Intentional Landscape: *An Interview with Painter Wilhelm Neusser*, by Jim Kiely
Published in Big, Red & Shiny, July 2016

Wilhelm Neusser and I first met in a roomful of paintings at an art auction. At the prompting of a question of whether he had a favorite, he began speaking about perceived intentions of many of the artists, their methods and how their imagery related to art history. Studious elegance and kind wit are two of Neusser's most obvious characteristics. Throughout an interview in his Somerville studio both were abundant as we discussed his growing up in Germany, emigration to the United States and the biographical, cultural and technical components to his landscape paintings. The content and form of Neusser's work are complex and sometimes cannot be entirely understood without close inspection, when imagery shifts and surfaces vary from thickly painted to barely glazed to partially scraped off or destroyed by tools. In many of the paintings there is an atmospheric yearning; across all of them is a sense that Neusser is using a particular genre for intentions greater than comforting reproduction.

Wilhelm Neusser, Photo: Studio

JIM: You and I have spoken a few times at length, but our conversations have tended to be about art and art history. I know you're from Germany, that you focus on landscape painting and not much more, though I admit to making guesses about you based on your work. Could we start this conversation from the beginning? I'd like to know something about where you're from

WILHELM: I grew up in a conservative, Catholic middle-class family outside of Cologne, Germany. My mother's and father's families came from an agricultural background. My father's father was a farmer and a hunter; and even though my father became a lawyer, he kept very close ties to the landscape surrounding us. In our house we had paintings on the wall that were decorative, like a hunting dog carrying a pheasant, ducks on a little pond…. But there was also a painting by my grandmother of the farm where my dad had grown up before all the land around it went down to the coal mining industry. That painting was important because of who painted it, of course, but also because it was a doorway to a better time – a doorway that now seemed closed. So the visuals that I grew up with were very much related to this family environment, not intellectual objects to look at and think about or discuss.

Untitled/Landscape (#1531), 2015, Oil on linen, 24" x 32", Private collection, MA, Photo: Studio

As a teenager I got interested in painting as something I could do with my hands. Living on the outskirts of Cologne, I could go to town where there was contemporary art. I mean this was, and still is, the town of Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and Martin Kippenberger, and of the amazing Ludwig Collection. Step by step they informed my own painting experiments of the time. Eventually I went to art school in Karlsruhe, at the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste, in the southwestern part of Germany, and then I moved back to Cologne where I worked for an auction house as an art handler. I was a driver between Berlin and Paris, and it was a really interesting thing because, after four years of art school where I was thinking about my own work, I got a completely different angle on the art world where objects were a commodity. Also, holding all the artwork in my hands, seeing it close up, was a great training for my eye.

JIM: Did the art you had grown up with and the art you encountered in the rest of the world set up any kind of tension?

WILHELM: Not so much. It wasn't as though I would go to Cologne and think, whoa, these contemporaries are extremely radical and that's the way I want to go. I didn't think, the art in my parents' house is super-conservative, boring and dusty. It's my nature to see things next to each other and not make an either/or decision. Is that unusual?

One artist I spent a lot of time looking at was Richter. He/s a painter who throughout his work analyzes the boundaries of painting, but at the same time he's very deeply rooted in a bourgeois German view of the world. That's what makes him so interesting and maybe even so successful. Sometimes he paints the most boring things like a bunch of flowers, a landscape, a few apples that aren't super-spectacular. But across his work he has consistency and an ability to touch on many different fields and thoroughly analyze them. Yeah, he explores as though he's walking down a hallway, entering one room of painterly adventure after another and making careful decisions about what makes a work of art good.

JIM: Something I've asked myself while looking at your paintings is whether the history and appearance of the German landscape that I see in them are actually there. Am I reading too much of what I know about you into your work?

WILHELM: That's a wonderful question. And if mine is a German landscape then what makes it that? I think some of what I grew up with is coming back more and more now that I've relocated to the U.S., and I wonder if it's part of an adjustment process. What I paint now is a very specific type of landscape – a not necessarily super-attractive land that has been industrialized mostly by coal mining. As I mentioned, this is my family's history. But that whole thing, that history, is only one of three elements that I focus on in my work. There's my biographical landscape, and then there's the historical German landscape, which is not personal but more a play on stereotypes and clichés. (I'm talking about postcards and picture books, about composition and idyllic ideas that go back to the nineteenth century.) The third element I focus on is creating topographies on the canvas – crusts of paint – so that my material itself becomes a landscape. These days I'm aiming for moments when the three ingredients come together and become as tasty as possible.

