Rob Wynne

LIKE THE FLICKERING OF A CANDLE

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VISIONARY GLITTER: THE ART OF ROB WYNNE

By Carter Ratcliff

Among the delights of Rob Wynne's exhibition is a luster-glazed effigy of a fly. As big as a winged Chihuahua, it is minutely detailed and every detail sparkles with silvery light. *Fly* rests on a wall, observing a tabletop covered with a variety of other objects, including a length of tree branch, also luster-glazed and an outsized glass eyeball, shiny and smooth. Just as smooth and even shinier is a pair of human feet cast in silvery glass. On a nearby wall hang framed images of various diminutive creatures—a butterfly, a lizard. Rendered in light-catching glass beads, these forms make subtle contributions to the prevailing glitter. Still more emanates from the *Teardrops*—sculpted glass forms—that cluster on every wall of this exhibition. Many artists, to show how serious they are, suppress any hint of glitter the moment it sneaks into their work. Not Wynne. Serious but not solemn, he is not afraid to dazzle us. All that glitters may not be gold, but it has an abiding appeal, and Wynne would like us to understand why.

Physiology supplies a partial explanation. Our optical apparatus is hardwired to respond to bursts and shimmers and ripples of light. Because we react automatically to these effects some critics would like to exclude them from the precincts of art. As these writers see it, an aesthetic reaction is supposed to be deliberate, not reflexive—not a visual equivalent to the sort of knee-jerk response that bypasses the avenues of conscious thought. Wynne agrees, and his art invites us to be as self-aware as we can possibly be. At the same time, however, he disagrees, for he sees no reason that art should not make use of all our susceptibilities, including our unthinking love of glitter—not to mention our helpless attraction to glamor, beauty, and shameless sentimentality.

Among his *Teardrops,* Wynne has interspersed wall pieces made of poured and mirrored glass. Their elements are the sinuous letters of single words—*Rapture,* for example, or *Blink.* As in the blink of an eye, perhaps. Another word on view is *Vanish.* Sometimes several words hover in a pattern that enunciates a melodramatic thought, as in *The Feeling Of Departure Clings Like A Wet Leaf To My Heart.* With this phrase the artist conjures up a mood, along with a rainy, autumnal landscape. Yet the mood is transient, for our focus inevitably shifts and we see these words not as bits of language but as luminous objects. Just as inevitably, focus shifts back to

facing page:
Butterfly 1, 2008
glass beads and thread
27 x 21 inches

Wynne's persistent themes of transience and absence.

Wynne induces an oscillation between the visual and verbal, the tangible and the intangible. His constant is inconstancy or, at the very least, elusiveness. Even his robustly three-dimensional *Fly* glistens so intricately that vision can never pin it down with any certainty. The slightest shift in light or viewpoint produces new details, which are lost in the next shift. With an array of startling presences, Wynne implies absence. He evokes the void and darkness, for everything in his art is in some way sporadic. Like *The Flickering Of A Candle,* to quote the title of another wall piece.

To make *Faux,* Wynne began with a close-up photograph of a porcelain shepherdess, an 18th-century Meissen figurine aglow with old-fashioned charm. Next, he transferred the image to canvas with an inkjet printer. Then he had the word "FAUX" mechanically embroidered across the upper half of the canvas. Rather than asking what is "faux"—or false—in this work, we should ask what is not. The girlish innocence of the shepherdess is sheer, deliberate artifice. Figurines like these were made for audiences with a taste for pastoral make-believe. As for the image itself, it is photographic but not really a photograph. This is a work on canvas but not really a painting. The word "FAUX" is false to itself, for it renders a true judgment on the falseness of all that it labels—medium, subject, style. Nothing here is simply true or false. Rather, truth and falsity shift with a subtly we perceive as a kind

Installation view of **Faux, A Place That Doesn't Exist,** and **Teardrops** (2008)

of flickering.

In the 1980s, Wynne painted abstract paintings. As the 1990s began, he returned to figurative images: camera-made fragments of faces and bodies on canvas. Reinventing the medium of drawing, he stitched portraits of Picasso and other luminaries with black thread on translucent vellum. From silvered glass he made forests of outsized mushrooms. Striking a succession of ironically domestic notes, he used snakes and butterflies and his own eyes as wallpaper motifs. In this exhibition, the artist's wallpaper features flies—a swarm of two-dimensional cousins of his large, 3-D fly.

In search of things to represent, Wynne ranges through the centuries and beyond the bounds of culture. A fly, after all, belongs to nature, not art, despite Salvador Dali's obsessive devotion of these creatures as emblems of putrefaction. Even 17th-century Dutch still life painting, which uses flies to symbolize the more dignified concept of mortality, do not entirely acculturate these insects. This, I suspect, is why Wynne likes them. Though his figurines and poetic phrases suggest that he is civilized, not to say over-refined, his flies demonstrate his grip on the ordinary and the unattractive.

