

Stephan Wittmer, Places

By Katy Diamond Hamer

One of the first things Stephan Wittmer told me is that he and his family eat spaghetti together every Sunday. We had a Zoom call to discuss the essay and this detail from his life really struck me as being not only as important, but very very human. Wittmer is a family man and academic, lecturing at the University of Lucerne. When speaking about the tradition of pasta, he also mentioned one of his recent photographs of bubbling tomato sauce. The sauce, when experienced close up and through the camera's lens, is both enticing and familiar but inasmuch as it is also unrecognizable. Wittmer's photographs may seem unassuming, but provide a new way to look at the world in which we live. Looking at life, is very different from experiencing life and in the process of art making, he does both.

For over ten years, Wittmer has traveled from Switzerland to the United States and has documented these travels in a very unexpected way. While most visitors to the U.S. are drawn to large monuments, tourist attractions, and landscapes that have been featured prominently in cinema, Wittmer's photographs shine a light towards areas that most people never look, such as under a hotel bed. Photography reveals less about the place, person, or object in the image, then it does about the person behind the camera. This can also be said about a painter in front of their canvas, depicting a particular scene or just a field of colors and strokes of the brush. Perspective is everything. This is also true when one embodies the role of visitor or tourist to a country that is not their own. One might initially think there is a responsibility of said individual to truly capture the experience in the most visceral and expansive way —big skies in the Midwest, the chasms of the Grand Canyon, bright neon lights and casinos in Las Vegas, the Empire State Building. But who is to say or decide that these expansive vantage points are what define a place or an authentic experience? Travel has fascinated me for as long as i can remember. On my trips, people often take photographs of things that would remind them of a particular place, something to invoke nostalgia. However, the more frequently one may return somewhere, those images get less and less specific. Conceptually retreated, I want to return to the Wittmer's sauce, the bed, clothes tumbling in a dryer, a simple donut on a round plate. Truth is often held in

details, and so much can be discovered by looking behind or into dusty corners. I am fascinated by tropes in contemporary art, but also by these tropes being removed.

Visual cues can motivate a particular form of spatial identification, didactics or semiotics aside, giving way to arriving at a particular place. Do Stephan Wittmer's photographs *feel* American? Well, firstly, I'm sure he knows more about the Midwest than I do. The land cannot be totally stripped of history or the way time moves across hills and valleys. There is an identifiable part of the landscape, it's the Western part of the United States — Native territories, Silicon Valley, San Francisco, the Badlands. In his travels, which we can only loosely follow through the inclusion of details hinting at airports, planes and Wittmer also explored the East Coast. These images are less identifiable as far as the preciseness of location, but silos that look like those near Newark Airport in New Jersey are present. From a 2014 conversation between Aleksander Hemon and Teju Cole for BOMB Magazine, Cole stated, "Rural landscapes can give the double illusion of being eternal and newly born. Cities, on the other hand, are marked with specific architecture from specific dates, and this architecture, built by long-vanished others for their own uses, is the shell that we, like hermit crabs, climb into."

Wittmer, almost as if a still-life painter, hones in on compositional choices, making everything quiet, devoid of expectation. There is an uncanny quality to the work. It feels incredibly authentic and cinematic at the same time. I think of artists such as those from the Pictures Generation and how they were able to individuate their respective practices. Sarah Charlesworth chose to often focus on the banal or as Wittmer states of his own practice, "places that are nowhere and everywhere." Wolfgang Tillmans is another artist to come to mind. His work, like Wittmer's, offers intimate views of objects, people, their skin, earth, and life in general — occasionally cropped so intensely and intuitively that it leaves us wondering what we are looking at. These three artists all have a commonality in a sense of removal, a visual, conceptual narrative that offers something to contemplate without being overly specific. Psychologically, their collective practices are nearly parallel to sculpture or painting...yet compositional choices are made in three-dimensional space and then flattened. Whether objects, people, or landscapes, certain signifiers function as clues in a mystery, links to something only the maker knows. Or in some instances, perhaps there is no story to tell, only pieces of a puzzle yet to be solved.

Photography as an artist's medium offers several different ways of documenting space. In the first stage, so much relies on lighting conditions and compositional choices, followed by its evolution as a printed object; printing method, type of paper or surface, size. In the ten years in which he visited the United States, Wittmer chose to look at things outside of popularity or glamour, like an electrical cord, snaking across the floor. It's all so familiar even devoid of its purpose or in this instance, an outlet. Landscape in every form can be familiar and recognizable based on exposure, nostalgia or a vibrant imagination. Also from Teju Cole, "In each place I have travelled, I have used my camera as an extension of my memory," as told to Sean O'Hagan for the Observer, 2017.

Katy Diamond Hamer is an art writer with a focus on contemporary art and culture. Writing reviews, profiles, interviews and previews, She started the online platform Eyes Towards the Dove in 2007 and was first published in print with Flash Art International in 2011. Interview highlights include Robert Storr, Helmut Lang, Courtney Love, Takashi Murakami, and Rebecca Horn. Taking a cue from art critics such as Jerry Saltz and movements such as Arte Povera (Italy, 1962-1972), Hamer believes that the language used to describe contemporary art should be accessible to a large audience as well as informed regarding art historical references. Having grown up in New York, she has been visiting museums and galleries since the age of 15 and cannot imagine a world without art, or the written words used to allow others to access a particular level of engagement.

Hamer is also an Adjunct Faculty member at the Sotheby's Institute of Art and a Core Critic at the New York University, Steinhardt School.