

Fields and folds in the shapeshifting work of ReschWilleit
by Dominic Eichler

I am invited to visit collaborative duo ReschWilleit's studio housed in a 1950s office building veiled in scaffolding in a semi-industrial neighborhood in northwest Berlin. The artists both in their late 20s are present, and so too are beckoning stacks of their recent co-authored works on canvas leaning against the walls. A full scale refurbishment of the building inside and out is underway and assorted power tools are laying about. There are markings on the walls. Demolition and dust lend the scenario a forlorn air—like a scene in a science fiction film set after some major global economic or ecological collapse. In this imaginary film, two artists are secretly making abstract paintings redolent of mid-20th century modernism, and holding a clandestine meeting with an art writer *as if nothing has happened*.

ReschWilleit comprises Manuel Resch (b. 1997) and Maximilian Maria Willeit (b. 1996). Both artists were born in Bolzano, grew up near each other in the South Tyrolean countryside, bonded as teenage graffiti artists, then attended art school. Since 2016, they have made art as two people and one artist—ReschWilleit. Upon entering their soon to be relinquished un-studio-like studio, a role reversal occurs. The two autonomous bodies that make up ReschWilleit stand meters apart, and form a triangle with me sitting between them on the only little wooden chair like a suspect. They flash smiles in conspiratorial unison. “The builders said we could still stay for a bit provided the tradespeople on site have unrestricted freedom to work,” says one of them, explaining the novel situation for them both.

I soon realize they have practiced the art of taking turns speaking for their joint endeavor. This has the side-effect of building micro-pauses into our conversation as they politely hold metaphorical doors open for each other. *After you. No, please, after you.* I have never met them before, so impressions come thick and fast. I look sideways at a work *Untitled*, 2024, to divert their attention. The work has an aurora-like quality with CYMK blushes flashing and flitting across the surface like shadows on spiritualist photography. We all leave traces, make marks. I also make out stitched triangulated lines like breaking down and I feel conscious of peering into the artistic beginnings of their future practise.

I wonder why they work collaboratively—knowing that this form can be difficult and remains uncommon. Writing to me later in an email about their collaboration, they explained:

*We see the potential to outgrow our identities for the sake of our art as positive. It is important for us to define our position—ReschWilleit—through our backgrounds and the deep exchange we've had since childhood. But also through our experiences as Italians who studied abroad in Germany and are now returning to Italy. From an administrative perspective, or where language permits, one might call it a “brand.” For now, we frame it as a duo or collective—though we're still uncertain about the latter term. This idea of transcending our individual identities isn't about neglecting or erasing them, but about expanding into something greater.**

Through constant conscious interaction, having to come to agreement about what to make, their joined-at-the-hip existence (as far as art is concerned) becomes something of a relational chain reaction. Following their own agreed logic, to date their work includes gaming inspired paintings of fragmentary digital fields; printed and folded compositions; and fluid, soft-hued and embroidered abstraction on linen. Each of these groups of works (all of which are *untitled*) result from their artistic research into images and image production techniques. This may or may not include any actual painted marks despite how gestural their work appears on first sight.

Unless we revert to inventory numbers, the *untitled*-ness of their work poses a challenge here. Picking out a work for this essay poses the same difficulty as describing a cloud to a friend in a stormy sky, even if you are laying side-by-side in the grass looking up. ReschWilleit's work reminds me of things like the deep space telescope, NASA renderings, staring at flames, seismic readings, lie detectors, lasers overhead at a club, and the ancient grain of exotic rock formations. But then again, they also recall the mess found on discarded paper next to a malfunctioning office printer and lots more. I suppose one could mention here heroic expressionistic paintings from the past too, but their work is not strictly referential by nature. Taken as a whole, their work generates vast imaginations of

abstract pictorial space. Almost infinite amounts. This undefined room to be, draws me in.

A central modality in their work is an overarching interest in *translation between states and things*. This has to do with where they grew up, how they now work and their fascination with techniques, materials and production processes. For some works, ReschWilleit take “fragments” of 3D-mesh files to generate dissipating passages of machined embroidery across linen. At the moment, the duo outsource the machining of the embroidery to a firm with a factory in the People’s Republic of China, adding another layer of translation to the fabric of the works.

