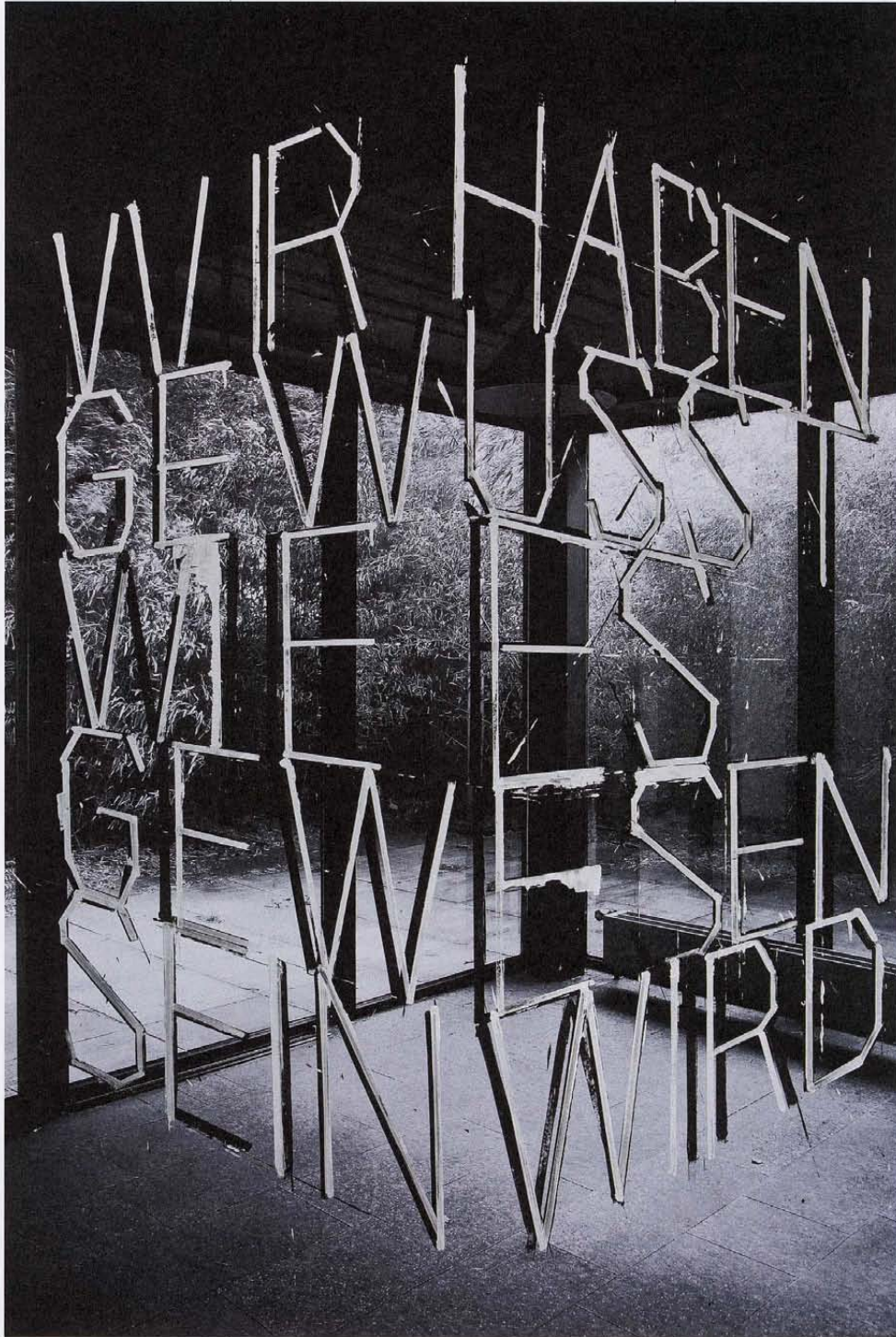


# Christian

# Vetter

Having just had a daughter, Christian Vetter has probably not been getting his full share of sleep, which is maybe why he has a bed on the mezzanine over his studio. His home is also just around the corner, which is convenient, though *convenience* may not be top of his list of creative priorities.

