Christof Mascher: Memory Palace

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Christof Mascher’s paintings dramatise the act of remembering a place. Dramatised, because the works teem with architectural paraphernalia that implies the shorthand place-making of amateur stagecraft, in which a banister signifies a whole stately home. Remembering, because Mascher’s mark making continually trips itself up, thinning into washes or dripping into vagueness, seeming to replicate memory’s inconsistencies and failures. The slippages of memory become literal slippages on the painting’s surface. In many of the artist’s works, the scene is composed of a constellation of foci against washes of quasi-abstract colour: not a view, but a collection of seemingly specific and self-contained viewpoints sharing a single painted space.

In Loom (all works 2015), the specific runs up against the general, as the hard edge of a spire or gable – ostensibly particular enough to be identified by the artist as an unnamed geographical location – meets a background that rushes with paint applied in loose swatches. In the top right corner, the simple track that encircles the small village in the centre breaks the apparent line of the horizon and continues to snake away into the night sky, trailing off into dense black smudges of paint, like redactions, ‘blackouts’ in a painted map of memory. The significant track or path that loops around or through a landscape recurs in Mascher’s recent paintings, as though each work is an illustrated point on a map linked by a single serpentine route, like a pilgrim trail or board game. The path – never straight, and often, as in Loom and the self-explanatory Street Turns River, deceptive, even illusory – implies a physical movement through natural space that parallels a mental meandering much like the act of remembering itself: recursive, repetitive, even devious. The street may give way beneath one’s feet at any moment.

Christof Mascher, Loom, 2015. Acrylic, pigment crayon, oil, uv-varnish on board, 100 x 130 cm / 39 x 51 inches. Courtesy the artist and Josh Lilley, London.

What spires, what farms are these? Since Mascher’s places are not shown as seen, but as remembered, their details are, naturally, fudged. Each painting’s contents appear as stacked signifiers whose origin is, at least in part, cultural. The architecture here is archetypal: that of the
horror film house, within whose narrow confines the terror of the narrative is to take place, and whose particular structure, in a sense, is the narrative. Buildings in Mascher’s paintings can recall by turns the gothic silhouette of the Bates Motel in Hitchcock’s Psycho (1960), Knowby’s rustic, almost homely cabin in the woods in The Evil Dead (1981), or the suburban blandness of 1428 Elm Street in A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984). Even Mascher’s titles – House of Many Windows, Loom, Day of the Tentacle – seem drawn from the archives of the video nasty. The latter, to be clear, is based upon a 1993 video game – yet the principle holds, because architecture acts therein, as in the paintings, as placeholder. This flattening of narrative information (a gable, banister, tree, not this particular one) is a trope of the fairy tale – undoubtedly the forerunner of the horror film – an association hard to miss in a painting like Requiem for a Wolf. Theorists of the fairy tale tradition have often remarked upon its propensity for narrative speed, in which descriptive language is kept to a minimum, allowing both for open imaginative engagement and each teller’s individual improvisations on the tale. Mascher’s ink on paper painting – its scale and medium drawing associations with the illustrated page or illuminated manuscript, implying an absent and parallel text – represents a kind of narrative inventory, a list of ingredients from which a teller might concoct a story. Wolf, pedestal, trees, pavilion, balcony, stars: each element is literally flattened, presented without depth, signs awaiting activation. Note, too, that Mascher’s signs occupy a distinctly nineteenth-century taxonomy of street furniture and architectural motifs – the components of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s urban context, and the characteristic signifiers of the settings for any number of their tales, both in their time and in their afterlife in cinematic and televisual retellings. Mascher’s motifs begin, in would appear, in literary form, as fundamental signifiers for the pieces of a story, especially one read or heard as a child. If the language of memory is Mascher’s primary mode of expression, allusions to childhood – seen both in these narrative placeholders and the repeated appearance of that quintessential childhood companion, the dinosaur – would have to be its most poignant reference.

Christof Mascher, House of Many Windows, 2015. Indian ink, pencil, acrylic, oil, uv-varnish on board, 28 x 41 cm/11 x 16 inches. Courtesy the artist and Josh Lilley, London.

Mascher’s works on paper enact most cogently the artist’s presentation of remembered space as palimpsest. Washes of ink, applied in thin veils of colour, allow each work to retain the history of its making as visible presence in the finished work. In works like Douglas fir, spectral architectural forms – sheds, perhaps – hover on top of a ground in which previous linear structures retain their shapes, if dimly. That Mascher’s earliest artistic experiences were in the graffiti subculture of
northern Germany is surely of relevance to works such as this. A tag on a train or wall knowingly enters into a relationship with a likeminded network whose members must transform, efface or reinterpret the gesture in order to keep it in play. Graffiti of this kind (its classical period, so to speak, notably before its translation into street art) is activated only by its own ephemerality, and only exists as a palimpsest of attempts to personalise public space. A much-graffitied train, ancient wall gouged with carved initials, or notice board covered in peeling and overlapping posters, are manifestations of a place’s public memory. Mascher’s paintings, then, exist both as images of the way a place is remembered and the way a place remembers itself. In both instances, the past stays visible beneath the skein of the present. Places are experienced both in immediate sensory terms and as admixtures of remembrance, desire and distraction.

