at history we go to objects for instruction, such as things in museums. But these things were once very humble everyday objects, like spoons or coffee pots. When I watched the Werner Herzog movie *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* I thought the people who made the cave paintings were kind of doing the same thing as me, trying to make sense of the world, trying to figure out their place in it. I don't think that much has changed in the meantime. Technology has changed of course, but many other things haven't.

PL: You depict scenes that feel sort of contemporary, but when you get up close it is quite basic language stuff, yellow ochre and red pigment smeared on a surface to represent fire, for example. Do you think painting allows you to be in dialogue with a long stretch of image making?

WW: I do feel this connection personally, and I find it somehow reassuring, but I'm not sure if it's something I actively seek to represent. I think it is quite difficult to make paintings that feel contemporary. You can make it of 'now', but then this runs the risk of being old tomorrow. I wonder about my work: could this have been made a hundred years ago? Because painting is so still, and so dead in a way, I do find it very interesting to try to show the passage of time, as some way of showing action or motion.

PL: Every mark you make on a canvas can be looked at as a record of your studio time as well.

WW: I try to make it quite transparent, you can see how the image is built up. I use oil, but I'm not layering the paint. It's more like a collage. When you layer paint up, for

me it feels more like a screen, whereas my approach is to paint something and then I respond to it.

PL: To what degree do formal concerns of colour, mark-making and composition direct your process, and how much do you map these things out before you start?

WW: Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't. Usually there are a certain amount of things that I'm certain about, and this is where I start. In the first painting I quite quickly knew I wanted to have this blue-brick building. Once you've established that, all the other things just come out of it. One of the main joys for me is to be able to switch back and forth between meaning and form. Sometimes a painting just needs a certain shape from a formal perspective, and I can spend hours thinking about what object that should be. It seems right to me that meaning sometimes can be dictated by practical considerations of a colour or shape you are trying to make.

PL: You also use the actual surface of your paintings as a palette. When did you first start doing this?

WW: About six years ago. And it's in the paintings here in patches. It hints that these things I make are not perfect products. There is no perfect solution within my process. I don't want to give this illusion that every brushstroke was intended to be as it is. Lots of things in the studio just happen, or go wrong, and I think it's good to show that.

PL: Would you say painting is a medium which forces these 'errors' to be very visible, whereas other mediums can more easily bury them?

WW: Yeah, it's a question of what makes painting today different from designing products. There are so many people doing perfect things. For example, with computer animation you can calculate everything. For me it's not that

interesting to chase this kind of perfection. I like to show the battle and everything that has been thrown in there, which to me is closer to the reality of life and the studio experience.

PL: Are you always collecting ideas and motifs for the work via a sketchbook or folder?

WW: No, I kind of have everything in my head! I have this idea that if something is important enough I'll remember it. You have this thing called the 'art of memory' where you are supposed to imagine a house room by room and start to populate them with all the things you want to remember. I think it's an idea from ancient Greece. And probably people used to have amazing memories. Even twenty years ago I used to know everyone's phone number. So I like the idea of giving your own memory some stuff to do. I have these things bubbling around my head...

PL: And they surface at the right time?

WW: Well, not always! I would say a lot of the time it's when I'm waiting at a traffic light or when taking a shower, daydreaming. Suddenly new ideas come together.

PL: So in your studio you don't have walls full of reference photos that you work from?

WW: No, I guess I like to try to reinvent the wheel, to work it out in my head. Everything in the world seems so photo-based these days, I think it's interesting to try to work it out for yourself. A lot of the time I get it a little wrong, but that creates a tension, and your own personality comes through. I also like the visual challenge, but what inspires me more is everything else: reading books, watching films or listening to music. Stuff that lies outside the studio, basically.

Reverse:
Wretched Excess, 2016 (detail)
oil on canvas, 180 x 240 cm

Artist's presentation

Willem Weismann will be in conversation with an invited speaker. Please see website for details.

Willem Weismann (b. Eindhoven, the Netherlands, 1977) has been living in London since 2003. He studied at Arnhem Institute for the Arts, the Netherlands 1997-2002 and Goldsmiths College 2003-2004. He won the East London Painting Prize in 2015. Weismann has had solo shows at Cabin Gallery, London, The Nunnery Gallery, London, Galeria Quadrado Azul, Porto and Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem. Recent group exhibitions includes *Summer Show*, Turps Gallery, London and *Secret European Studio* at ArthouSE1, London.

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