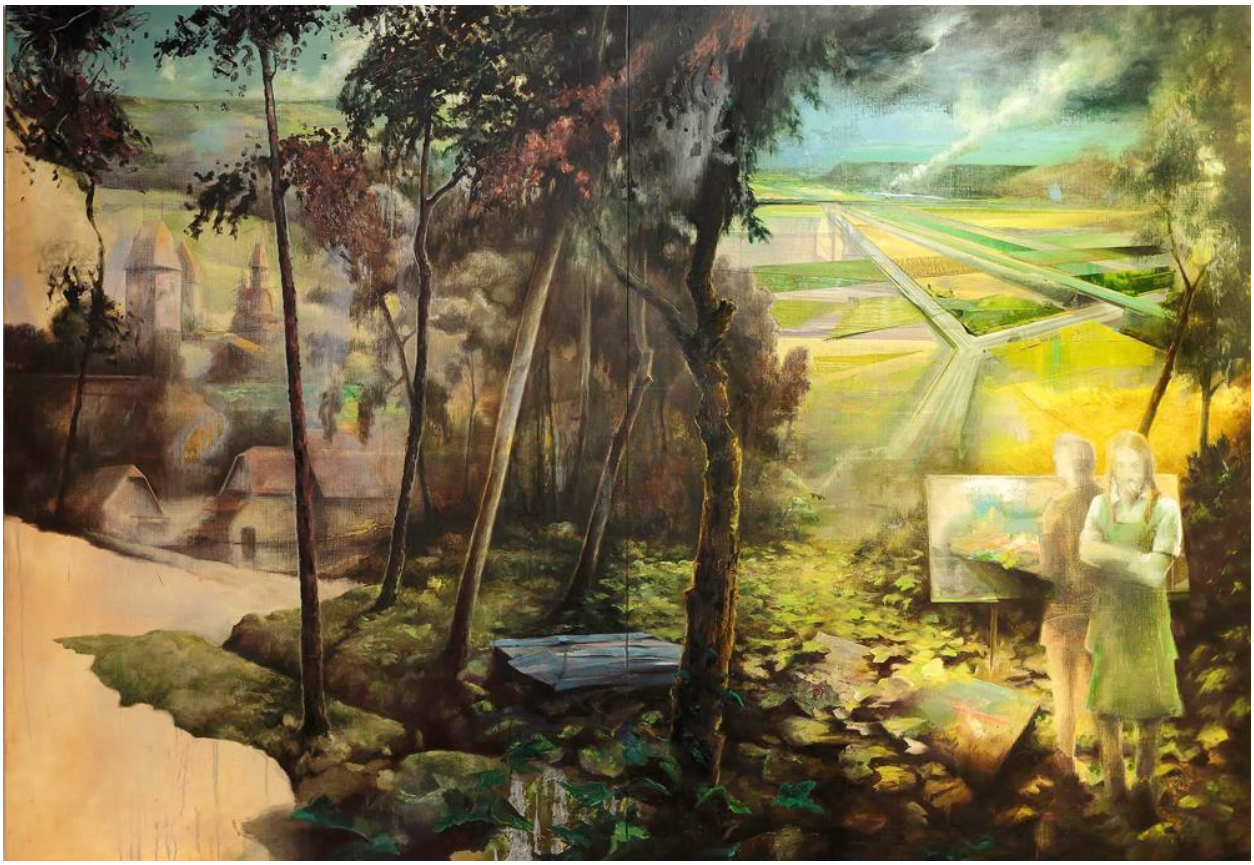
Bright Horizon/Windmills (#1534), 2015, Oil on linen, 12" x 18", Private Collection, MA, Photo: Studio

JIM: Your surfaces are intriguing. In one work you present a series of wind turbines on an open plain, apparently just after a rainstorm. My initial impression of the painting from a distance is of a well-done, straightforward piece of realism; but the impression becomes more complex as I approach it. The paint of the sky becomes textured, as though it was applied with a squeegee, the turbine blades become cut gestures in the sky, and the foreground takes on as much surface texture as Braille. Approaching the painting visually changes it, and sets up a tension between a making a permanent representation of a landscape, which is inherently impermanent, and the painting process itself.