Placing an image of 18th-century damsel at one extreme and a lowly insect at another, Wynne's oeuvre includes, by implication, everything there is—nature as well as culture, the ugly as well as the beautiful, the negligible as well as the cherishable. Yet the sheer amplitude of Wynne's representations can be misleading. Or so I believe, for this exhibition persuades me that he is not a representational artist—not primarily, despite the undeniable truth that his art holds up an accurate mirror to all manner of things.

I realize that I am being a bit paradoxical here. What I am trying to get at is my suspicion that Wynne is up to something more remarkable than presenting us with images of various objects and creatures. He is giving us any number of opportunities not merely to see but to see what it is to see. And to make sense of what we see. His subjects are not flies or porcelain coquettes. As we try to figure what he

Installation view of
Flypaper, 2008
wallpaper, published by Studio Printworks
dimensions variable

might mean with his glittering, gleaming, glowing images of these subjects, we begin to glimpse the possibility that his subject is meaning itself.

Earlier this year, Wynne made a series of six silk-screen prints, all with the same image: a rose blossom reclining on an artfully rumpled piece of salmony-pink satin. Naturally enough, this flower is not a product of the garden but an overwrought piece of costume jewelry. Over these glittering images the artist has scattered real glitter and he supplied each one with its own histrionic announcement. "I WALK EVERY DAY IN SEARCH OF YOU". . . "BELIEVE IN ME AND I'M YOURS".

At first reading, these sound like declarations of true—and truly desperate—love. Yet they are a bit too sappy, too sentimental, to be believed. Is the artist really trying to convince some object of his desire that "TO BE LIKE YOU IS MY DESIRE"? Maybe, but I suspect that something else is going on here. One possibility is that, with these conjunctions of poignant phrase and glittery image, Wynne is inviting us to think about the tenuous, always shifting relationship between artist and viewer.

To be an artist is to impose oneself on one's medium, to wrench it into a shape satisfactory, first and last, to oneself. Illustrators and decorators must ingratiate themselves with their audiences, but artists must not. Thus Wynne's use of pretty images and lush materials is flagrantly, dangerously ironic. Seducing us with all manner of glitter, he runs the risk of being completely misunderstood. Of being seen as a decorator, not an artist. Yet this is an error easily avoided.

What decorator would mix flies with his more attractive images? Furthermore, there is none of decoration's easy allure in glass eyeballs or free-standing feet, with their uneasy hints of the body's vulnerability. No decorator would obscure the image of a jewelry rose with evidence of over-the-top emotion—"I'M LONELY FOR MYSELF." And then, "I WAS TOLD THEY LOVED ME." Not "you" but "they," a detail suggesting to me that Wynne is thinking of his audience, that milling crowd of people for the most part unknown to him. It is a question of love because he is an artist, not a decorator

I Was Told They Loved Me, 2008
four-color screen print with hand applied glitter, ed. 15
60 x 40 inches

seeking merely to be appreciated.

The artist has somehow been told that we love him—or his art—but he can't be sure that we do. If we do, it may because we or at least some of us have so powerfully understood his art that we have taken it away from him. We have made his sensibility our own and thus derived him of it. Bereft, he is lonely for himself. At other moments he feels that we don't understand him at all, that he can only try again, in the hope that one day we will. In short, he must walk every day in search of us.

The connection between artist and audience is tenuous. Intermittent. It flickers, and this flickering is to be glimpsed everywhere in Wynne's oeuvre. Whatever his theme or manner or mode, he always addresses the relationship between artists and viewer, with all its ups and downs. When this relationship goes well, it generates meaning and art achieves its purpose. Moreover, it always goes well, if we let it, for Wynne's images and objects are amazingly generous. They want nothing more than to make us aware of ourselves as we make sense of them. His art is all about us. At the same time, it is all about him.

Wynne is like a moth eternally drawn to the flame of self-awareness, which is not always reliable. For self-awareness is elusive, like the glitter that attracts us to this artist's works—attracts us not only because glitter enchants the eye but also because it symbolizes an ideal. Or, rather, the elusiveness of the ideal. Know yourself, said Socrates, and his advice is echoed by long centuries of art and literature. Of course, we are never quite sure how best to follow this advice. The flame of self-awareness is often feeble. Yet it now and then flares up in triumph. On the table at the center of this exhibition lies a book containing a page that reads, "I SAW MYSELF SEE MYSELF." This is a visionary's ultimate vision.

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