

MARLON WOBST

by Nicholas Fox Weber

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Marlon Marlon Wobst does something with the human figure that no one else has ever done before.

In his completely original way, he makes every one of his personages amiable, relaxed, and amusing to behold. Oh of course one could mention the work of several of Wobst's contemporaries where there is a *slight* resemblance of approach in the deliberate playfulness and informality, in the way of declaring "this is a nearly abstract form that resembles a figure, that reiterates the ideas of head and chest and limbs while it is the opposite of a traditional reproduction of a person, of the sort of facsimile of an actual human being in the manner of academic art going back ad infinitum," to certain other artists, many quite famous, at work today. Or, more relevantly, one could note parallels to the pictures of certain modern masters: Nicolas de Staël, Jan Müller, and Milton Avery quickly come to mind. But there is something different going on here. It is as if, with every image, the artist is clearly taking delight. He is palpably amused by what he sees, and so are we. Yet there is also a sense of fleeting time, and occasionally of danger; what is cheerful is also, if not exactly sinister, then emotionally complicated.

Wobst works with three different mediums: oil painting on canvas, ceramic, and felted wool. The latter is an ingenious use of a material that in the hands of a lesser artist would seem decorative, but is in this instance technically remarkable so as to be nuanced and subtle. The colors and exuberant nature of Wobst's all of this recent work bring to mind Pablo Picasso's Dinard paintings of the late 1920s. This is an art of celebration, but also one of mystery. The way that the figures dive, their immersion or partial immersion in the water, suggest that, as in those small pictures by Picasso, there is, along with ambient joy, a sense of threat in this fun-filled universe. It is the same confluence of attitudes that gives such verve to the 1931 jazz song, with its lyrics by Lew Brown set to music by Ray Henderson, entitled "Life is just a Bowl of Cherries." Like that song, Wobst's work invokes feelings of spirited playfulness, but, rather than being saccharine, the leaps and nosedives, whether rendered as pictures on paper or felted wool, or as brightly colored ceramics, are full of nuance. Time is passing fast. There is an atmosphere of great fun, but there is also a powerful sense that the fun is only part of life, not the whole thing, that an inevitable complexity dominates the scene.

Brown's lyrics are subtle. Meant to move quickly, like the delightful characters of Marlon Wobst's art, they have their esprit only as a by-product of struggle:

Life is just a bowl of cherries,
So live and laugh at it all.

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People are queer, they're always crowding,
scrambling and rushing about;
Why don't they stop someday,
Address themselves this way?
Why are we here? Where are we going?
It's time that we found out.
We're not here to stay;
we're on a short holiday.

As in Wobst's work in both mediums —and he is as daring inventive in his choices of materials as he is in his subject matter— there is a sense of irony, an intelligence that, along with its pure entertainment value, is the reason this work is so riveting. It is exciting to see art so fresh. And in a world as fraught as ours is, it is marvelous to encounter a diversion of such profundity.

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