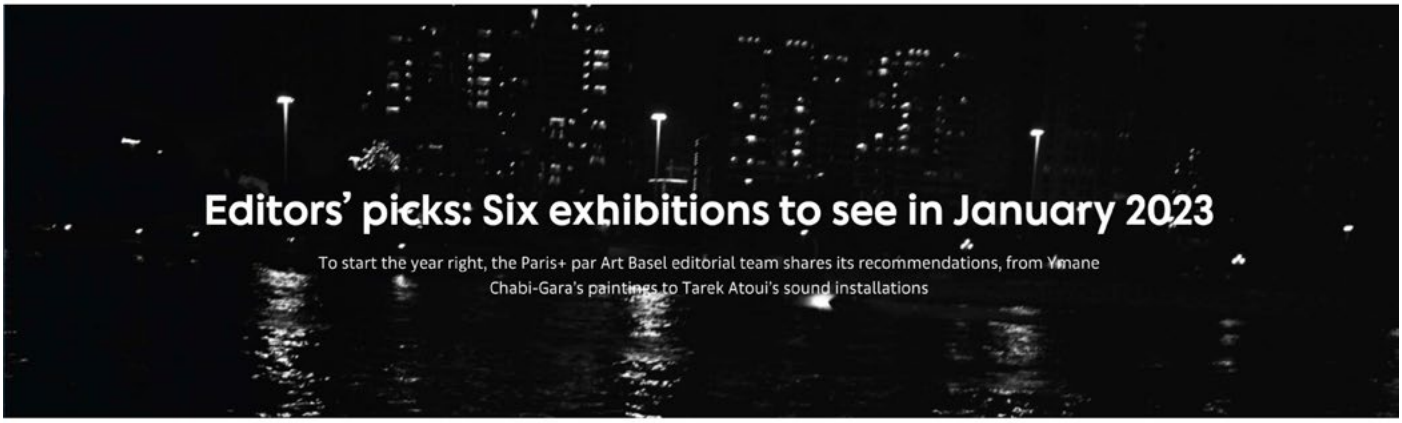
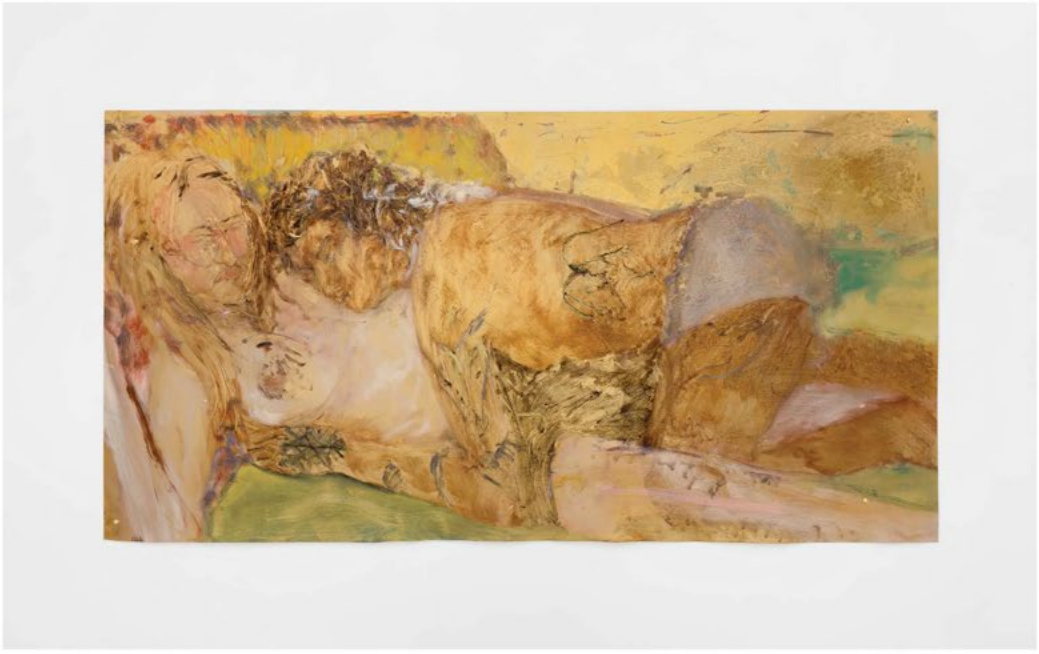
WILLA WASSERMAN





Willa Wasserman, Emily & Quinn, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and High Art.