Landscape (#1422), 2014, Oil on linen, 24" x 32", Photo: Studio

WILHELM: Right. In a compositional sense landscape paintings are hermetically sealed and intellectually suggest that places can stay in a certain state forever. A painted notion of paradise can be all yours, sure, but it's also the beginning of the end of the painting and the subject. There's a tradition of disrupting this notion by giving importance to the physical nature – the flesh and crust – of the painting itself. It includes painters like William Turner, Francis Bacon, Anselm Kiefer and Cecily Brown. What interests me is how illusion in a painting can overlap with physical surfaces and materials. In a piece like the one you just mentioned and in others the sky has a gradient of atmospheric distance but then it falls apart. The incongruence creates what I consider a beautiful kind of rip in the initial illusion, a dialectic between completeness and disintegration or between healing and destroying. Maybe there's also the fear that you can't reach any certain state of perfection, which is the actual nature of world.

JIM: And so you present, for instance, a collection of interlocking plains assembled into an appealing, rolling countryside. I want to get comfortable in it, but you don't allow me to have that experience, right? You gray out certain areas, crisscross lines into impossible perspectives and let paint wash down the surface of the canvas in ways that bring attention to the canvas itself. Sometimes your canvas has a beaten, worn-out quality.



Landscape/Pastoral (#1519), 2015, Oil on linen, 66" x 96", Photo: C. Yeager

WILHELM: It's an intended experience. One of the recent new tools in my arsenal is a sanding bit and electric drill. I use them to sand down layers of paint to create structures that are not purposefully productive in terms of composition but purposefully destructive.

JIM: So you'll build up many layers of paint and then sand them down to get a vivisection of what has accumulated. What becomes your goal then, to go back through geologies of paint?

WILHELM: That's a very good question, because there are those moments where I can have a really nice, sleek surface and enjoy it but for some reason it can't be left like that. It's a decision, one I have to make many times, of whether I should add on to what's there and lose it to a certain extent or just leave it as it is. I normally decide to add on to it but then I have to attack it, and so I take out the sander. By doing this, I create series of structures that might be partially covered with the next layer of paint. Hopefully this adds to a kind of canvas topography. What I'm thinking of here is translating an emotional or mental state onto the surface, rather than depicting something I've seen.

JIM: Grinding down through the geology of paint brings to mind your growing up among strip mines.

Lovers (#1601), 2016, Oil on linen, 66" x 96", Photo: C. Yeager

WILHELM: Yes. And that brings us back to the biographical-landscape element of my work. The region I am looking at is west of Cologne. All over there are strip mines. They're huge, constantly growing and slowly moving. What companies do is try to get to certain layers of coal by digging away at one side of the earth and building it back up on the other. As a hole slowly moves onward, little villages are eaten away and people move elsewhere to rebuild. What's left are re-cultivated landscapes that are kind of natural looking but really 100% artificial. So, a mine eats the countryside and its history, then creates a new landscape and new history. We can discuss this politically or psychologically; for the people who live there it's just their reality, and for many families, including my own, it has many effects. For instance, my father became a lawyer based, to a certain extent, on the fact that my grandfather's farm was torn down as part of a mine project.

JIM: It got chewed up and spit out.

WILHELM: In a way, yes. And so the painting that I described early on by my grandmother depicting the farm is her interpretation of a landscape that's not around anymore. When my dad and I would walk through the re-cultivated landscape he'd say, this is where the farm was, where the river with the water mills and the castle and everything else was. That was his childhood memory and his own nostalgia projected onto the landscape. All of that is part of my sense of the biographical landscape. When I work on paintings like this, all of it returns to me.

JIM: Could we step back for a minute and talk about your chosen genre? Why landscape painting?

WILHELM: Yeah, well, it sometimes seems that there's not a whole lot you can do with it anymore. I mean, it has a very long tradition and has been used to a lot of ends. What I like about landscape as a painter is that it allows me to create a mood and atmosphere that resemble what's in nature but that really we project onto it – particularly fear. And when I paint a landscape, a large one, the act of walking across the land and taking it in from different perspectives is exactly what I do in front of the canvas. It's a metaphorical playground with references to hiking, overseeing and maybe gardening the earth.

JIM: My experience of being in a landscape is that the more time I spend in it the more incomprehensible it becomes. Vastness gets magnified and I realize that I'll never fully know what I am standing in because there's just too much to know. It's partly intellectual, but it's also based on the senses: everything heard and seen and felt is fleeting but part of what sustains us.