Many of their works also involve the idea of taking one kind of information and support or carrier and using it to generate another form, on another support. “Painting” with partial or interrupted renderings of digital image files onto a canvas, for instance, via a choreographed and recalibrated (mis)use of a high-tech printer. (I asked to see documentation of the printer they use with its intense flashing green laser light and ominous warning signs. It is unsettling to view a machine hazardous to our precious sense of sight used for generating images.) By *misuse*, I imagine the horror of the engineers who labored for generations to make their printers render uncannily accurate high-resolution images when watching ReschWilleit use them to make smeared, truncated, tanked marks on linen. Everywhere we all face the decision to either follow the instruction manual or not. Artists and disobedience (on both grand and small symbolic scales) have a long decisive history.

Perhaps it is possible to remain in the flow of process and revelation without stopping to fix anything down too firmly just yet. I looked instead at a jpeg of *Untitled* (2020), a large immersive oil on canvas work depicting two fantasy robotic figures on a chequer board gaming landscape. It features high-keyed electric pink and purple, and is complete with white sparkle highlights typical of urban graffiti. More recently, as we have seen, figures and the figurative have marched off from ReschWilleit’s painted fields. For now, the artists have veered more and more towards soft, attractive, atmospheric, warped abstraction. Although it is wrong to suggest a linear progression and more accurate to think of a field and enfolding, and sometimes folding back on itself.

Take, for instance, several works, all *Untitled* (2019), satisfying compositions using created “sublimation prints” on fabric adhered to canvas. In these (also all *Untitled*) high-art, borderline sculptural reliefs, the artist’s graffiti and gaming backgrounds are also more apparent. To make the works, ReschWilleit subject digital prints to physical manipulations and application of additional passages of paint sometimes in their studio courtyard because of the right mess involved. These and most of their work draws on an extensive archive of digital images, of which they offered just a glimpse. Clicking through their samples revealed android dreams, pixelated fragments, techno-scapes and visual shards—the stuttering of a communal digital subconscious. Theirs is a virtual but generative world that has taken leave of bearing slavish semblance to our life and taken on one of its own.

During our interactions, I suggested to the artists that “they must win every argument, or have the upper-hand, as it is always two against one.” Gaming, of course, biases the value attached to competition, although you can not win unless someone plays along. Are points or credits being scored somewhere on an interface we can not access? Relating gaming to their approach, they wrote:

Approaching art production through this mode of thinking feels natural to us. We grew up with video games as a part of daily life—not only as a pastime but also as a medium for commenting on reality. Since games like Grand Theft Auto critiques and satirizes real life, it has felt like a genuine feedback loop is occurring. In this feedback loop, digital worlds impact society and daily life, and vice versa. Game designers always compose games from a specific set of factors within a particular setting. Like different ecological spheres, they generate their own entropy. Over the past few years, creating frameworks that foster potential has become important to us. Our work has developed from translating digitally rendered images onto canvas to exploring how the “lore” of a subject transition between digital and physical worlds. Our approach has now developed into creating a painting system that functions like a closed ecology. We embed information into the canvas material by curating processes that blend digital and physical elements in unpredictable ways. [...] Everything bleeds into everything. Just as we change a video game and repurpose tools, we approach painting. The basis is language that goes beyond its own code through interconnected modifications. We think our paintings are from this potential, like playing a game. Each canvas is like a data carrier, the end of a play through, a screenshot of the now.

This smooth talk is not unlike like how *Mensch-Machine* band Kraftwerk imagined themselves in the early 1970s. And ReschWilleit's own experimentation with imaging tech has a similar fascination with the creative potential of using arm's-length tools. We can therefore also see ReschWilleit's most recent work within a tradition of machine-generated art. Think from Jean Tinguely's various drawing machines to the Avantgarde experiments of lesser-known figures such as Vera Molnár (1924—2023) whose work was included in the seminal exhibition 'Cybernetic Serendipity' at the ICA, London 1968, to Edward Ihnatowicz's robotic computer controlled work *The Senster* (1969-1970).

