

FrameWork 5/14

Heather White on Shirley Wiitasalo

*but what shapes:
the transfers of Shirley Wiitasalo*



The gallery is like a building on fire: you go upstairs and everything is denser. The paintings at the top (there are seven, from Shirley Wiitasalo's *Dark Mirror* series) are sinister and saturated. Each is silver, and overlaid with black, and atmospheric. They are all lush and unsettling.

Though painted and without obvious referents, the *Dark Mirror* pieces are cinematic in sheen and in mood. They could be frames caught by film left rolling. In the dirt after the documentarian, pursued, dropped the camera in the woods. Or pointing out a motel window while someone tired, waiting for someone else. I tried to focus the tones into trees or sky until I understood that these works didn't come from some divested or forgotten thing.

There is much more intention than that to this series. Each composition picks a line to develop (horizontal or vertical; like barbed wire or like steel pipe) and repeats it at regular intervals across the canvas. The lines in *Dark Mirror H4* are thin and scroll tightly enough to conjure television static. In *Dark Mirror V2*, they have the curve and clang of metal gate-beams. But if this is a gate, it doesn't stilt the view; the clouds gleam on our side of it, somehow. Keep this handy: the near does not always mar. What's closest to us need not obscure.

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The layers don't block the scene, but build it up. *I see it through them and because of them*, wrote Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose phenomenology Wiitasalo seems to practise. If there are foregrounds, they are not what interrupts, but what shapes, the backgrounds. What pulls them forward. What might be glitches or cataracts are the fundamentals here. I see what I see *because* of what I see it through. Paint.

So there is no story off-screen that we're missing, and no place behind the paint worth wanting. The medium, the process, is the end, the point. The works study the possibilities of the material. And though the dark mirror lines are parallel, their wavers aren't. Each blots and peters uniquely. Wiitasalo is methodical, but not mechanical. The paintings are not the work of a camera after all, and palpably.

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They still feel viewfound; Wiitasalo is a painter's painter with a photographer's aspirations to be neutral. She embraces play and gesture, but at a distance. She proceeds without the grand expressionism of brushing, dripping, or smearing, taking the painter out of *painterly*. Wiitasalo uses other objects than paintbrushes (she doesn't disclose what kind) to mediate her medium, enacting what she calls, enigmatically, a "transfer process."

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Transferring is shifting, ferrying, unceremonious. Even if spirit tends to lurk near movement, the term connotes a technical pragmatism. Employees and prisoners are transferred. Commuters transfer in their anonymity, funds in their abstraction.

Despite the bureaucracy, or maybe because of it, whole new places emerge, and whole new experiences. Different horizons, different hopes, new rules and new cells form. Sweet and mundane details attend: the crossword waits undone in the free newspaper; a dozen discrete dreams of dinner swim in the line for the bus door. Or nothing tangible happens, but possibility inflates or diminishes.

Transference is key in psychoanalysis. It's what the patient brings into the room that didn't start there -- old patterns and structures and expectations. According to much of the theory, analysts draw out the transference by being like blank canvases or mirrors. Transference is the condition of possibility for revelation, a space for it. The work of analysis is said to happen *in the transference*.

A site, transference is both an illusion and a place of labour, a mirage-garage. It encompasses all feelings. Transference happens when (and where) the patient falls in love with his therapist. When and where the patient wants to hurt hers. These are ancient forms.

Of course, not everything that bursts on the scene derives from an invisible past. Sometimes it just bursts. There is space -- on the couch, on the canvas -- for surprise. For freshness. Some shapes are not stencilled, but sketched right then and there, and about nothing but themselves. Parts may be sudden, unbidden.

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When through the water's thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it despite the water and the reflections, is how Merleau-Ponty began the thought.



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The paintings at the bottom of the stairs (Wiitasalo's *Border* series) could be excerpted from the surfaces of swimming pools. The works evoke water, or the feelings that water evokes. They are far more artificial, and much more contained, than the ocean. Their colours are beach toy-bright and plastic. Their lines are borne of Wiitasalo's transfer process but fold over themselves to delineate haphazard shapes on the canvas. The forms enclosed in each square could read as islands, except that their borders are like Mobius strips. They're closer to trays half turned inside out.

They are trays and twisted rulers on a desk. A wash of a desk. No matter what interpretation I apply, it drops off before the looking is up. Some slice of colour or texture won't conform. The plane I impute breaks on some corner like a wave and upsets the expected order, as above, clouds floated through the gate like ghosts. These canvases humour domestic logics to a point, condone mixing metaphors like textiles, then return to their own foreign whims.

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The works near the door – the *Distant* series - give the widest angle on Wiitasalo's worlds. Multiple globes fit in one frame, and the surrounding white does not appear to be plaster tightening around them, only void. Bold and patterned moons float freer than pool rafts. Or the other way: these paintings could be microscope slides of material ultra-magnified.

The *Distant* pieces bring out a photogramishness that, I now realize, has been everywhere the whole time. Using paint both to light and to press, Wiitasalo has set unwieldy, unnamed entities on surfaces, and exposed them.