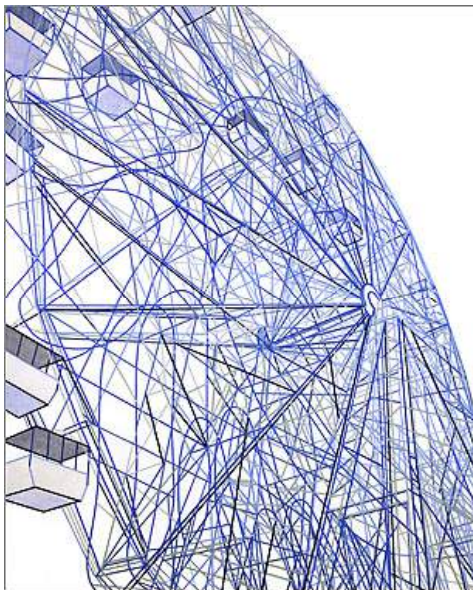


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Plausible Reveries

By Matt Fisher
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William Steiger, *Wonderwheel 04*, 2006 60 x 48

In Mr. DeMarkis's sixth grade class, a few of us managed to spend lots of time doodling. Usually the subject matter included some combination of spaceships, Arnold Swarzenegger, and roller coasters. Coasters were the specialty, zooming, looping and twisting in impossible configurations, sometimes requiring rocket-enabled cars or leaps across starry chasms. Sure, we knew that the trestles and struts we improvised probably wouldn't support a real coaster's weight, but they were close enough for our needs. We were collaborating on a group fantasy, constructed with real-ish objects intended as plausible actors in an open-ended story.

I'm reminded of those drawings the more time I spend with **William Steiger's** paintings, which are built out of similar reveries. His work, of

course, is produced with a level of focus, clarity and skill far beyond the casual doodles we were cranking out, but there is something similar in the gee-whiz adoration of mechanically complicated contraptions, and moreover in the way the paintings show more-or-less plausible objects that sometimes belie their own origin in an objective world of fact.

Take for example, 2011's *Blue Wonderwheel*, the latest in an ongoing series of renderings of Deno's Wonder Wheel in Coney Island, and part of Steiger's show *Manufactory* at **Margaret Thatcher Projects**. At first glance, it appears to be a competent, draftlike rendering, but on closer inspection, lines appear to cross in front of each other in wrong

ways, struts entangle, the whole interior support system loses itself in a spiderweb, and the likelihood of this image corresponding to the real-world attraction breaks down. Instead, the painting becomes a kind of contradiction, either a faithful rendering of an incorrectly-remembered object, or (and this is more likely) a self-reflective and somewhat mischievous exercise in which some reveries deflect others, dreams dissolve in midstream, and objects imply both their own selfhood but also leak out into other identities.

In Steiger's world of objects, these kinds of contradictions pop up often. For example, in *Cyclone III* (2011) the tangle and insensibility of the coaster's struts only become evident after a beat or two. In most of his recent aerial paintings of planted fields, the machined regularity of the landscape, smoothed-over features of river arcs and banks, and artificiality of the view are enough to both imply and refute a specific locale. And in paintings of manufactories and farm buildings, the occasional impossibility of the placements of certain windows, gables, or volumes only occurs to you after a few moments.

Steiger paints several kinds of subject matter, usually in ongoing sets: funiculars, train cars, roller coasters, biplanes and zeppelins, tunnels, granaries, railway semaphores, all highly articulated forms that can withstand his rigorous reductions of detail without losing a sense of directness and concision. Steiger chooses to give enough detail, enough referent, but not a bit more. The overall effect is the concentration of emphasis on small pleasures of hue, texture, and composition that are folded into a depiction of otherwise iconic and distanced objects. These paintings reward a bit of patience, opening up to reveal warm subtleties after initial bold and graphic introductions are made.

Over the past several years he has alternated between stripping away and then adding back identifying details and features to his images, oscillating between object and scenario in a way that suggests a slowly evolving narrative anchored by specific-yet-ambiguous locales and memories. Recently, bits of background—mountain peaks, colors in the sky, objects toward the horizon—have been surfacing. Throughout, his subjects remain something more than visual signposts, yet other than realistically depicted landscapes.

Steiger is often described as a kind of neo-Precisionist—a successor to the lineage of Sheeler and Demuth 70 years on. Certainly, affinities with that school exist, but just as much with other movements. For Steiger is evidently too aware of too many things that fall outside the Precisionist program: the ongoing history of procedural abstraction, the timeless currency of sharp design, and most of all the slipperiness of memory. The persistence of his fascination anchors these paintings: both bold and subtle, these works manage to wink both at an age of technological optimism and at the romantic nostalgia attending its decline.