Willa Wasserman
'TS CLEF'
High Art, Paris 9th arrondissement
Until February 11, 2023

In Willa Wasserman's paintings, you will find bodies. At High Art, the American artist presents her sensorial and oneiric vision, brought to life through oil paintings. Between shadow and light, she tells of transformations and relationships that evolve with time, in artworks inhabited by mysterious characters. Combined with silverpoint, which allows colors to change with oxidation, her brushstrokes invite us to relax in her world, populated with bodies curled up in a mist of color and sensuality.

EDITION FRANÇAISE
THE ART NEWSPAPER

Vue de l'exposition « Willa Wasserman : TS CLEF », chez High Art.
Courtesy High Art et l'artiste

Willa Wasserman : TS CLEF

Dans son beau texte de présentation, Andrea Abi-Karam, poète, nous invite à « *pénétrer dans la Rave lumineuse de Willa Wasserman* », façon surprenante d'ouvrir à cet univers désirant, amoureux, et aux trans, filles ou garçons qui l'habitent, mais dont le raffinement pictural paraît loin des images qu'on associe à la musique électronique. Personnages faisant l'amour ou qui, nues ou à moitié, nous fixent de façon un peu fière, un peu lasse. Willa Wasserman emploie des techniques rares comme la pointe d'argent et, outre la toile, peint sur de grandes ou petites plaques de cuivre. Traits de constructions visibles, traits multipliés, lacunes dans la peinture, autant de caractéristiques qui donnent aux figures un caractère instable, non fixé, à quoi s'ajoutent les jeux de reflets sur le cuivre. En dépit du naturel des scènes et des postures, ces effets d'esquisse et de lumière nous évoquent la peinture symboliste (Odilon Redon ou Gustave Moreau) et quand un médaillon convexe vient se poser sur une des moulures de la galerie, celle-ci prend des allures de palais.

Du 17 décembre 2022 au 11 février 2023, High Art, 1 rue Fromentin, 75009 Paris

ARTS

Willa Chasmsweet Wasserman: Exposing a Larger Queer History Through Painting

Wasserman welcomed me into her home and studio; despite only being in the space for about two weeks at the time of my visit, she seemed to be settling in comfortably.

By Anni Irish · 12/01/21 4:00pm

Detail of Willa Chasmsweet Wasserman's '858 by Emily Dickinson in which I read "chasmsweet" while I couldn't sleep on' 3/15/2021, 2021. Oil on linen, 49 1/2 × 74 1/4 in / 125,7 × 188,6 cm.

Willa Chasmsweet Wasserman's paintings are the kind that stay with you for days. They give the viewer something new to experience in each interaction with her work. Wasserman describes her approach to painting, to Observer, as one in which you are meant to look "while adjusting your eyes." This way of looking, and experiencing, is akin to that moment when you first wake up and are in the transitional condition between sleep and waking--hypnopompic. In this state of consciousness, the brain is attempting to make connections between non-linear objects and larger associations.

This tension between perception and waking consciousness is what Wasserman's paintings teeter on; larger split seconds of recognition of the self and the other. Put another way, these paintings offer a kind of dialectic, or way to psychically acknowledge the representation of the self in relationship to the parameters that Wasserman has set up for her viewers to experience; a psychoanalytic reading if you will. Wasserman's work also speaks to a larger history surrounding queerness, desire, and intimacy that reverberates through her subject matter and the details she parses on the canvas.

Wasserman draws attention to the gaps in-between space, time, and recognition that often get overlooked historically, socially, and visually. Working predominantly with oil paints on metal surfaces and canvases, Wasserman channels a larger history of painting that is meant to translate to this contemporary moment and beyond. Thinking through larger representations of the self, lived experience, trans identity, and subverting old word techniques to create new meaning she is giving viewers insight into what could and can be. These themes are omnipresent in her work. And as a trained metal worker, this has also crept into her creative process in exciting ways.

"They feel like siblings to me. I think oil paint was invented to mimic flesh and be very valuable and moldable. And metal, especially because all metals have different properties. But brass is shockingly malleable and you can make it into what you want. And that feels kind of like painting. Paintings also change a lot over time and so does metal depending on the environment that it's in," Wasserman told Observer.

