

GETTING TO THE POINT: THILO WESTERMANN—A SURVEY OF HIS OEUVRE

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An oeuvre as complex and self-referential as that of Thilo Westermann demands a more intense look at the thematic and formal genesis of important groups of his works. If one traces the chronological sequences of his works, one finds oneself on a winding path that makes evident the thoughts and motivations from which Westermann develops his artistic ideas, how he finds his frequently innovative techniques, and why creating a work can sometimes take several years.

Early Works

Already evident in the pencil and color pencil drawings that Westermann made even before beginning his studies is an interest in depicting plants—a subject that pervades his later creative work. This fascination with representing natural processes of growth and decay, which is inherently artificial and symbolically exaggerated, and which has grown over the course of cultural history, comes clearly to light here. Among the early motifs are lilies and roses, which recur time and again, both alone and combined in vanitas still lifes. Window views, with their long art-historical tradition, also appear early on in Westermann's work. At first, however, the view out of the window remained empty, with the artist focusing entirely on the immediate present. For example, a *Bougainvillea* foliage depicted with back lighting in a pencil-gray surrounding pops out like a colorful energy field. Similarly, in a drawing created two years later, an extinguished candle and a bunch of hyacinths radiate in the light entering through the blank window as if from inside, while the almost organically fragile material of wax contrasts ethereally with the hard marble cornice, the plastic window frame, and the glass vase.

In parallel, Westermann uses pencils and color pencils to depict a series of plants from his native region in various states of flowering. In the neutral fashion of scientific, botanical drawings, he dispenses with any theatrical *mise-en-scène*; moreover, there is neither light nor shadow. As with a botanical specimen, the plant's structure is removed from space and time.

Reverse Glass

When he first began exhibiting in the early 2000s, Westermann asked himself how these fragile works on paper could be shown and at the same time be protected. He began to experiment with glazed frames and, a little later, presented his sheets under glass domes, as is common in scientific collections. This

form of presentation underscores the object-like character of the works—just as, for example, Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades can be understood as works of art only in a museum context. In order to make his small-scale works refer to this deliberate staging themselves, that is, to let them protect their own fragility in the form of a pane of glass, Westermann began to apply his motifs directly to the reverse of such panes of glass.

One of the first works created in this way is a series of 15 pieces showing roses from different angles and in various states of flowering and wilting. Instead of applying paint in wash layers, as is usual in classical reverse glass painting, from the outset Westermann composed his motifs of individual dots, similar to the grids of the halftone images in print media but generated manually rather than by machine. Also in the individual sheets of the series *Roses* (2002), he first modeled the high points of the object with white and the low points with black dots, before applying, as a background, a layer of monochrome red paint for the petals, and a green or ocher-brown one for the sepals and stems. Westermann thus transposed his graphic (pencil and color pencil) drawing into a reverse glass painting. Ever since, the manually applied halftone dots have enabled him to lend his motifs the illusion of three-dimensionality, independently of the inherent color of the respective object, which is applied flatly behind the dots at the very end.

As in the historical botanical etchings and engravings that Westermann has always admired, which are first printed solely in black on paper and then subsequently colored on demand, Westermann focuses entirely on contours and outlines and on imitating textures. After a period of experimentation, he took the next step, to compose his works entirely in black and white. Seemingly perfectly logical, this development once again highlights his works as drawings.

Bouquet (2005), one of his first black-and-white works, is a magnificent composition of cultivated and garden flowers. Buds, full and wilted blooms, and partially shed sepals combine into a classical vanitas motif. Its pin-sharpness and flawlessness recall the early pictorialist photographs of the late nineteenth century, from an era in which the new medium was still searching for its own language by imitating painting.¹ The postcard-like advertisement for the fashion brand Prada that Westermann also incorporated into his composition testifies less to his interest in flashy clothing as it does, just like the card in *Madonna* (2007), to an intense study of different modes of representation and display in glossy magazines, photographic and printed images, and reproductions of artworks printed on postcards.

