On Paul Wesenberg's Paintings

Barry Schwabsky

Michelangelo famously distinguished two antithetical approaches to art-making, *per via di porre* and *per forza di levare*—but only the latter, he opined, was truly sculptural, while the former, he thought, was *simile alla pittura*, more like painting.[1]

Indeed, while sculptors who work in stone, as Michelangelo did, or in wood or many other materials, operate primarily by removing matter from an existing mass, painters almost always proceed by adding matter to a surface—and that's true even of those, such as Morris Louis with his stain paintings, whose additions do not increase the thickness of the work's surface but imbue that surface with permeating color. And while one can think of many sculptors—all those who model in clay or plaster, for example—whose procedure is *per via di porre*, painters who have systematically worked by subtracting, *per forzs di levare*, are much rarer. One immediately thinks of Lucio Fontana with his slashed canvases, but after that, the names become scarce.

That's one reason why the fact that Paul Wesenberg makes his paintings both *per via di porre* and *per forza di levare* is so striking. His starting point is the removal rather than the adding of material: Wesenberg "draws" on his linen canvases using a dentist's drill, rending the fabric and leaving networks of cicatrix-like lines, and sometimes holes as well—a kind of beautiful damage. The artist himself has spoken of an "'Irritation' of the canvas surface" which gives rise to "additional traces and injuries."[2] There is a great delicacy to these "irritations," these scarifications resulting from the painter's attack—I don't think that word is too strong. They adorn the canvas like graceful embroideries. Paradoxically, these drilled areas appear raised, as if added to the surface; although material has been taken away, what remains has been made more prominent. Although these initial interventions into the linen are based on tiny sketches, they don't feel sketchy—at times they even

appear so elaborate that one could almost imagine them as having been, at least for an artist more oriented toward minimalism, sufficient for consideration as finished works. But for Wesenberg, these refinements of the surface are merely the armature on which to project the web of what might be called, tentatively, an image.

But to speak of *an* image, in these paintings, might be going too far. The image is not one; it is either less than one, a partial or fragmentary image, or more than one, a plurality that is perhaps on the verge of some kind of synthesis that has not yet occurred. One might be tempted to say the image deconstructs itself but it is probably more accurate to say that it seems to be in the process of assembling itself from its own shreds and tatters. What might these images be that occur in Wesenberg's paintings? Just those ones that, to our imagination, have always been the substance of painting: landscapes, figures, portraits. Everything is a sort of archetype: *bird*, *horse*, *flower*, *tree*, *head*, *house*… And yet these images might well have had their origins, not in the realm of ideas, but in some concrete, empirical observations, for however intangible the details have become in the transition or translation from perception to sketch to painting, they retain an aroma of specificity.

I should say a bit more about how these images, or rather these shreds and traces of images, come to appear on the surfaces that Wesenberg has prepared for their arrival with his little drill. It won't surprise you to learn that in addition to this drawing *per forza di levare*, he also adds matter to the surface—but only here and there, for a good deal of the linen will typically remain without further color—in the usual manner of his painter colleagues, that is, with a brush, sometimes thinly so that it soaks into the weave of the linen, sometimes more thickly so that it sits on the surface: impasto. But then he avails himself of a third form of painterly intervention that, one might say, makes more of an issue of the *via di porre* that is already quite operative in the more conventionally painted passages. I am referring to his use of oil skins—paint that he has manipulated on a Plexiglas surface, from which it can be peeled off easily after drying and then applied to the canvas as a sort of

collage element. Compared to the fluid application of wet oil with a brush, this is more emphatically, almost polemically, a *via di porre*. And the paint skins can be even more of a challenge to the work's pictorial synthesis, since (unlike the brushed-on color that tends to integrate itself with the weave of the linen) they self-evidently sit atop the painting's surface.

Once, the ideal for Western painting was a seamless, totally integrated surface in which an image could be locked into place. Since Manet, that ideal has been relentlessly questioned. Remember what Picasso said: "In the old days pictures went forward toward completion by stages. Every day brought something new. A picture used to be a sum of additions. In my case a picture is a sum of destructions. I do a picture—then I destroy it. In the end, though, nothing is lost: the red I took away from one place turns up somewhere else."[3] Picasso's color transferred from one place to another is part of the ancestry of Wesenberg's paint skins. It appears that something in the modernist impulse to show painting as a made thing, a construction—which can only be done, paradoxically, by deliberately leaving it partially unmade, unfinished, even destroyed—remains urgent. And Wesenberg's paintings assert as urgent a call on our attention as any being made today. The paintings' meaning inheres more in what they are than in what they show; or rather, what they show is how they come to be, and in that showing, we begin to discern what they mean.

---

[1] Michelangelo Buonarroti, "Lettera a messer Benedetto Varchi," online at https://it.wikisource.org/wiki/Lettera_a_ messer_Benedetto_Varchi.

[2] Paul Wesenberg, "Emanzipation de Oberfläche/Empowerment of the Surface," in *Paul Wesenberg: Exotic Homeland* (New York: Slag Gallery/Paris: RX Gallery, 2021), p. 56.

[3] "Statement by Picasso: 1935," in: Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ed., *Picasso, Forty Years of his Art*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1939, pp. 13, 15. Online at https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_2843_ 300061942.pdf.