This relationship that Wasserman has forged between painting and metalworking has become a signature component of her art, something I wanted to know more about. On a brisk November afternoon, I made my way to Wasserman's studio located in bustling Bushwick. Over the last two

decades, Bushwick has built up a reputation for being a haven for creatives like Wasserman. This has resulted in a migration of many galleries and artists flocking to the area, taking over abandoned factories and transforming them into modern-day ateliers.

Wasserman welcomed me into her home and studio; despite only being in the space for about two weeks at the time of my visit, she seemed to be settling in comfortably. She recently relocated from Los Angeles to New York, however, this is a reunion. The Indiana native received her BFA from Hunter College followed by an MFA in painting from UCLA. And despite the fact that there is still a global pandemic raging, Wasserman has maintained a busy exhibition calendar; currently, Wasserman is showing her work at NADA Miami.

When you first enter the studio a red beaded curtain greets you. It gave way to a brightly light room with large windows covered with sheer canary yellow curtains. The room was lovingly cluttered with painting materials, sketchbooks, and rolled linens placed around in piles. Several pieces of linen and paper were hung on the wall. A hand-made metal cut palette with daps of oil paint already on it and a large easel sat at ready for Wasserman whenever the mood strikes her. We discuss our mutual love of the painter Joan Mitchell, how Wasserman's studio practices have evolved, her affinity for egg sandwiches, but also just what is fundamental to a studio practice.

Willa Wasserman's studio Willa Wasserman

Her new projects are beginning to take form and I was there for a rare lull in her normally busy studio; This is also coming off her first solo exhibit with Downs & Ross gallery which closed on November 13. Wasserman, at the moment, is both living and working in a space, which is a first for her. And as a result, she has had to create boundaries for this new studio.

"I've established this space as my studio space. Like I don't do other stuff here. I don't let my phone up into the loft. It's nice having a loft because when your bed is just in your room you always just like flopping onto the bed with my laptop and doing stuff. But it's not really the case up here," she said.

Wasserman's new living situation however has allowed her to evolve. "I'm in a time and a space where there's no drama, and I'm making it myself. And I feel like I'm an all-time painter now," she said.

Wasserman noted that lately, she had been listening to a lot of the 1980s band TalkTalk, as well as Anne Briggs, a popular British folk singer from the 1960s. These musical influences among others, help to set a tone and also create a mood that Wasserman finds conducive to working. The idea of space in terms of music and art, and also the physicality of places came up several times throughout our visit.

"Space is for work and space for potential. I just want to give people space to figure out what they see. Rather than make declarative paintings, that's why I paint so softly. It's because I don't want to tell you what it is, I just want to make room." Wasserman said.

During our visit, Wasserman showed me a spool of silver that she had received in the mail. The iridescent strands were tightly wound and cool to the touch, maintaining an almost fairytale-like quality. While this object seemed incredibly special and tactile to me, a novice to the metal point tradition, this was exactly the kind of supply old world masters from centuries before would use to achieve the desired meticulous effect. Within the confines of Wassserman's hip 2021 Brooklyn studio however, the silver spool has taken on new meaning.

Willa Chasmsweet Wasserman, 'untitled 7/11/21,' 2021. Oil on blackened steel, 8 × 8 × 1 3/4 in / 20,3 × 20,3 × 4,4 cm. Image courtesy of Downs & Ross.

In 2018, as an MFA student in UCLA's famed painting program, Wasserman began experimenting with the Renaissance metal point tradition, applying it to her studio practice. This was born out of Wasserman's previous experience as a metalworker and has since carried over into many of the paintings she creates today. Old world masters such as da Vinci, Jan Van Eyck, and others used sharpened pieces of metal such as silver on a prepared surface, usually using gesso, to create precise and meticulous drawings. While elements of the tradition remain intact, Wasserman has developed her process with it.

"I feel like with the metal point which is brass and will be silver soon, that has a material limit of how dark or light it can go. That sort of establishes the

boundaries of the paintings. I think I have a tendency to keep things close to the original or the surface," she said.

Wasserman generally begins by drawing with a piece of steel wool either on a piece of paper or directly onto stretched linen. From there, her work starts to take on various forms and it also helps establish the parameters in which she's working. This can be seen in convex paintings in which Wasserman paints directly onto pieces of metal, usually brass or blackened steel. Using delicate brush strokes, Wasserman animates the canvas with soft muted tones that create ethereal and hazy images that are meant to make the viewer adjust their view.

