

# DUBINSKYFINEARTS

**"Thou shalt not make unto thee any image" was, and continues to be, the modernist creed. It has given rise to pure abstraction, concrete as well as conceptual art. However, language itself is also an image, and this image changes according to its context."**

**Djawid C. Borower**

## Pictures of Wine

### *Walter Pamminger and Wolfgang Pauser – A Colloquy*

**In his "Pictures of Wine", Djawid Borower has created images based on other images. This premise provided the starting point for a colloquy between cultural philosophers Wolfgang Pauser and Walter Pamminger, taking place at the artist's studio on 22nd May 2007, and presented below in compressed form. This is not the first time Borower has addressed the images and icons of contemporary culture, such as money, film, or god and similar celebrities. Throughout, the transposition of writing into painting, its transformation into an image has been of central importance.**

*Wolfgang Pauser:* In line with some of the artist's earlier series, Djawid Borower's "Pictures of Wine" offer images based on other images, though this time the process of depiction is carried to the point where writing itself is depicted. This strikes me as a highly accurate response to the 20th century's traditional issue of representation versus abstraction, of figural versus abstract art. Depicting writing tends to deflate the central assumption of this entire

discourse, i.e. that representation relates to reality while abstraction departs from it.

*Walter Pamminger:* The tension starts to build as soon as character turns into image. In panel painting, the usual setting encourages us to regard rather than read. In addition, Borower does not simply copy the wine label but enlarges it to enormous proportions. Some objects remain essentially unaltered when enlarged. Enlarged characters, on the other hand, are subject to significant changes: What started out as detailed, even ornamental lettering turns into an abstract image encompassing considerable pictorial space; formal qualities such as curves, points, and edges become conspicuous.

*Pauser:* Looking at "Pictures of Wine", I am immediately aware that I am incapable of reading the text the way I would read it on a label. Right away, I notice there are other levels and aspects, calling for a different approach.

*Pamminger:* As in Borower's previous work, the writing acquires an increasingly abstract, pictorial quality and encodes meaning only incidentally. The point is, that such an arrangement perplexes the viewer. We are forced to vacillate between reading and regarding – it is impossible to do both at the same time. The larger the characters appear, the more likely we are to slip into a mode of contemplation, whereas the small print of the label first of all facilitates rapid identification and information. In transposing printed matter into panel paintings, Borower introduces "hard" typography into the "soft" medium of painting. This adds another layer of tension as the hand-painted characters naturally acquire a certain autograph quality and bear the obvious marks of painterly style.

It is this transfer from one medium into another which is crucial. Though Borower refers to other images and objects, these images are then transformed into oil painting. The wine label refers to something outside itself, to wine, and this reference function survives in "Pictures of Wine", as it did in earlier series. In art, however, an oil painting in all its splendour demands to be savoured in and of itself. The conversion into painting and the attendant enlargement practically oblige us to approach the image through the faculty of taste. Borower does not take us to the supermarket and says: "Take a close look at that label". Instead, he transposes it into painting, setting off all kinds of transformative processes.

Borower reinforces the pictorial, liquid character of his paintings by blurring the images' outlines. This is not purely a matter of style but also introduces a temporal element insofar the

blurred quality of the image may be attributed to the erosion caused by the 'flow' of time.

*Pauser:* The blurred outlines suggest that something spilled over the surface of the painting, leaving a residue. This makes the characters seem deceptively substantial, as if they had somehow acquired a third dimension. The lettering takes on a kind of sculptural quality.

*Pamminger:* Also on a material level ...

*Pauser:* Right, on a material level ... we have the canvas thickly applied with paint. And the blurred effect adds a residue of time and the process itself. A wine label, on the other hand, is generally perceived as two-dimensional, informative, time-less, and therefore 'immaterial'. The blurred characters become more ambiguous, challenging their claim to clarity. As a result, the painted text displays a different order of 'substantialness' than the lettering of the label, it acquires substance in a material sense.

After all, a wine bottle represents an attempt to capture nature in a glass, make it airtight, and generate a sequential identity – one might say, an attempt to arrest the natural process. In their blurred outlines, the paintings themselves gain a process-like quality, introducing the temporal element that is so characteristic of Borower's other works. It is no coincidence that he dedicated an entire work cycle to the temporal theme in his "Pictures of Time". Also, I am certain that there is a very good reason why the palette knife is unfailingly plied from top to bottom. Applying it in every direction, up and down, left and right, would create an excessively 'handmade' effect.

Instead, one is left with the impression that representation occurs on two separate levels: the depiction of the label itself and, secondly, a vaguely automatic depiction of a temporal process that in fact never took place. The downward blur is not directly associated with the brush of the artist. It simulates a change effected by time.

*Pamminger:* Simulating the passage of time has a certain romantic quality. Romanticism opposes rigid identification; it seeks to dissolve precise forms, to liquefy objects.

*Pauser:* The same thing happens to the wine label. The process inherent in the blurred outlines of the painting represents a direct challenge to the label's positivist intent: to establish and preserve facts. Like an identity card it seeks to document a particular identity. However, it does so in the service of a cult whose primary function is the dissolution of codes of conduct and established roles. Inebriation changes people, makes them do things they would normally never do, it affects the social constructs connecting everybody gathered round a table. Something happens, and in the process something dissolves. Wine sets off all sorts of displacements, it dissolves codes and conventions. Drinking alters perception. And wine also changes with and within time. In a media culture that defines itself through the serial image and the infinite sequence – in film, television, advertising – the wine label and all it stands for signal an increasingly rare 'desire to preserve identity'. Into this, the blurred painting tries to introduce a sense of process. This tension between fluidity and confirmed fact has always been one of the fundamental issues of

representation – and is the major theme in this series of painting.

