

Window onto Painting

[En] Whenever a framed glass pane or a painted window appears in an art- work, art historians are often moved to cite a metaphor put forth by the fifteenth-century humanist and architect Leon Battista Alberti, who said that a painting creates the illusion of looking through a window. While in antiquity the window in architecture was thought of as framing a picture of the landscape beyond, Alberti summarily reversed that equation – for him, the painted image becomes a window that gives us a glimpse within, or rather a vista onto a world beyond the physical one. Even the name “Windows” for the software developed by Bill Gates was derived from this oft-cited metaphor.¹ Both of these divergent associations resonate in Daniel Karrer’s reverse glass paintings.

On a material level, the works are framed panes of glass behind which the image appears – a circumstance that in itself already recalls a window. In his art, Karrer has engaged with the most common painting genres, in particular still life (see *Untitled*, 2019, fig. 1) and landscape (see *Untitled*, 2021, fig. 2). Pictorial quotations from art history recur in his works – sometimes more, sometimes less concretely. In *Untitled*, 2021 (fig. 3) and *Untitled*, 2022, (fig. 4) (literal) fragments of certain works by Piero della Francesca, one of the most important painters of the early Renaissance and a contemporary of Alberti, can be discerned. Della Francesca is considered an enigmatic artist, his figures imbued with a sublime and otherworldly air. That Karrer refers, among others, to two key works by this Old Master is surely no coincidence. The *Flagellation of Christ* in Urbino is one of the many paintings that ceremoniously stage central perspective, the artistic innovation par excellence in Piero’s day. The painting already inspired artists of the twentieth century such as Max Beckmann and Giorgio de Chirico. Karrer borrows only individual figures from Piero, but that suffices to establish a clear connection to this icon of perspective, for example in *Untitled*, 2022, which quotes one of the secondary figures from the *Baptism of Christ* in London’s National Gallery. That painting, too, provides evidence of the Old Master’s knowledge of geometry, while once again embedding a biblical scene in a recognisable earthly landscape – another painterly invention since the Renaissance. Through references such as these, Karrer opens windows onto the history of art, linking his work to specific aspects from past epochs of painting, which he then takes up more explicitly in other pieces – for example with the perspectival foreshortening of the floor in *Untitled*, 2018 (fig. 5).

The digital component of the window metaphor is equally essential to Karrer’s reverse glass painting, in which he seeks to emulate the digital aesthetic, even in his method, by using Photoshop to make his sketches. The software aids him in running through various possibilities to further develop a work once begun. When painting behind glass, the process of creation is reversed compared to painting on canvas or wood. Whereas on a conventional picture support the image is created from the background to the foreground, i.e., additively, image composition in reverse glass painting usually proceeds in the opposite direction. The uppermost visible layer of paint is as a rule applied first. Karrer, however, undermines this principle. This is possible because glass as image support allows – similarly to Photoshop – layers of colour to be completely or partially removed again and new layers to be added to what already exists, using a palette knife or other tools. The sharp edges and the varied painted structures that directly collide are reminiscent of software-generated renderings or digital collages, of distanced flat windows to a world beyond. This impression is reinforced even further by the uniformly smooth and shiny surfaces of the paintings as well as by the modest bordering frame, elements that our eyes, accustomed to the displays of electronic devices, know only too well.

The aesthetic of Daniel Karrer’s technique may call to mind digital media, but his subjects are multifaceted and his works always remain distinctly painterly. Even though the glass pane negates the surface relief of conventional painting, brushstrokes and gestures become even more visible thanks to the transparency of the painting support. It is as though we were looking through a window onto painting itself.

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