In *858 by Emily Dickinson in which I read "chasmsweet" while I couldn't sleep*, this larger sense of space and the visual representation of the body is explored in an exciting way. Creamy hues of cornsilk yellows, subtle marigold oranges, and eggshell whites blend to create a dizzying scene of both recognition and misrecognition. A suspended body emerges from the foreground with their back to the viewer and long hair cascading down from the side as they look to the left with their arm extended by their head. The body gives way to what appears to be a statue or bust on a pedestal. Yellow and white brushstrokes take over the canvas and mold around the forms all while creating a large sense of order among larger *Untitled 7/11/21*, is a magnificently intimate small 8"x8" painting on a piece of blackened metal. A headless naked torso with open legs confronts the viewer. Periwinkle purples and cornflower blues highlight the form against a black backdrop. The dreamlike form is assaulting and commands attention. There is an energy to this work and the others that vibrate through the surface and beyond. These moments of intimacy and intensity are what drive Wasserman's work, and what brings art lovers running to bear witness.

Willa Wasserman's Art of Skepticism and Sentimentality

By Emily Watlington September 15, 2020 3:09pm

Willa Wasserman, Convex still life (poppies, milkweed, roses) no. 3, 2019, oil on poplar, 15 inches in diameter. COURTESY THE ARTIST

"Painting is very romantic, no matter how you slice it," Willa Chasmsweet Wasserman told me in a mid-quarantine virtual studio visit. The Indiana-born, Los Angeles–based artist plies her chosen medium against itself, retooling historical techniques in order to critique painting's more troubling traditions—like the tendency of artists to subsume their subjects into their own worldview. "Painting is haunted by its history," she said, "and we have to deal with the ghosts."

In 2018, while working on an MFA at the University of California, Los Angeles, Wasserman began a series borrowing from the Renaissance metalpoint tradition. Artists like Leonardo

da Vinci used a piece of metal (traditionally silver) sharpened to a point and set in a stylus to draw precise renderings with fine lines. Endeavoring to emphasize the ways in which representing (and even perceiving) a subject always involves some projection on the artist's part, Wasserman takes on the metalpoint technique as both medium and object of critique—drawing instead with brass wool. The artist uses the tangled mass of thin brass wires, a cleaning and polishing tool, to create blurry images on linen panels of varying sizes. She portrays friends in parks, in front of a bird bath, and among horses. Usually, Wasserman draws from life—though her hazy renderings make it hard to discern details like faces or gender. In this time of social distancing, the artist has instead been deriving images from a 1970s anatomy book. The gray marks that the brass wool leaves cannot be erased and are difficult to alter. In a sense, the works stay forever in the sketching phase, eschewing the pretense of completion.

Willa Wasserman, Figure with birdbath [a bather], 2020, metalpoint on linen, 54 by 39 inches.COURTESY THE ARTIST

Wasserman, who has a background in metalworking, discovered the process by accident: she was burnishing steel with a wire brush in an unsuccessful attempt to meld her painting and metalworking practices, an experiment that left shimmering marks on the studio wall. "The technique is a restraint against my own bullshit," Wasserman noted, regarding the forced haziness of the resulting images. The same could be said of the method shes use to create paintings with Jenny Gagalka and Beaux Mendes, fellow members of the collective En Plein Error. The trio holes up together for thirty-six-hour sessions, passing around paper and oil pastels, riffing off each other, and off quintessential art historical motifs (Noah's ark, bathers). Countless famous paintings were made collaboratively in workshops, yet in En Plein Error, there is no hierarchy, and everyone gets credit.

Wasserman also paints still lifes— typically flowers in vases—observing her subject not directly but in a convex mirror. The resulting paintings, rendered in oil on carved poplar wood, are convex, too—1:1 depictions of the reflected image. Here, there is no effort to translate a three-dimensional image onto a two-dimensional surface. Indeed, Wasserman chafes at "painting's historical pretension to showing more than what's on the surface"—as seen most literally in works by Renaissance artists like Jan van Eyck and Petrus Christus. These painters used convex mirrors to expand their purviews 360 degrees, suggesting a kind of omniscience. In Wasserman's paintings, the mirror is decidedly not a tool used to widen the scope of the artist's subject, but instead, to flop it, distort it, and render it less familiar. The artist first began painting floral arrangements to learn about color, but has now come to see them as an homage to her grandmother, who was also a painter, and a gardener. Last year, for a first solo show at Nothing Special, Los Angeles, Wasserman interspersed works by both artists—again thwarting painting's individualistic tendencies, and emphasizing the romanticism inherent in even the most self-critical of paintings.

