

MONDAY, JULY 11, 2011

[Michael Wetzel at LaMontagne Gallery](#)

I am not the only person to have noticed Michael Wetzel's current exhibition at LaMontagne Gallery, as the show's extension and a review in the Globe attest. The reasons for this attention are surely varied, but what I find most appealing about this work is its ability to define a contemporary moment through a balance of formal elements. Many painters have pushed towards 'flatness', and painting, of course, has a luscious history of patterning and spacial rendering. But I am starting to notice a current of artists who combine these formal strategies into an unmistakably contemporary mixture, and I wonder whether a balance of flat and deeper space will be a defining element of these years.

That being said, this work is not without its references. There is a melting firmness and thinly disintegrating feel to some of these paintings that reminds me of Francis Bacon, especially in Wetzel's use of black to simultaneously build and destroy space. This might only add to the suggestion that these works encapsulate a moment, as Francis Bacon has drawn surprisingly high auction prices lately. I also want to see a connection to Vuillard or Bonnard in Wetzel's painterly wallpaper and tablecloths, but I think that the Artist might have his own reasons for this imagery. The art-historical references here are staid, avoiding imitation or mockery while preserving an informed and respectful formalism.

Wetzel's respect for his subject is less clear, as these paintings work through a litany of well-known symbols of wealth. There are towering champagne flutes, enormous lobsters on banquet tables, and even an apparent equestrian ring. Irony or a call for revolution would be the expected message in choosing such things, but these works aren't that easy. The soft touch and slowed hand belie a care that both resents and longs for these trappings, and it is this duality that grips my interest. Even the portraits avoid an outright disdain, showing vulnerable people in a way that allows them our sympathy.

These paintings hold the complexity of any deeply examined subject; they go flat until they show their volume, and they resent until revealing their longing. It may be that this complexity is what I am sensing in calling these 'contemporary', as it can seem like we live in a cultural moment where everything vies equally for attention and few things inspire unity. But then again, I could be wrong- I haven't met a person yet who doesn't like Lady Gaga.