![Image](image.jpg)

Christof Mascher, Requiem For a Wolf, 2015. Ink on paper framed, 23 x 17 cm / 9 x 7 inches. Courtesy the artist and Josh Lilley, London.

Apertures – windows, doorways, and arches especially – recur, even dominate, within Mascher’s work. In *House of Many Windows*, the house of the title is hardly visible. Instead, mullioned, arched and dormer windows float upon a field of brown paint that is alternately dense and so thin the bristles of the brush leave scuffed marks like the wagging of a tail. Look inside one of these windows (the association of peeling back the paper door of an advent calendar is irresistible) and fragments of other scenes are revealed: streetlamps, stairways, fences. In this work, Mascher appears to allude to the post-Alberti practice in Western painting of conceiving of the picture as a window from which the painting’s scene is viewed. Each window, then, acts like a painting, hung salon-style, as in a seventeenth-century scene of cognoscenti discussing works of art within a cavernous interior space. In such images, each painting acts as a portal into a discrete world, activated by a standardised visual rhetoric developed during the fifteenth century.
This rhetoric of linear perspective, emboldened by the transcription of architectural forms into Christian narrative painting, enabled time as well as space to become an animating factor in the telling of stories. Plunging characters into deep space allowed for a natural human instinct—things happening at a distance appear to be unfolding in a different time zone—to activate more complex narratives. The rhetoric survives in Mascher’s paintings, but in worn-out or dilapidated form. Linear perspective allowed painted narratives to be more convincing—that is, to lie more successfully—thanks to the role of classical architecture and its web of lines; in Mascher’s piecemeal approach, that language survives only as fragments. Rhetoric, convincingly and lucidly expressed, has devolved into a broken dialect. The narrative—the lie—continually fails to convince, perpetually deferring its own resolution, in a performance of forgetful tale telling, like a dream haltingly related to a puzzled lover over the breakfast table. Though dependent upon the component parts of the narrative tradition in Western painting, Mascher’s works regard them sceptically and hold them, quizzically, at arm’s length. Inspect one of the artist’s buildings closely—try to construct it, within one’s head, as a built environment—and it collapses in on itself like a sandcastle.

Mascher’s paintings call to mind, repeatedly, the memory palaces of classical antiquity, memory aid visualisations of three-dimensional spaces in which the information to be remembered was placed. Moving through these spaces virtually during deep concentration, one would see, as though in a first-person video game, the data to be remembered: the declension of a foreign verb as sequential rooms in a building, for instance, or the names of one’s colleagues in a new workplace as objects placed in various locations in an imagined interior. Mascher’s foci—the huts, banisters, tunnels and cypresses in North Bend, for example—become loci, points in a memory palace sequence that would signify a list of data to be memorised. This painting in particular, with its mountainous landscape seen from an elevated viewpoint and centralised against an empty pale ground, seems to demand the presence of an explication text to fill in its visual blanks. If Mascher’s paintings dramatise the act of remembrance, then, their strategy is that of the memory palace; by eliding...
textual exegesis the loci become detached and flattened, signifiers unmoored from specificities into an erratic world of fluid narratives, dead ends and stubborn accretions of matter.

In Mascher’s large-scale painting *Walden*, a landscape paradoxically flat, and simultaneously deep, fills the painted surface almost to the brim. Clusters of small buildings abut jagged escarpments; monoliths arranged in neat rows meet tilled fields; a huge purple statue of a man holding a squirrel rears up within an agricultural setting. Mascher’s painting confounds the willed consistencies of landscape painting – which, after all, exists to remake the world as a picture, to elide both disagreeable content and the unreliability of human vision – and enacts instead a way of looking at and thinking about landscape as filtered through a yearning, restlessly self-aware contemporary consciousness. Eschewing the weary citations of postmodernist place making, Mascher returns the landscape to itself. Here, those slippages – the moments when memory fails, as in the painting’s middle ground, a pattern of painted swipes, a brush hair’s breadth away from abstraction – embody something approaching a Romantic fervour. The bits and pieces – gables, pitched roofs, cypresses, white picket fences and aqueducts – of the culturally mediated landscape are sewn together by an energetic, playful, regretful, hopeful rush of amnesiac optimism.

Ben Street is a freelance art historian, lecturer and writer based in London. He lectures on contemporary art for Sotheby’s Institute of Art, Tate and Christie’s Education, and on old master painting for The National Gallery and Dulwich Picture Gallery. His writing has been published internationally, most recently in museum catalogues for Lucian Freud and Joseph Cornell, as well as in Phaidon’s 2015 publication *Body of Art*. He is the co-writer and presenter of *Duchamp’s Urinal* for BBC Radio 4, a contributing writer for *Art Review* and a contemporary art consultant for The Art Fund.