This article appears under the title "Willa Wasserman" in the September/October 2020 issue, p. 12.

Published November 10, 2023

Seen by Testudo: November Exhibitions in New York

BY JOHN DENNEHY

John Dennehy co-founded Testudo with the mission to establish a more accessible and fair art world. John is a passionate collector of works by queer artists and antique ceramics.

With autumn exhibitions in full swing, I'm excited to highlight six shows in downtown New York that should not be missed. November is the perfect month for gallery hopping in New York as the temperatures drop and the turning leaves create perfect conditions for walking between the galleries and neighborhoods.

Installation image, Willa Wasserman, Mirror xx,xxx,x. Photo by Dario Lasagni. Courtesy the artist and François Ghebaly.

Willa Wasserman: Mirror xx,xxx,x*, François Ghebaly, October 28 - December 2*

For Willa Wasserman's first show in François Ghebaly's New York gallery, the artist has made six works of oil and silver nitrate on bronze. The bronze canvas creates a mirror effect, reflecting the viewer, while the paintings depict Wasserman standing in the middle of the gallery, in a haunting pose with her limbs outstretched. The result is an immersive effect that creates space to consider this pose chosen by the artist. As the essay by Kay Gabriel that accompanies the exhibition references, Wasserman's stance in the paintings leaves ample room for interpretation and has the potential to change based on each angle. Is it meant to evoke the symbol X? The concept of "no"? Or, a morbid crucifixion? Wasserman's self-portraits combine with the changing, imperfect patina on the bronze canvas to create a very contemplative show on the idea of the body and its identification over time, revealing elements that resist all stability and certainty.

New Talent: 6 Queer Figurative Painters Reimagining Intimacy

BY EMILY WATLINGTON July 13, 2021 5:33pm

Whether painting figures beyond the confines of the gender binary with blurry ambiguity or memorializing formative moments of sexual exploration in exquisite detail, a growing group of painters is developing a new visual vocabulary for depicting queer intimacy. Melding ambitions at one personal, political, and painterly, this cohort celebrates queer intimacy—emphatically and at times with trepidation, delicately refuting the oppressive gazes that sometimes accompany visibility. Their works range from sexy to sad, rowdy to raw, and hot to heavy, all the while doing the important work of expanding our repertoire of intimate imagery.

Take a look below at some of the most exciting queer figurative painters working today.

Willa Chasmsweet Wasserman

Willa Chasmsweet Wasserman: Figure with vase and seashell, 2021, oil on blackened steel with hardware, 11 in diameter. Photo : Courtesy the artist.

To avoid subsuming subjects into her own worldview, Willa Chasmsweet Wasserman paints using certain techniques that restrain her vision. Working in the dark, she draws with brass wool or observes her subjects using a convex security mirror that flops and distorts their appearance. Regarding the forced haziness of the resulting images, Wasserman has said that these techniques are "a restraint against my own bullshit." In her paintings, it is difficult to discern a figure's face or gender. The Los Angeles–based artist will open her first New York solo show, "chasm sweet," this September at Downs & Ross.

Emerging artists to watch: Willa Wasserman

Sonia D'Alto

Willa Wasserman's work is inscribed in the phantasmatic possibilities of painting, in between contemplation and rejection of tradition.

A ghost still to come: on Willa Wasserman's painting

The question is indeed "whither?" Not only whence comes the ghost but first of all is it going to come back? Is it not already beginning to arrive and where is it going? What of the future? The future can only be for ghosts. And the past.
– Jacques Deridda

What is painting today? In order to answer we need to consider today's technological context as well as contemporary questions of visibility. Politics involves a relationship with appearance, just as visibility is intertwined with the construction of identity. For this reason, painting today may seem an anachronistic act with no place. On the other hand, and despite the risk of its marketability, painting can also become a countermove.

Willa Wasserman, *Convex still life (hemlock and black calla lily)*, 2020 oil on poplar.
Courtesy Downs & Ross, NYC and the artist.

Many artists of the last generations have locked themselves in their studio. Sheltered from the present, they have been working on canvas. Their practice oscillates between the appearance of a miracle and the unknown. After all, how to judge their medium of choice? How can we be objective or critical in the face of their work? What are the possibilities of critique facing a medium like painting today?

