

FÖHR, GERMANY/SYLT, GERMANY

Thomas Wrede

MUSEUM KUNST DER WESTKÜSTE/
KUNST:RAUM SYLT QUELLE

All that can be seen for miles is an undefined milky white surface. Amid a welter of footprints, two tiny figures meander toward the horizon. *Im Nebel* (In the Fog), 2004, is part of Thomas Wrede's series "Am Meer" (Seascapes), 2001–2007—images that show people seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Sometimes we see these figures strolling by the waterside or just standing in the shallow waters of the river Watt. Sometimes the people are barely visible between the tufts of grass poking out of the dunes, as in *Dünengras mit Sitzenden* (Marram Grass with People Sitting in the Sand), 2005; sometimes they are absent, as in *Strandkörbe II* (Roofed Wicker Beach Chairs II), 2005, in which we see only covered wicker loungers scattered about a beach like building blocks.

Wrede's photographs are all about the boundaries that define artificiality and the difficulty of pinning down the real. While his "Seascapes" are expansive and characterized by panoramic views, his series "Real Landscapes," 2005–, concentrates on close-ups. These pictures draw their power from an extreme depth of focus. Every detail can be made out—and this proves confusing. What on first glance look like distant cars or settlements in the desert turns out to be models in a heap of sand. Looking more closely, you can recognize fingerprints and other details that allow you to get a sense of the proportions.

Both series were shot in North Frisia, many on the more-than-half-mile-wide beach of Amrum. Presented under the exhibition title "Anywhere" on the neighboring North Frisian Islands of Föhr (Museum Kunst der Westküste) and Sylt (Kunst:Raum Sylt Quelle), these photographs also play with the idea of the islands as objects of longing. At the Kunst:Raum Sylt Quelle, the two new series have been hung beside older ones, including "Magic Worlds," 1998—photographs of fun scenes in amusement parks—and "Domestic Landscapes," 2000–2001, which focuses on the strange world of living room wallpaper. Reality and artifice collide so violently in these works that you find yourself studying every detail in disbelief—but nothing here has been staged; it is only the framing that unmasks a world filled with clichéd desire.

Whereas displaying these photographs on Sylt, Germany's most popular vacation island, creates a spatial connection to the landscape of the dunes, the Wolk's presentation in the museum on Föhr puts them in a context of historical seascapes. The Museum Kunst der Westküste is also exhibiting part of its own collection of paintings and graphic works from the period 1830–1930. These pictures tell of life along the North Sea coast from Norway to Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands: fishermen at work, sublime landscapes, forbidding natural elements. Beauty and threat lie close together in Wrede's work, too, but without real-life dangers such as storms or high seas. It is only the mood, the huge emptiness or ice-cold severity, that takes on psychodramatic force in the infinite isolation of "Seascapes" and "Real Landscapes." While the compositions of the historical paintings keep pointing to the

insignificance of human beings in the face of natural forces, the grandeur and sense of threat in Wrede's work are staged solely in the viewer's head. This juxtaposition makes clear how much our perception of the maritime world has shifted. The sea is no longer so much a place in relation to which people live and work; rather, it is a backdrop for our longings and our fears. Wrede's photographs show the world as an interplay between microcosm and macrocosm. Every sandy dune contains the desert, every pebble is an island—and what we are seeing may well be an illusion. But it is also a reality that can be found in every detail, and so, by playing with proportions, Wrede is also laying claim to a grain of truth.

—Sabine B. Vogel

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.



Thomas Wrede, *Strandhotel* (Beach Hotel), 2008, color photograph, 55 1/8 x 70 1/8". From the series "Real Landscapes," 2005–.