

Art is not what you see, but what you make others see (Edgar Degas)

For more than 60 years, the artist Christoph von Weyhe has produced a series of paintings based on the repeated depiction of the commercial harbor in Hamburg, Germany, where he was born. These are not at all the typical seascapes that people usually paint, yet the single-mindedness of his pursuit imbues them with an added charge that has less to do with the place itself, than with the images that von Weyhe has managed to extract from it over the course of his career.

The artist has lived in Paris since the early 1950's. He returns regularly to Hamburg to paint its harbor, working day and at night to produce large gouache sketches which he brings back to his studio in Paris. The sketches are then used to produce paintings, which he works on for months at a time. Creating these plain-air gouaches is a physically intense process. Urgently rendered, these vivid and dynamic gestural snapshots of the manmade landscape convey the intensity of his sketching process, which stands in sharp contrast to the subtle delicacy of the paintings he produces from them in the studio.

Von Weyhe paints in layers, rendered with very fine cross hatching, thus creating a unique sense of depth and light. A kind of fog or haze floats over his canvases, but one never loses awareness of the paint, whose layered applications recall the weave of a fabric. Color, space, and even depth emerge from within these images by means of their attenuation, their dissipation even. It is very important to note that his works absolutely need to be seen in person. They are made for human eyes and brains, not cameras. They are made for a viewing experience that unfolds over time. One's eyes need to adjust and absorb them. The effect from the fine detail of the cross hatching requires time to register. The more time one spends with them, the more one moves in relation to them, looking closely, then pulling back, the more the works in turn unfold and reveal their delicate rendering of the manmade landscape of the commercial harbor.

For someone to be so singularly engaged with the same motif over the course of a lifetime is rare. As viewers, we can track the slow evolution of von Weyhe's practice from the technical precision of his earlier works to the more gestural feel of his later works. In recent works, the under painting still has the same time labored intense cross hatching and layering as in his first depictions of the harbor; but the foreground forms that suggest abstracted cranes, industrial outlines, and harbor lights have become more urgent, gestural and colorful. The new works are perhaps the most openly colorful he has made. Yet the larger brush strokes in his new works still float over precisely rendered layers of his signature cross-hatching. The gesture is there, but its execution is dedicated and extremely considered. The craftsman and the architect are both still joined in these paintings as they are in his entire body of work. The underpainting of the smaller brushstrokes makes it clear that these gestural swaths of bright colors are precisely planned and executed in advance, in order to host the vividly gestural strokes that float over them.

What is it about a place that can fuel 60 years of such intense and dedicated work? What are the reasons, personal or other, which have tied him so enduringly to the depiction of the industrial harbor in his hometown of Hamburg? Such questions are best left unanswered, if only because they target a facet of the artist's process that is, by definition, inaccessible to its audience. One can speculate as to the impact that this landscape might have had on him as a child, or perhaps its resonance as an instantiation of global trading. There are few landscapes as representative of the anthropocene era as a commercial harbor. Yet these questions dissipate as soon as one encounters the work in person. What emerges instead is a relationship to each specific work, and to its specific composition of line, form, and color, it's specific intermarriage of abstraction and representation. The repetition of certain forms, the enduring presence of fog, the way the forms emerge and recede against their background, all of these seemingly banal considerations are made vibrant and enigmatic by von Weyhe's precisely orchestrated gestures on the canvas. What they allow us to see or perceive is perhaps nothing less than the wonder of gazing, the wonder of looking, looking and wondering, at any place, any landscape, as if for the first time. -

Text: Mike Bouchet