

Uwe Wittwer: Raised Hide, Haunch of Venison, London

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A woman in a white dress stands next to a seated man painted in blurred, blue-black strokes. Evoking both the dazzle of a paparazzo flashbulb and the nebulous scrutiny of an X-ray, the image is simultaneously foreign and familiar. A glance at the gallery guide tells you this is James Stewart and Grace Kelly, staring out of their famous window. Only then does the man's seat resolve into a wheelchair, the object in his hand into binoculars.

Painted in watercolour from a photograph downloaded from the internet, Uwe Wittwer's pastiche of Rear Window is an ideal opening image for the Zurich-based artist's new show. Under Hitchcock's lens, voyeurism became glamorous, even ethical. The moral of Wittwer's tale is that looking matters. This explains why the "raised hide" of the title is the subject of a picture in two of the three rooms. A spartan observation tower on spindly legs, it is both a signal of the artist's ever-watchful presence and a reminder that we too must keep our eyes open.

Wittwer is a democratic image-maker. Alongside the watchtower and the Hollywood icons, the first room contains pictures of three anonymous sisters smiling against a snowbound landscape, a Japanese geisha perfect as a doll under her parasol, a blurred still-life that originated as a painting by the Dutch Baroque master Abraham Mignon and a similarly distant translation of a family portrait by Gainsborough.

Although all began as digital images, some have been transformed into watercolours. Others are inkjet prints, their silky yet vibrant textures the result of sophisticated software that allows Wittwer to transform the original photograph with a virtual paintbrush before printing it out in perfectly rendered monochrome.

So far, so postmodern. The trend for translating photography into painting was kick-started by the German artist Gerhard Richter in the 1960s. It took a while for other artists to catch up, distracted as they were by the possibilities of performance, video and installation art. But in the past decade a generation of painters, most notably the Belgian Luc Tuymans, have adopted digital images as models.

Both Richter and Tuymans wish to expose the notion of an authentic image as a fantasy. But Wittwer is pursuing a subtly different course. At the heart of his London show lies his "Class of Beauty" series, seven vitrines containing watercolours of fragments of paintings by old masters, and one devoted to copies of Andy Warhol's electric chair. A cluster of Titian Madonnas are reduced to lyrical black lines. Although sometimes disfigured by long threads of

paint dripping from their veils, their delicate, sensuous contours make them unmistakably inspired by the Venetian. The vision of Pieter De Hooch, the 17th-century Dutch painter, is boiled down to a woman's bowed, wimple-shrouded head, a typical Flemish rooftop, and a square of monochrome tiles. With a few eloquent strokes, Wittwer delineates the transcendent peaks and ethereal trees over which Caspar David Friedrich took such exquisite pains. Captured in watery, pigeon-grey, Warhol's chair loses its menace yet retains its iconic impact. Deprived of their awesome panorama, close-ups of the raised spears and plunging horses of Uccello's "Battle of San Romano" give no sense that this was the first Renaissance painting to attempt a grand battle scene using classical perspective.

Overlooking the vitrines hang two of Wittwer's own – although in this conceptual territory the word is always troubling – watercolours. Working from two photographs of classes of schoolchildren that were taken in 1939 and 1945 respectively, Wittwer has painted the figures in negative, evoking faces and limbs in dark, tenuous shapes as if they are swimming out of a traumatised collective consciousness.

The imperative to look and learn from your elders and betters is clear. Yet Wittwer's gestural tampering also reminds us that art cannot stand still. Thanks to his own fine draughtsmanship, he is capable of playing with the visions of his ancestors – and with images of children entangled by war – without desecrating their memories.

His penultimate gallery juxtaposes a miscellany of watercolours. From a Vietnamese battleship to home interiors found in sales brochures, every one has a detail that compels the gaze: diaphanous white stools topped with black halo-like seats; a dark sky bleeding into a pewter sea; contrasting shades of grey that somehow conjure the glow of a lamp over a card game.

After such quiet poetry, the show's grand finale comes as a shock. A trio of monumental inkjet prints are based on Uccello's three paintings of the battle of San Romano – the originals of which are in the National Gallery, London, the Uffizi and the Louvre. Whereas Uccello's masterpieces are colourful, vertiginous yet ultimately static spectacles, Wittwer's interpretations have the gauzy, dynamic energy of film stills. Displayed among them are inkjet prints of an American observation tower in Vietnam and a decrepit cart used by a Prussian family to flee during the second world war.

Wittwer is showing us that images change but wars continue. All we can do is keep looking.