Conversing with ReschWilleit—through emails and download links, in an odd zoom call where my head looked distorted by a lens and sandwiched between theirs, or on the telephone to one speaking for two—I get the impression that any attempt at pinning down a neat definition of what they do is going to meet with various degrees of evasion. (On the Zoom call, one half uses a Pacific island sandy beach backdrop to obscure private context.) There are always more possible extrapolations, diversions, other hyperlinks to follow, rich discursive veins to reconsider. Whether that be from Cady Noland's *Towards a Metalanguage of Evil* (1992) to last year's reiteration of curator Jeffrey Deitch's group exhibition *Post Human* (also in 1992), material about which the artists shared in our exchange. At one point, it is not even clear if their work is painting or not, or if "ambivalence" is an appropriate term for their mindset. Accruing a label seems to be a big problem, although the world is full of them.

Take, for instance, although much of their work looks like a variant of abstraction, they insist they are not "all about abstraction" as such but rather, the self-imposed challenge of picturing code. As precedent for their experimental mindset they point to Arte Povera and Italian maverick Mario Schifano (1934-1998). Schifano shifted his style an approach throughout his life, his diverse work sometimes synthesizing the crosscurrents between high art and consumer capitalist life. For him painting was "a form of wandering"*. The need for an analogous complex visual response to our own algorithm-driven existence seems evident.

Back in the mid-1990s when getting online was a comically noisy affair, and around the time ReschWilleit entered this world, I was hanging out with cyber-feminist and their hacker friends. I also went to Catherine David's *documenta 10* (1997), which featured a giant hall for offline computers heralding the birth of internet art and communities. For many back then, anything resembling easel painting seemed like a reactionary cadaver. No one expected that art would look so retro decades into the future, people spoke optimistically about digital freedoms, flat hierarchies, gender liberation, communities and sharing. This was, of course, way before most actual people and everything else got online to behave ironically, as people do when they suppose no one is watching. Post-internet art already has an art history. I back away from the brink and don't mention contemporary vibe killers like "gamergate" or hate-drunk right-wing TikTokers. We all know that real life can get out-there. Take, for instance, their solo exhibition at BPA, Cologne in 2021. There an installation of intense gestural gaming paintings showed their backs, as well as their fronts. Integrated was "press release" composed of two (un)helpful appropriated newspaper articles: "Nintendo and the Challenges of Life" and "There's No Right Way to Dress Your Baby". We might inhabit a chaotic simulation, but if so, it is all we've got.

Against this contested and congested cultural digital background noise and challenges to the coagulation of intentionality and meaning, ReschWilleit's energetic and colorful work exudes a productive optimism about art making. To cast off the specter of digital doomsday-ism, one of them, suggests exploring a contemporary continuum of open-ended possibility between "cyberpunks and solarpunks" without having to be a starry-eyed evangelist for either. An artist's creative, exploratory use of tech (such as theirs) then might be a way of eschewing a sense of powerlessness. There is an acceptance here that while technology, the post-internet condition, and digital culture amplify and morph not just the best and worst in us, as it does so, there is an agency in artistic reflection and response.

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Weeks later, ReschWilleit calls me on speaker phone. They are in a car on an autobahn leaving Berlin behind with all their works in tow. They are heading south to Verona where they have built themselves a new studio in a barn on the edge of town. Just what will happen there is something that the future

will reveal in time. To mark this personal and artistic turning point, they have produced a new edition *Untitled* (2025). This sensual work comprises one hundred sheets of paper, each one uniquely creased before being printed. The folds in the paper generate some unpredictability in the printing process, some pre-programmed uniqueness that only makes itself known through the act of translation of data into the physical world. Each print features what looks like a swarm of self-replicating spheres, producing an atmospheric ballooning cloud of soft magenta and blue tones against white, suspended in a state between dissolving and becoming.

** all quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from conversations between ReschWilleit and the author in March 2025. / The notion of "painting as wandering" is from the curatorial statement accompanying the recent exhibition Mario Schifano: The Rise of the '60s — The Robert Olnick Pavilion, Magazzino Italian Art, Cold Spring, New York September 14, 2023 - January 7, 2024.*