



JAN WURM



# Jan Wurm's Social Situations

By **Suzaan Boettger**

Jan Wurm's painting manifests the current international predominance of representational imagery — and specifically of an abstracted figuration — yet her procedure is not that of the presently pervasive "neo-expressionism" but instead partakes in a renewal of realism. The source of her figurative imagery is not the romantic urge to find oneself through a directly introspective and emotionally expressive rendition of the primary symbol of the self — the human form. The focus is less on a private being than on a socially-determined identity: one discovered in interaction with others, in experience, in time.

Wurm's pictures of people participate in the history of social realism, presenting images of a reality that is essentially public, societal — in the "real world." This "social realism" exemplifies not the didactic, overtly politicized American painting of the 1930's nor the propagandistic version perverted and promoted by authoritarian governments everywhere, but that of Gustave Courbet's 1855 demonstration of a "realist allegory" — of that desire to portray representative figures and situations that suggest the actualities of modern life. As connotated by the original French 19th century innovation and explored by as diverse recent artists as painter Jack Beal and sculptor George Segal, Wurm's realism recognizes the potential of mundane, quotidian activities of work or play to reveal basic truths about who we are and how we live together — in relationship or estrangement — in the contemporary period.

The loosely-brushed drawing of these scenes deny photographic origins, (in contrast to its pictorial obviousness as a source of photo-realist paintings), but the figures' casual, unposed postures nevertheless bear an affinity to those in

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candid snapshots. The images suggest impromptu glimpses of families, or freeze frames from anecdotal narratives, with characteristic gestures revealing inner natures.

One poignant domestic memory is an adolescent's departure, in formal attire, for *Prom Night*, as one 1984 painting is simply titled. The composition is vertically bisected with a younger male/female couple posing for an older one. The range of warm-tawny hues of their clothes and of the interior unites the figures with each other and — particularly in regard to the parents — to their environment. Likewise, similar loosely drawn lines around schematically flattened forms describe their shapes and those of the room's decorative patterns. Yet the couples are separated by the predominant blue/black rectangle of the open doorway between them.

Here the allusion to photography is doubled. The camera is depicted, used by the father, who steps across the opening to capture a picture of the younger duo in their fancy grown-up dress. He is attempting, as we do ever-increasingly with the burgeoning of easier/quicker/smaller cameras, to render transient sight into stable materiality, to fix a moment of celebration and transition into a timeless state. Because of the mirror behind the youths, and because one of them (the girl, by her prominence?) presumably is his offspring, and because he is, after all, framing the scene by taking the picture, he will inevitably catch a bit of himself in it. Behind him, the mother's removed position and withdrawn pose evokes her detachment, as if musing to herself on her daughter's imminent passage through the door and into adulthood, and, identifying with her and reflecting on her own passage through time. On the opposite side of the room, the young people have their back to reflection, that inspired by a mirror, and are ready to go out into the dark unknown of the world.



Not only is the camera shown as the vehicle for making a snapshot, but the painting/picture as a whole resembles a snapshot, with the spontaneously caught interactions revealing in a characteristic familial act essential generational differences toward an involvement with experience and time.

The element of time is also central to Wurm's trio of *Circus* paintings (1984-85). Time is explored both within and between the paintings, as figures within each work demonstrate attitudes toward time, but the works' serial nature also elicits the sense of a progression of sequential anecdotes of a narrative. In *Circus #1* we see a family before or between performances, in their trailer dressing room with the red and white big top outside the window. The woman seems to be sewing or mending, performing domestic or back-stage roles only ancillary to her stage identity. By contrast, Wurm shows the two males, father and son, maintaining their single professional and public identity by their similar idle postures, as if they had no off-stage activities or personal individuality.

*Circus #2* captures the adult couple as trapeze artists springing through the air high above ground, about to make contact. This painting displays one of the most pared-down compositions of her work; the reduction to bright, simplified figures against the darker tonal geometric planes of curtain, wall and floor effectively directs attention to the diagonal thrusts of the outstretched limbs. The focused image acts as a visual counterpart to the figures' concentration on the precisely-timed feat, suggesting the experience of moments passing quickly when one is engaged in and absorbed by a demanding activity.

The third *Circus* painting, showing a family standing with their backs to empty theater seats and the little girl turning to look back and point upward, suggests a post-performance scene and thus in a more general sense the passage of time. The children try to extend the experience with their souvenir of a tiger face balloon and their leftover popcorn and soda, and the girl's continuing engrossment toward the arena evokes the childlike inability to let go of fantasy, or to distinguish between performance or art and "real life."

With this subject matter Wurm adopts the circus theme explored to different effects by Georges Seurat in his late 19th century pointillism and by Pablo Picasso in his poignant "Blue Period" (1903-5). Her flattened, expressively outlined forms also merge the expressionistic and realist approaches to figuration, which are both prominently associated with the art of the San Francisco Bay region since World War II. But even more essential is her synthesis at the level of allusion: her narratives evoke both the contemporary and the timeless. The metaphors of interactive identities and of the instrumental importance of the perception of time describe common and shared experiences, generalizing the social situations beyond the local and the present and transcending specifics toward universal realities.