Interestingly, a few years later Westermann did not use the widely disseminated engravings after motifs by the French artist Pierre-Joseph Redouté (1759–1840) as models, but rather adapted one of his rare oil paintings. Much like eighteenth-century reproductive engravers, Westermann translates Redouté’s painting into a delicate halftone grid, not in order to copy or reproduce it as accurately as possible, but rather to inscribe it into his own work as a new, original work. Accordingly, whereas a garland at the upper end of the vase, the beading waterdrops, and a rosebud shifting into the image on the right are all motivated by the model, the roses are clearly distinct from those of Redouté. Westermann has replaced the polypetalous *Rosa centifolia* with a modern rose variety by the British breeder David C. H. Austin

(1926–2018), who named the rose Redouté after the French artist and launched it in 1992.² The updating of the motif with the more recent variety, and omitting the Baroque vanitas symbolism, not only demonstrates Westermann’s outstanding knowledge of art-historical contexts and the botanical history of breeding. It also reveals his endeavor to test the continued life and legitimacy of the historical in the present.³

Color Pencil Drawings

From 2009 to 2010, color recurs increasingly in Westermann’s works. In a series of monochrome color pencil drawings, the importance of the motifs recedes into the background, and the name of the pencil color used seems to inspire the works. By means of reserves, hatching, and over and over delicately dotted planes, Westermann creates, as in his reverse glass still lifes, organic-looking compositions. The color, whose name (given by the manufacturer) also titles Westermann’s work, influences the resulting formations. For example, in *Warm Gray II* (2009) and *Warm Gray IV* (2011) cliff-like mountain formations seem perceptible. Reserves and undrawn areas in the aforementioned works suggest fog or clouds. The subtle appearance of these works recalls classical Chinese landscape painting. Yet unlike the works of, say, Fan Kuan 范寬 (c. 960–c. 1030) or Guo Xi 郭熙 (c. 1020–c. 1090), Westermann’s paintings remain abstract, lacking any trace of human figures or objects that might indicate, however approximately, the size of the “mountains.” These small-format color pencil drawings—which Westermann first drew on paper and later on primed aluminum composite sheets, thus making them objects in their own right, like the reverse glass paintings—reintroduce the aspect of materiality into Westermann’s oeuvre, which is almost entirely omitted from the crystalline appearance of the reverse glass paintings.

New Technique

It was therefore unsurprising when Westermann adopted a new motif in 2013/14: Asian scholar’s rocks, which he encountered when studying Chinese ink painting. These expressive stones of natural origin were formed over millions of years by flowing water or wind erosion. Once sought and found, they served scholars as an object of contemplation in their study or landscape garden. Gaps and small holes in the solid material of stone inspired Westermann to engage more intensely with the balance of emptiness and substance in Asian aesthetics and visual conceptions. A comparison of *Scholar’s Rock* (2013) and *Scholar’s Rock (2)* (2014) shows just how decisive that effort was. The stone in the earlier work rises like a silhouette against the black background. In the lower part, the reflection and suggested continuation of the stone, as if under water, points to the Asian custom of placing such stones in water bowls to combine solids with fluids. Westermann’s later scholar’s rock, by contrast, seems to unite those two elements. This impression should be attributed in part to a new technique Westermann was employing for the first time in these works.

Unlike in his earlier reverse glass paintings, Westermann now covers the entire back of the pane of glass with a thin layer of black paint, which he then removes again, dot by dot, with a needle, and finally seals with a layer of white paint. Seen from the front, the layer of white looks like light passing through the places where Westermann has removed the layer of black paint. Rather than modeling the shadows of the motif with black dots as previously, Westermann has since concentrated on the high points of the motif, which appear to be made up of dots of light.⁴ The sharp, silhouette-like demarcation of figure and ground that characterized the earlier works can be deliberately controlled, eliminated, or induced depending on whether a line marks a sharp delimitation or individual dots merely suggest one. From now on, the motif and the ground are interwoven and form a unit.

Unique Prints

In order to address his work process, and to restore the painterly character of the small format, which viewers at first often perceive as photographs or prints, Westermann decided to scan the finished reverse glass paintings and have a so-called unique print made, which as a rule is enlarged six times the size of the painting. Printed only once and unlike a mere reproduction of an original, Westermann's unique print has the status of a new original. This can be presented together with the original painting but can also stand alone. This mechanically produced print makes visible the craft aspects of the motif. These are scarcely recognizable in the small-format and handmade work. Reverse glass painting and unique prints thus represent two ways of looking at the same motif. If making the painting is about depicting a certain (fictive) motif, the unique print focuses on the graphic abbreviation of the dot. The enlargement makes it clear that the dots are not halftone dots fabricated mechanically, but rather signs placed by the artist's hand in a subjective process of creating the motif.