Untitled (part of the series *Wissen: Inifinitiv*), 2011, acrylics and inkjet-print on paper, 200 x 134 cm





'It's maybe too comfortable to live here. You feel trapped sometimes. I enjoy it when I am in a big city. Here everything is so... neat. Even the outskirts... As an artist, I feel inspired when things are not so perfect. All you can see here is a perfect surface. For example, in Mexico [from where he has just come back] the surface is more open and you can see into the structure of things – while they are being built, and collapsing and then being rebuilt – whereas here everything is finished.

'There is a lot of support from the state – that's the good part. The bad part is that it probably makes you a bit lazy. You don't have to fight so hard. Sometimes I think we produce a lot of average things. The motivation to produce something really good is not as strong here. We live disconnected from the rest of the world. We're not even part of Europe.'

Vetter started his career producing abstract expressionist paintings, which, he says, went maybe 'too well'. 'I try to work against some resistance, and I went the other way and tried to paint realistic pictures. It was very interesting in terms of getting to know what an image was, and what my interest in a particular image was, but in terms of painting, it was, well, boring. I would struggle to finish paintings. I felt a very strong discomfort with the whole thing. I knew I had to change something again.'

'In the 90s, in Zurich, it was almost a crime to be a realistic painter. The climate was (and still is) very ideological. I have always questioned these assumptions. Especially if you live here. If you want to do something good for the world, then go out and do it. But not art. That is too easy, and not really appropriate, playing the good guy and telling people what is right and wrong; here – it doesn't mean anything.'

But even if his work is never directly political, politics seems to be always just around the corner. It is difficult not to think of it as being at least militant, and playing heavily with the language of protest. On first encountering his work, one could be forgiven for thinking of a blackboard in an empty classroom where angry students had scrawled their feelings next to the half-effaced left-overs of some convoluted theory.

'I am definitely a political being. But I don't like art that is obviously political. I don't like it when artists preach. But I am interested in the world and maybe I can't help sounding political. I think there's an aggressiveness, or a desperation, in the work. It has become very difficult to do something that has an effect on other people. I think a lot of art has become just a nice product for the art market – I despair about this.

'In recent years, we've had a lot of painting celebrating its own power. But I doubt if things are really like this. I no longer believe in the power of painting as a means to make



Untitled (part of the series Painting Manifesto), 2010, oil on paper, 42 x 60 cm

## A lot of art has become just a nice product for the art market — I despair about this

historical work, as, say, in Neo Rauch and a lot of the German school of painting. I believe this is a dead end. They are just repeating empty gestures.'

A turning point in Vetter's career occurred five years ago when he went to Beijing for a six-month studio residency: 'From the very first day there, I just changed everything. I renounced colour, I renounced using photographic references. My painting became less realistic. My work became my own language. It was a moment of great crisis. I had become really fed up with everything. The change didn't have that much to do with China. It just helped to be in such different surroundings. I may have done this if I had stayed here. But it would have taken me longer. It was lucky I could leave everything behind.'

Does he ever think of going back to colour, one cannot help wondering.

'No, I don't miss it at all. I like colour, but I always found it too stressful dealing with colours. It was like a liberation moving away from it.'

Coming back to Switzerland after Beijing was, he says, 'the same shock I always have coming back and realizing that you are living



Untitled (part of the series Wissen Informativ), 2011, acrylics on paper, 200 x 134 cm





Glag Ship Store, 2011, Installation



in a glasshouse. At first, I just forgot everything about Beijing. The memories came back later. Maybe it has to do with the lack of connections between life there and life here.'

In fact, tensions between radically opposite poles – black/white, order/disorder, etc. – are a constant presence in Vetter's work. 'It's always a struggle: between wanting to build something on canvas and realizing the impossibility of doing so. I think that's a vital process.'