Willa Wasserman considers the haunted and ghostly nature of painting. On the skin of the canvas there is irony, criticality and a legacy of a history – at least for the West- based on the repetition of ruptures and negations. Wasserman's work is inscribed in these phantasmatic possibilities of painting, considered in between contemplation and rejection of a certain tradition. Their works are a form of resistance, an operational absence erasing all security, both of tradition and disruption. Their painting is placed in the transition, in the possibility of adherence and convergence of different elements.

Willa Wasserman, *Self portrait in a convex mirror*, 2020. Courtesy of Good Weather and the artist.

Willa Wasserman, *Self portrait in a convex mirror*, 2020. Courtesy of Good Weather and the artist.

The transition occurs with and from the bodies, in the mixing of them with the space and in their possibility of crystallizing, even if only in a fleeting passage

or in their temporary representation. This is seen in the works now at Good Weather, where starting from Muybridge's photo studies on movement, the artist explores transitory poses such as steps or turns. These are different from what we see in the anatomy books of Muybridge. They are more than his constructions of races and genders in his chrono-photographs. The instability of poses contrasts the archetypes he tried to construct.

A transition and transformation also manifest in Willa Wasserman's still life paintings of sunflowers. Illuminated by natural light at Good Weather gallery, they take up Christian metaphors with personal, intimate and secret meanings. The reciprocal and metamorphic tension between interior and exterior, personal and collective, acceptance and denial, is recorded in the work *Self Portait in a Convex Mirror* (2020), a portrait that reveals the condition of passage and identity mutation. This work again departs from Muybridge's investigations and from Google Street images, an archive the artist also uses to explore instability. The body, the skin, and the aura of these moving figures rest on transitory surfaces, protected from immobility or fixity. It is the artist's attempt to build an archive of mutability with their convex paintings.

Installation view of Willa Wasserman, *"Crawling on hands and knees," flowers and well* at Good Weather Gallery Chicago. Courtesy of Good Weather and the artist.

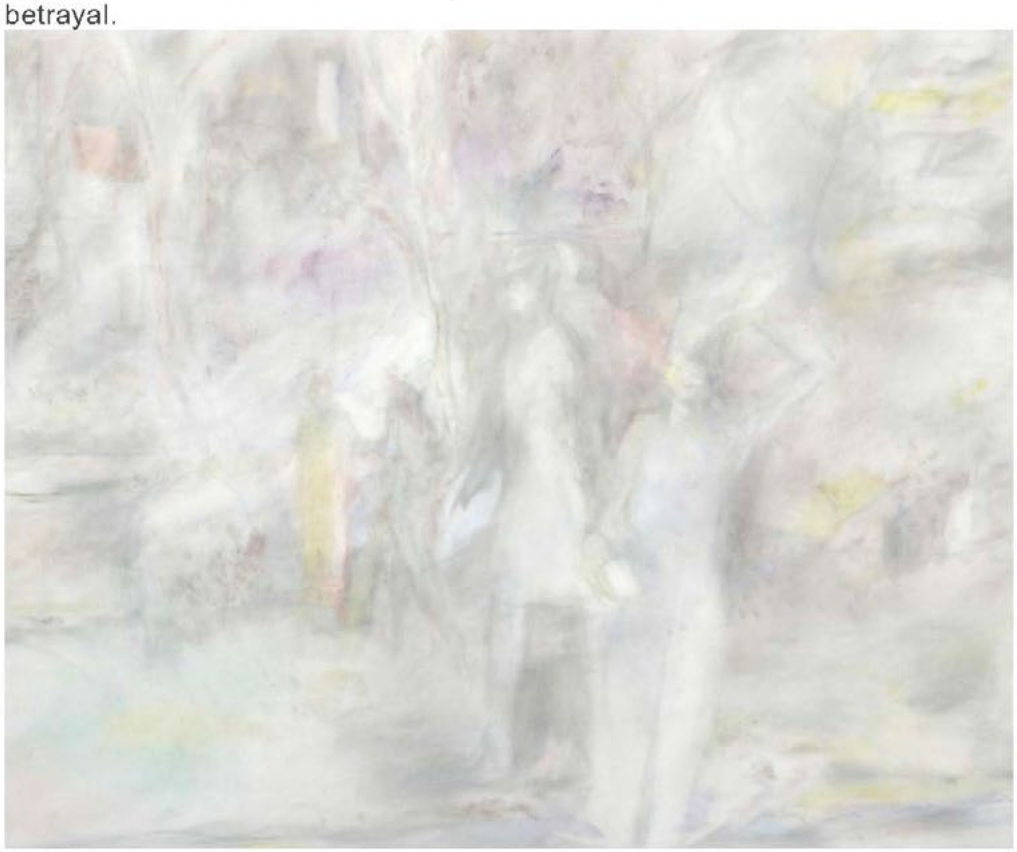
Their bodies on canvas are weak and vulnerable. Hidden, erased, imperceptible are the features of their (in)consistency. They are traces, marks on poplar wood or linen surfaces, materials that exercise a certain will

