

Hence

Something seen otherwise than by ordinary sight¹

Laura Wertheim Joseph

In this cycle of egg tempera paintings on wood panel, Michon Weeks engages with late medieval liturgical artwork, finding an object within a historical source that captures her attention, and isolating it as the basis for her own work. The paintings that result from this process of decoding and recoding take up an idea or question related to their initial sources but bear little *visual* resemblance. Weeks does not seek ordinary likeness.

When I visited Weeks to see this body of work, she didn't immediately explain her process or thinking but invited my questions. Although these paintings compelled me to hold back from identifying them, I saw kinship with the work of twentieth-century metaphysical painter Giorgio de Chirico, who engaged visual traditions of the Italian Renaissance to strange and philosophical ends. Isolated objects and figures, ambiguous spaces and architectural features, jarring or incongruous perspectives, a stage-like quality, simplicity of forms, and a sense of containment are hallmarks of de Chirico's evident in this body of Weeks' work. In *Entry*, a stone wall recedes into a murky-colored, dimensionless space at a puzzling angle. Weeks painted the side of the wall that appears closest to the viewer directly along the left edge of the panel, creating a sense of tension between two different realities. Is one the world we see, the other the world we *seek* to know?

These paintings raise questions about the role of uncertainty in our lives, and the role of vision in grappling with that uncertainty. Not all require reference to their source, but contemplating *Hence* [Figure 9] alongside the related panel of Duccio's *Maestà, The Temptation*

¹ Forest Bess as quoted in Jon Yau, "Without Elaboration," *Hyperallergic*, March 18, 2012, <https://hyperallergic.com/48551/without-elaboration/>

of *Christ on the Mountain* [Figure 10], helped me gain deeper understanding and appreciation for Weeks' contemporary icons.

Duccio's *Temptation* depicts the moment Christ refuses the devil's offer of dominion over the world if Christ will worship him. Against a luminous gold-leaf background, towering above vividly rendered hillsides of Siena, Christ points his finger at the devil, embodying the biblical passage from Matthew 4:8–11: "Get thee hence, Satan." Christ's face is modeled with clarity and softness; Satan's is murky and undecipherable. While Duccio's rendering of details exemplifies naturalism characteristic of the Renaissance—Christ's face and drapery, for example—medieval conventions of incongruous scale inform his overall composition. Weeks speaks to her rationale for taking a similar aesthetic approach in her own work: "When it is more realistic spatially, it is more about what it looks like. When it is more schematic, it is more about what it *means*."²



Figure 9: Michon Weeks, *Hence*, 2022, egg tempera on wood panel. Photography: Courtesy of the artist

In isolating an element from this panel, Weeks looks to Christ's finger, which casts off the devil, a specter of uncertainty. But the finger occupies space between Christ and the devil and seems to be an emblem of the human struggle to find clarity in the face of uncertainty, of existing between them. Weeks' translation of the finger into a disembodied rectangular prism that exists in an ambiguous space seems to contemplate this experience of in-betweenness. A background of hatched and layered sea-foam greens and grays contribute to a sense of visual instability and vacillation. The finger-like image spans a raised edge that runs vertically along the left side of the panel, a place where painting becomes a sculptural object, a place where one reality shifts to another. Two of the finger's straight vertical edges come directly to the panel's edges, gesturing towards a hunger and longing for something beyond what we see and know.



Figure 10: Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Maestà, The Temptation of Christ on the Mountain*, 1308-1311, tempera on wood. Photography: Open source

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