'I try to understand the complexity of the world, and I believe that is a political act. Not to find quick answers.' And the act of making art is part of this refusal to simplify. At the same time, he tries to be very economical with the means he uses. There are letters and grids on the walls, papers on tables. The studio makes one think of an old-fashioned, pre-computers typography workshop.

'I have been working with words for about a year. I like if paintings are not just self-referential, and language is a good way of reaching outside, something that is not really there. It also has something to do with my conviction that painting is language. I tried to understand how this language is made out. I think about the differences between the literal and the painterly language. I think it is an interesting question: what happens to a word once it becomes a material thing, once it is painted. You feel the meaning evaporates...

'When I started to paint words, I was looking for letters I could easily paint with rulers. I started to use a grid. The letters are adjustable: they can be smaller or thinner, but they follow this grid. I asked a typographer to programme them as a font. We are working on a metafont, which is a system of programming fonts so that letters are defined from the inside, from their structure, rather than shapes – and that is exactly what I am interested in: letters not as specific shapes, but as structures.'

When we ask him about research, he tells us, 'The research is my work. I understand my work as a process of research. It's not as if I did research, and then my work.'

We come onto his *The End* series, which features the phrase 'The End' over a number of works. 'It's quite a pessimistic series. I often feel there is no way to do painting any more. But, on the other hand, I feel that dealing with the end, dealing with the lack of possibilities, is also a way of going on.'

By the end of the series, even the words 'The End' have become illegible, as if even 'The End of Painting' could no longer be expressed in painting.

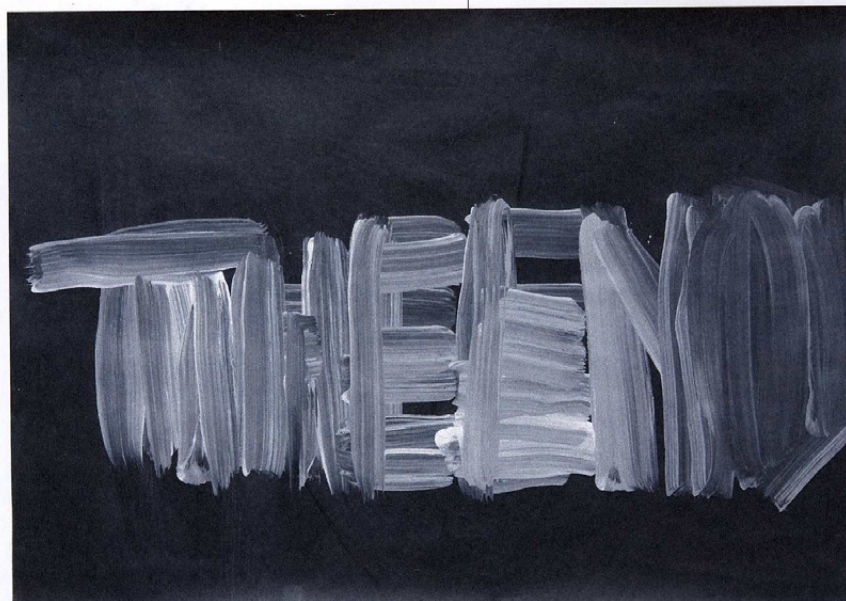
On the floor, we find a pile of canvases with black & white frames painted on them. The frames are empty – an attempt, according to the painter, to, 'paint the loss of the painting. I called them *Mirrors*. Mirrors who don't reflect any image anymore.

'I have reached a bit a crisis with regards to painting on canvas,' he says, pointing to the large black & white photographic inkjets pinned to the wall. 'I have ordered these today, and I want to start painting words on the images.'

'I think my work is not conceptual at all. It just happens. A lot of things that are not planned happen. I think a lot about my work, but then work quite unconsciously. I do something and it often surprises me. Sometimes I even think I am not really the author of my work, but that the work is coming through me in order to become visible. It is like a real experience. I know it sounds a bit esoteric... I do things and I fail a lot, and that's also the motivation to go on.'

[www.christianvetter.ch](http://www.christianvetter.ch)

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of the world, and I believe  
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Untitled (The End), 2011, acrylic on paper, 42 x 60 cm