ICE (#1408), 2014, Oil on linen, 54" x 72", Photo: Studio

WILHELM: Something that fascinates me about a lot of landscape painting is this notion of the idyllic, which suggests there is a place where everything is good, a paradise that is supposed to stay that way. But landscapes are just the opposite. They are in constant movement but what we want is domestication, right? So in art we domesticate with our eye in terms of a composition. We build walls around everything to make sure that our little realms stay the same. And they don't. Here there's dialectic of harmony versus change, which are both realities but sometimes just in our hopes and dreams.

JIM: You just reminded me of paintings from the Hudson River School with their balance between chaos and order.

WILHELM: Yes! What makes them so appealing is that they are unbelievable! You know they can't possibly be true depictions. They're unbelievable reality, statements about something else. That was also a period in which America started redefining itself. It's interesting to think of a painter like Albert Bierstadt, who was part of the great expedition toward the West. He made sketches and took photos, then went back to his New York studio and, you know, put all those parts together on panels into landscapes that had all kinds of glamorous, spiritual greatness but only to a certain extent resembled what he had actually seen. There again, we have an experience of nature and wildlife that was probably scary and somewhat dangerous at the time. However, what he created out of it was something more like an English park…something that has been domesticated by the urban eye.

JIM: I suppose he went through the same process as a lot of artists: figuring out what information to put into his paintings, what to add, what to edit out and why. Bierstadt had his intentions. To jump over to you, could we talk about your decision-making process?

Untitled/Landscape (#1532), 2015, Oil on linen, 24" x 32", Photo: Studio

WILHELM: Right. Well, the other night a friend came to my studio and he was able to convince me that one of my paintings definitely contained enough information. He pointed out different areas where there was a very rich palate of structures, colors and so on. So we got into this discussion about how much information a painting actually needs. It's a tricky thing.

I brought up an analogy to digital image files on our computers. When we zoom into a JPEG file, we quickly experience pixilation… information breakdown, very disappointing. I enjoy high resolution, where I can visually enter into an object's deep tissue and find earlier layers of palimpsests. What I love to find in a painting is a character beyond the first impression. When I go to a museum, I'll stand in front of a painting that has caught my attention and spend a lot of time to kind of stretch it out and move it around in front of my eyes to find those bits and pieces, chunks of information and pixels, that I hadn't seen but that were part of the first big impression. I love to experience that in my own work too, which means I have to paint it in. But then there's this big question of how much pixilation I can put between clear information without losing the entire thing.

JIM: So does that translate into how you build and destroy paint, leave a canvas section blank and let paint run its own course and puddle?

WILHELM: Right, that's what we have. But we keep the two components that we just discussed: reference points to the landscape in the nineteenth-century notion of what a landscape really is, and reference points to it as a painterly, materialistic appearance on a flat surface.

JIM: There's a lot going on in your artistic thought process and it can't all be forethought. Isn't there a point in the decision-making where you say, fuck it, pick up the paintbrush and figure it out?

WILHELM: Oh yes, there is definitely that moment and I consider it one of my big challenges. A lot of what I've talked about is brain-based, but in the end I have to act. I have to paint, maybe slowly, but even then accept that I might wind up having to wash or scrape or sand everything off the canvas. There's no way around that.

JIM: You bring a lot of risk to your own process. Is it ever nerve wracking to put a belt sander to something you've been working on, knowing that it could destroy everything including the canvas?

WILHELM: Yes it is nerve wracking, but my experience is that it's always worth the risk – always. What it comes down to is believing that there's a painting beyond the one I already have, something better. There isn't an endpoint. So it's worth the risk and natural, maybe, to try to push on and transform something.