Let me put things in an even wider perspective. Essentially, the wine label provides one of a few remaining means to record our most fundamental categories: space – stating a specific region, time – in the vintage, singularity – with individual surnames a part of the wine's designation. We have space, time, place, identity, origin, and authenticity. It pleases us to imbibe and assimilate these philosophical categories along with the wine and we interpret a particular wine's unique taste in the light such scholarly concepts.

At the same time, the wine label is closely related to aristocratic territorial rule, where the name of a family and a region would often be identical. Obviously this involves considerations of power, which in wine display their most appealing aspects. In wine culture, this relationship becomes downright charming: territory is no longer the aggregate of "terror" and "terra", but rather turns into terroir, the wine growing region. Here we continue to pay homage to pre-industrial romanticism. Production is not industrial but rooted in the land itself. After all, for the past two hundred years few issues have occupied mankind as much as the alienation of production and wealth from the soil. As the land's ambassador to globalised and literally 'landless' contemporary society, wine fulfils a special function. It is no coincidence that the subject invariably comes up wherever international managers who have little else in common are forced into conversation. As such, wine offers ritual compensation for our rootless situation.

*Pamminger:* This is particularly evident in the design of the label. Although its aesthetics are finally changing, more often than not we are still faced with a typographic culture originating in the France of two centuries ago. The wine label bears the imprint of the year 1800, it is the preserve of traditional letterpress aesthetics and obviously derives some of its authority from that. This inherent traditionalism is also reflected in standard wine vocabulary. One might refer to a "Grüner Veltliner" (a type of Austrian white wine) as "full of character, with balanced fruit and acidity." I like to call this the "rhetoric of instant qualification". As he highlights a particular characteristic, the speaker becomes anxious that he may be departing from the harmonious centre, and immediately feels obliged to return there. Somebody full of character probably has a rough edge or two, might even be prone to extremes. Hence, the immediate retraction implicit in the balanced fruit and acidity. It is my theory that the bourgeois subject dearly wishes to realise itself in the wine's character, to recognise itself in terms of taste. Full of character, it should still be balanced and pleasant. Equilibrium is the ideal.

*Pauser:* Looking at "Pictures of Wine" gives me the idea that art works should also be sampled blindfolded! That might be one way to subvert brand identification. I mean, how does it usually work in the art scene? The first thing one looks at is the name next to the picture. Who is the artist? Do I know him? Is he or she famous? Only then does one actually look at the picture. The artist is perfectly aware that the way in which his work is perceived to a very large extent depends on his own reputation and the length of his exhibition listing. There-

fore, we are provided with a signature and a name plate. The wine label works in a similar fashion. In both cases the 'brand' makes it clear from the start that there is little risk involved. Significantly, there are plenty of wine labels that also bear a signature. It even appears to be handwritten.

*Pamminger:* It happens all the time, take "Chateau Le Pin", "Romanee Cont", or "Opus One" for example.

*Pauser:* Funnily enough, these are also signed on the lower right margin, almost like a persiflage of artistic practice. It is interesting to note that the art historian Ernst Gombrich once connected the concept of art to wine making, the making of apple wine to be exact. According to him, art implies long-term competition to produce something that has no base in reason or necessity. A number of people have to compete with one another in a serious endeavour to produce the best wine, the best work of art. Such an endeavour implies delicate discrimination, a need to identify certain particulars, distinguishing something by its place and name. In the white space of the label everything has its proper place. The place has its place, the name has its place, lineage has its place, time has its place, the land has its place. So that one can say: This is art! And this is precisely the issue Borrower addresses in his tableaux of denotation and identification: What is art?

This also raises another question: What deserves painting? We live in an age inundated with images. But we no longer get the picture. In fact, there is a shortage of holistic images ("Weltbildlichkeit"). Which takes us back to the

beginning of our conversation, to images based on other images.

*Pamminger*: I agree. During the medieval and Renaissance era, artists could still aspire to create images of universal validity. For painting, however, historical developments since then have brought an increasing loss of authority with its territory gradually occupied by science. Abstract painting can be interpreted as the logical outcome of this process. Art became radically self-referential and reductivist. Painting itself became the subject of painting. Another tendency manifested itself in the growing presence of pre-existing images, in particular those originating in so-called mass culture. As the images produced by art lost their holistic force, they gained enormous power and currency in the world of contemporary media. It may seem paradox, but art embraces what would appear to be its natural enemy: the world of mass media images. Borower's works belong to this tradition; the principle of repetition he employs recalls Pop Art. The difference is that Borower does not refer to the endlessly reproducible character of the image. It is true that by repeatedly painting a single motif in the form of a limited series he deconstructs the ideology of inimitability that underlies the traditional panel painting. However, in his case the repeated use of the same motif serves to call attention to the singular, inimitable quality produced through painting.

**Walter Pamminger**, Vienna; chemist, author, design theorist, award-winning book designer.

**Wolfgang Pauser**, Vienna; essayist and cultural philosopher specialising in everyday culture and design.