regardless of what is written on their skin. Willa Wasserman's figures, still lifes or landscapes exploit an ancient technique typical of the Renaissance tradition: the silverpoint, or more generally the metalpoint. For a long time the same technique was used for portraits of the powerful and official images. Willa Wasserman uses it to make quasi-confidential and domestic pictures.

The artist's use of brass and copper wools contribute to the gray and green palette of many of their paintings. The metalpoint marks are slightly reflecting, creating a patina over time. The resistance to erasure typical of this technique helps fix the indecision, fog and nuance of the subjects. Bodies and their visualization in a specifically technical realm are treated cautiously. A certain obsession seems to be layered in them, in their aura as things, in the way we perceive them and how we decide to represent them.

Willa Wasserman, *Convex still life (sunflower)*, 2020. oil on poplar. Courtesy of Downs & Ross, NYC and the artist.

Concepts such as authenticity and autonomy should already sound obsolete. The same goes for the linear chronology that seems to structure the history of art. Anachronism, repetition, interruption, novelty and rupture are things to be reworked, to be used with a diversified approach. Considering their own imagination, Willa Wasserman's perception and their possibilities of representation on canvas exist beyond the alternative between adhesion and betrayal.



Willa Wasserman, *Park and lake*, 2020, oil and metalpoint on linen. Courtesy of Downs & Ross, NYC and the artist.

According to a romantic conception of authorship and heroism, and according to a method of cynical and selected construction, the appearance of things is based on the cancellation of others. The paintings of the American artist navigate this contradiction, transforming the usual iconographies into the immaterial and intangible, for example in *Figure with birdbath [a bather]* (2020) and *Park and lake* (2020).

Willa Wasserman, *Figure with birdbath [a bather]*, 2020, metalpoint on linen. Courtesy of Downs & Ross, NYC and the artist.

These works, as well as the convex still lifes, give meaning and shape to what they represent. At the same time they emanate a suspended potential, which manifests itself with resonances of perceptual uncertainty. A historical tradition

and a self-critical approach are called into question in the sensual ambiguity of the traits with which subjects and objects appear in their own color scheme. Both of these aspects are deformed into a hybrid between drawing and painting, between abstraction and figuration. It seems that in the quintessential place of the visible, that is the picture, an attempt at invisibility takes place. It is a process of carving out numerous and potential presences: historical entities that break out in a distorted and complex way.

Willa Wasserman, *Convex still life (ivy and some grass)*, 2020, oil on poplar panel. Courtesy of Downs & Ross, NYC and the artist.

As Willa Wasserman ironically states: "Unfortunately, the past did not (and does not!) need to be revived, it's painfully present!" This is the case of painting and its haunted aura, its transitory definition. Referring to the legacy of European painting, the artist continues: "It is less as a grab-bag of references or productive launching points, and more like ghosts that appear by resonances, that continually refresh themselves through allusion."

Critical inheritance is also a sign of a dominant discourse. Consequently, collaborative work bordering on anonymity becomes a strategy for the artist. In their individual pictorial practice, the artist makes visible losses, absences and erasures, which fluidly and placidly intertwine in the refusal of a vision, in a personal expression of imagination and perception.

Willa Wasserman, *Convex still life (basket, urn)*, 2020, oil on poplar. Courtesy of Downs & Ross, NYC and the artist.

Willa Wasserman's floral compositions are the distortion of a tradition. Their painted bodies are so nuanced that they are devoid of any identity and gender. The quest for painting demonstrates the danger of a medium, its official and dominant character. The artist's work elaborates this linguistic and significant terror, dismembering it from the inside thanks to the use of traditional techniques and subjects. Their perception is characterized by unresolvedness. The artist adds: "In terms of images, erased things come back, always." Writes Jacques Derrida about the apparition of the inapparent: "This radical untimeliness or this anachrony on the basis of which we are trying here to think the *ghost*". Is painting a radical anachronism?