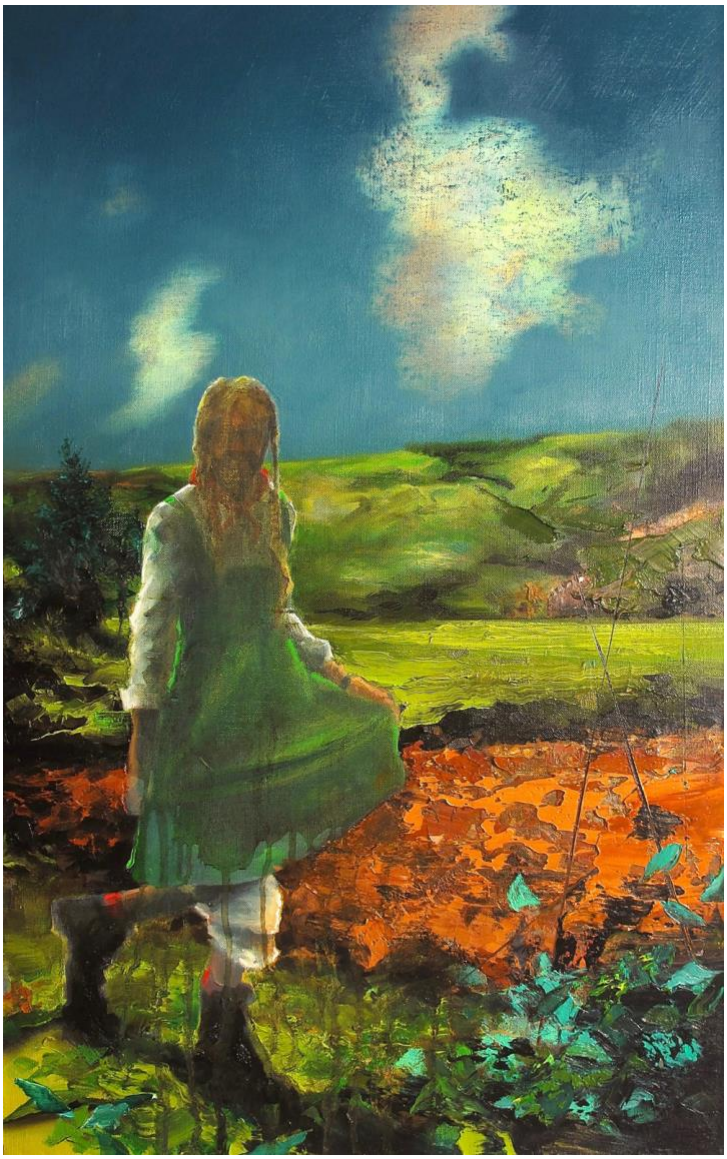
JIM: I don't know that this would qualify as taking a risk, but lately you've been including human figures in your landscapes. And they don't all seem to be present for the same reason. Some, for instance, ignore viewers and others engage them; some are serious and others jocular – or seemingly so. Is their point to add more of a narrative element to your work?

Melancholia (#1602), 2016, Oil on linen, 66" x 96", Photo: C. Yeager

WILHELM: In a way, yes. For a long time I didn't paint any figures into my work. In one of my most recent paintings, though, there's a figure of someone taking a moment to look at something, to be lost in thought in a landscape that is somewhere between a warm, golden sunset and a nuclear catastrophe. So there is melancholy, loneliness and isolation, which can be read at the same time as satisfying solitude or as a scary final minute of living. Meanwhile, in another painting there might be a little artist at his easel, doing the same thing I was doing when I painted him. And then there is, um, the woman/man alter ego in a costume-y dress.

JIM: When I first saw a version of that alter-ego figure, with its blond pigtails and Pipi Longstocking dress, I figured it was a humorous cultural reference. It might still be that, but when I got up close to it I noticed that her face was your own. It then took on a psychological edge.

WILHELM: She or he is semi-inviting. I consider her or him to be kind of a narrator, or a transmitter between us and the landscape. It points out where we are, where the landscape is and how we might be able to get into it. There's a door open now and we can measure the distance between us and the world in front of us.



Promenade (#1522), 2015, Oil on linen, 32" x 20", Photo: Studio

JIM: Before going on to the next topic, I want to say that I respect your privacy and would understand if you'd rather not address it. Last year your father died and I wonder if it has affected your painting, if it has injected a little bit of longing into it.

WILHELM: I think yes. When I was living in Cologne and near my family, I didn't consider either very much. Moving here, I looked back and it was different. Then when my dad became sick and died, there was an emotional impact on looking back. Throughout this interview, when I've talked about the biographical ingredient of my work, I've meant it to mean something with geographical and emotional components to it. There's no way to reconstruct some long-ago time, but incorporating a certain experience that I had and still have is part of my painting now. This isn't about recreating a good old time but about visualizing my own experiences right now.

Living here between MIT and Harvard where everyone's thinking about the next big game-changer in communications, financial services or whatever, where everything's super-fast and super-visionary, I notice that my reaction is wanting to slow down. There's an escapism that draws me away from this future-oriented high-speed world. I feel drawn to certain types of nostalgia even if sometimes I feel bad for it because it's so retro in a negative or all too romantic way. But it's healing and part of why I feel drawn to certain periods of painting. I'm obviously processing leaving behind a certain landscape and area of the world that had a huge influence on me. And this will sound cheesy, but you get to know what home was once you've left it.

Escape (#1605), 2016, Oil on linen, 66" x 96", Private collection, MA, Photo: C. Yeager