

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

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Michael Wetzel: *Hunting Club*, 2009-11, oil on canvas, 60 by 48 inches; at LaMontagne.

MICHAEL WETZEL LaMONTAGNE

The 10 new still-life paintings by New York-based Michael Wetzel featured in “Sunny Today,” his first Boston solo show, combine delicate floral arrangements, effervescent pyramids of filled champagne glasses and finger sandwiches that suggest a distant fantasy world of privilege and abundance. Wetzel’s cooked lobsters and delicate glassware—reflections of archetypal male status symbols—bear thematic allegiance to the 17th-century Dutch *vanitas* paintings of Jan Davidsz. de Heem. However, the compositions are compressed and abstract, combining the patterned interiors of Matisse with the spatial ambiguities and shifting perspectives of Picasso. Sensuous dabs, drips and marks of loose oil paint make up the images, which are defined by delicate white lines and sgraffito.

Hunting Club (2009-11) depicts a destabilized world where a cropped image of a recently killed pheasant arranged on a platter is juxtaposed with a trussed, similarly plated, roasted bird; they are positioned at opposite ends of a green-and-blue-striped tablecloth. A trio of sparkling

champagne glasses arranged in the lower right situates the viewer at the periphery of a festive nighttime celebration, seen through an oval frame that could be a mirror or a window. A partial image of a hunting horn dangles from a cord while pink champagne flows and bubbles from a tower of glasses.

Wetzel employs a geometric framework of triangles, trapezoids and circles in *Gin* (2010-11), named for the bottle of Tanqueray that is cropped by the left edge of the canvas. A bouquet, seen from above, fills the lower right corner. Two martini glasses adorned with lime swizzles are seen from different perspectives: one from above, the other straight on. They accompany plates of neatly arranged triangular cucumber sandwiches. Two tiny horses in the area above the green tablecloth, which is decorated with subtle lion-and-crown emblems, suggest that we may be peeking into the prestigious realm of the English aristocracy—perhaps as visitors to Epsom Downs, the most iconic of the sporting and social races. Wetzel’s painted world in red and green seems to exist somewhere between fancy and reality.

While the artist’s table settings are for the most part alluring, three small portrait

busts of women adorned with oversize pearls are mere ornament. Their skin disintegrates into a mesh of crosshatched lines. Like the country clubs they attend, these anxious-eyed women seem to be attractive yet ultimately unsatisfying symbols of excessive luxury.

—Francine Koslow Miller