Photomontages

The years that Westermann spent visiting and studying in Asia resulted in innovations not only on the level of technique, but also of motif. For example, two works often exhibited together—*Paeonia lactiflora in a Vase with a Dragon Relief* (2013) and *Lilies in a Crystal Vase with a Card representing a Putto* (2013)—on closer inspection reveal more interweaving than might be expected at first. The peonies of the first motif are placed in a vase with Asian decorations. The putto by Ignaz Günther (Stiftskirche Weyarn), reproduced on a postcard presented in the second motif, points beyond the edges of the picture-within-a-picture to a crystal vase with white lilies. The latter are not, however, the typically Western lilies familiar from Mariological symbolism, but rather an import from Asia. Analogously, the peonies depicted by Westermann are a variety created not in Asia, as the origin of the genus might suggest, but in Europe, by the French flower breeder Victor Lemoine (1823–1911). Known since they were first marketed in 1906 under the name of the famous actress Sarah Bernhardt, this variety remains popular in the West.⁵

Westermann thus replaces the centuries-old tradition of the symbolic language of flowers, still evident in their classical sense in his early works, by the history of cultivating lilies and peonies. He thus lends contemporary relevance to the familiar visual tradition and gives it a completely new horizon of meaning.

His discovery, that a plant originally from China was named after a Western actress, continues to preoccupy Westermann.⁶ A first product of his research into the cultural history of the peony is his photomontage "*Paeonia lactiflora*" at the Waldorf Astoria Towers, New York 2014 (2014), for which Westermann transplants his reverse glass representation of the Westernized peony into the luxurious surroundings of the Waldorf Astoria Towers—which "la divine Sarah" could easily be imagined having visited on one of her tours. By means of digital montage, the reverse glass image suddenly appears in the lobby of the Towers and thus lends an "exotic" note to the neo-Baroque American ambience, mirroring the hotel as a cosmopolitan place of exchange and international hospitality.

In his photomontages, Westermann traces the *genius loci* of particular places, weaves together what he has found with the historical conditions he has researched, and thus reveals connections that would otherwise remain hidden. He proceeds dot by dot, just as he creates the motifs of his reverse glass paintings; he shoots detail after detail of the original situation and, in the process, increasingly becomes one with the place photographed. The tiniest uneven spots, textures, and reflections of light are meticulously recorded before returning to his studio so he can reconstruct the atmosphere as perceived in situ. During the photomontage, the photographic source material starts to mingle with Westermann's personal feelings, prior experiences, subjective perceptions of the places shot, and his associations with them. Moreover, conversations with the owners, Westermann's own research in collections of objects, and historical contexts also enter the pictures; for example, the furniture from an adjoining room or otherwise associated with the place photographed—all of this can be added digitally. Westermann thus creates a *mise-en-scène*, just as film directors condense and compose their settings to achieve the utmost visual effect in seemingly quotidian reality.⁷

The arduous process of researching and assembling the intricate building blocks sometimes takes months or even years. The decision to combine the image of the *Paeonia lactiflora Sarah Bernhardt* with the interior of the Park Avenue hotel was anything but arbitrary. The hotel as a place of hospitality and a meeting place for international exchange may, of course, reflect Westermann's personal experience as a traveler in America. In the case of the Waldorf Astoria Towers, however, the connections go deeper, since the history of the Astor family can be traced back to Walldorf in Baden, Germany, where Johann Jakob Astor began his meteoric rise to become one of the richest men in America. The fact that the self-made-millionaire made profits not only from furs and real estate but also trading porcelain from Asia closes the circle with the vase decorated with a Chinese dragon in Westermann's artwork as well as with the cultural history of the peony, which itself achieved world fame as the variety *Paeonia lactiflora Sarah Bernhardt*.

Westermann's enthusiasm for orchids depicted by Ma Lin 马麟 (c. 1180–after 1256), the Chinese master of ink painting, preserved at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, dates back to an early stay in

the United States. Now, however, Westermann begins to grapple more intensely with the painting and its history. Both the delicacy of the lines and the “orchids that look as light as if they were respired” represent a particular challenge when transferring them to his own technique of etching dots.⁸ Following the classical tradition of improving one’s own artistic abilities by copying the paintings of proven masters, Westermann first repeated the motif from the Chinese painting using his reverse glass technique. He did not, however, study the work of the Song dynasty court painter solely for its painterly aspects but also created a photomontage to reflect on the present location of the painting in a Western museum, whose exhibition display Westermann recorded in a number of close-up photographs. For the photomontage *“Chinese Orchid (Homage to Ma Lin)” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 2014 (2014)*, he reconstructed the original situation and “tried out” his copy in the museum surroundings of the Met’s Asian Art Department. The label next to the painting was carefully digitally “rewritten” while preserving the typo of the original text. It indicates not only the precise accession number of the Song ink painting—“Related artwork: C. C. Wang Family, Gift of the Dillon Fund, 1973 (1973.120.10)” —, but also reports precisely on the genesis of Westermann’s reverse glass painting:

“This orchid painting originates from an ink on silk painting by Southern Song dynasty painter Ma Lin (ca. 1180–1256), who excelled at making crystalline images of flowers, stripped way [sic] extraneous elements to allow a boldly composed image to shine. By appropriating the motif and transferring it into his technique of reverse glass painting, Westermann not only pays tribute to the old Chinese tradition of copying master painter’s works, but also recreates the flower motif through the meticulous placement of dots.”

The connection to China is established by a photomontage from the following year: *“Chinese Orchid (Homage to Ma Lin)” at the Himalayas Art Museum, Zhujiajiao 2015 (2015)*. The motif of the Chinese orchid can be seen through an open door inside a building that is identified by the title as the branch of the Himalayas Art Museum in Zhujiajiao. Not far from where Ma Lin once worked in Hangzhou, Westermann spent several months in 2015 on a grant in what has come to be known as the “Venice of Shanghai,” where relicts of the splendor of the old scholars’ gardens can still be found today. The harmonious meshing of inside and outside that is central to both to such gardens and to the design principle of the “framed view,” in which a window or a door provides a view of a landscape and makes it look like a painting in a frame, recur in Westermann’s photomontage. Impeded on both sides, one’s gaze is guided immediately to the mirroring image, the large unique print, which reflects not the viewer but rather the courtyard and the part of the building opposite it.

The photomontage *“Chinese Masquerade” at the Amanfayun, Hangzhou 2019–20 (2020)* is geographically directly connected to the aforementioned city. Inspired by two plates preserved in the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg, each presenting a European couple and originally made for a Chinese market, where such europeries enjoyed great popularity, Westermann created the reverse glass paintings *Chinese Masquerade (2020)* and *Chinese Masquerade (2) (2020)*, each featuring a fictive vase decorated with the motifs found on the plates and holding a stylized bouquet of peonies that are

also found on one of the plates. Westermann digitally transferred the first of his two works to the Amanfayun Hotel in Hangzhou, China, where he had taken pictures in 2019. Using a number of these individual close-ups, Westermann reconstructed *en détail* a table, a chair, and a wooden folding screen, which were originally distributed across the entire hotel but that, in the digital overview (i.e., the photomontage), best represent Westermann's perception of this place. In the *studiolo* atmosphere thus created, the open catalogue of the Hamburg museum's porcelain collection lies next to the resulting reverse glass painting. As if in an East-West conversation, both objects face the Chinese wooden chair with a still-life ornament. The folding screen, which originally blocked the viewer's gaze, has been made permeable so that the photomontage reveals one of the scholar's gardens studied by Westermann at West Lake in Hangzhou.

Migrations by Thilo Westermann and Correspondance avec Stéphanie

A Qing dynasty vase with floral decoration from the collection of the Bavarian National Museum in Munich, which after being imported to the West was given French silver fittings and a spout (since removed) to dispense water at table inspired Westermann to create a still life with the hybrid Sino-French vessel at its center. The reverse glass painting, in which the vessel appears without its folding lid, combines the best of Westermann's earlier works: One peony flower taken from *Paeonia lactiflora in a Vase with a Dragon Relief* (2013) appears next to the national flower of Singapore (*Vanda Miss Joaquim*), which Westermann has repeatedly depicted, and the *Vanda coerulea* from *Vanda coerulea in a Crystal Vase* (2012). Together with the vessel, the flowers thus represent the coexistence of more recent East-West cultivars and artistic reworkings.

Most recently, his study of the hybrid vessel and a private tour at the porcelain collection of the Forbidden City in Beijing with the curator Zheng Hong 郑宏 have led Westermann to record the results of his research, which extend beyond the contents of his artworks, in the artist's book *Migrations by Thilo Westermann* (2023).⁹ Between New York, Virginia, Beijing, Shanghai, and Paris, he became vividly aware of the "migration of forms" formulated by Roger M. Buergel and Ruth Noack. In order to document and make tangible what he observed, heard, and researched, Westermann invited his interlocutors to write texts on the topics discussed. The essays address, among other things, iconographic transformation, the migration of motifs (e.g., the Chinese peony and the scholar's rock on Chinese porcelain), the cultural history of the peony in general, the colonial mechanisms of the East India Company, the economic principles of improved marketability of new varieties in the competitive flower market, and the reaction of Chinese artists and artisans to Western influences. Together, these themes lend an additional dimension to Westermann's effort to render visible the processes of cultural history.

Despite the scholarship of its contributions, the artist's book also already has autobiographical qualities—Westermann introduces the authors in a "Letter to the Reader" at the beginning of the book—whereas

the discovery of a portrait engraving of Napoleon's adopted daughter and the former Grand Duchess of Baden, Stéphanie de Beauharnais (1789–1860) represents the point of departure for *Correspondance avec Stéphanie*, a widely ramified textual work. Fully aware of the circumstances of Stéphanie's life and her historicity, Westermann uses her as a muse-like projection figure and at the same time as the subject of scholarly research. As if she were still a living art collector, he keeps her—and at the same time the reader—up to date with his artistic work, his research, and his thinking in a series of handwritten letters. This collection of letters, of which only a selection has been published,¹⁰ documents current political and social events and sometimes resembles a treatise on cultural studies. Similar to his photomontages, Westermann here combines personal matters and subjective perception with scholarly research, history, and the present in order to create fictive documents that create a dense web of connections across cultures and eras.

Tracing the trajectory of Thilo Westermann's work reveals that an interest originally based purely on motifs can unfurl and fan out an entire cosmos of associations of cultural history and of form. Westermann rigorously pursues to the end the possibilities of his artistic labyrinth and encourages viewers to following their own forks in the path in order to adopt other perspectives and to distinguish new paths from well-trodden ones.

¹ See Dominique de Font-Réaulx, "Mélange der Genres," in *Thilo Westermann. Souvenir de Baden-Baden*, ed. Markus A. Castor and Heike Kronenwett (Cologne: Snoeck, 2022), pp. 23–31, esp. pp. 26–28, resp. „Mélange der Genres“, *ibid.*, pp. 229–38, esp. pp. 233–35.

² See Michael Marriott, "David Austin's English Rose 'Redouté'", in *Migrations by Thilo Westermann* (Milan: Skira, 2023), pp. 91–94, esp. 94.

³ By Westermann's own account he was surprised that Austin did not find inspiration for his rose variety, as an artist would, in formal models such as Redouté engravings but rather named a rose he had already developed after the famous master solely for marketing purposes. See "Letter to the Reader," in *Migrations by Thilo Westermann* (see note 2), pp. 9–10.

⁴ See Xavier Salmon, "Drawing with light," pp. 179–81.

⁵ Jane Fearnley-Whittingstall, "The Migration of Peonies," in *Migrations by Thilo Westermann* (see note 2), pp. 53–73, esp. p. 65.

⁶ In his "Dossier (Januar 2022)" Westermann writes: "The Peony has its roots in East Asia. When it was first introduced in the West it was considered a luxury object and was then further cultivated there. ... Named after the fin-de-siècle star of the stage, the plant was thus relieved once and for all of its Far Eastern origins. It had been entirely inscribed into the canon of Western culture."

⁷ Markus A. Castor has also pointed out the cinematic aspect of Westermann's photomontages. See Markus A. Castor, "Écrire, pointiller, exposer et le montage du temps. L'arpentage poétique de Thilo Westermann entre nature, exploration scientifique et histoire – une introduction," in *Thilo Westermann. Souvenir de Baden-Baden* (see note 1), pp. 7–20, esp. pp. 7–8, resp. *idem*, "Schreiben, Punktieren, Belichten und die montierte Zeit. Thilo Westermanns poetische Vermessung zwischen Natur, wissenschaftlicher Ergründung und Geschichte – eine Einleitung", *ibid.*, pp. 213–26, esp. pp. 213–14.

⁸ See Thilo Westermann, "Dossier (Januar 2022)."

⁹ See “Letter to the Reader” in *Migrations by Thilo Westermann* (see note 2), p. 6–7.

¹⁰ *Thilo Westermann. Souvenir de Baden-Baden* (see note 1).

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