

## ARCHITECTS' EYES. A Playlist for Kris Van Dessel

In one of his songs David Bowie talks about the joy he sees through his architects' eyes. He might have been looking through Kris Van Dessel's eyes, for Kris' recent paintings move on the canvas like animated architecture. There is boundless energy in these canvases, which are visibly the work of an artist who has broken through a creative barrier, shedding all inhibitions of acquired taste to find a visual language that is wholly his own. Although these new paintings are constructed with an architect's eye for detail and are filled with hard-edge shapes, they move on musical rhythms that give them the allure of sublime romantic landscape paintings. What gives these works their tremendous energy is not simply the dynamics of composition, but the collision of sound and vision, which is a cinematic sensation. Hovering between the figurative and abstraction, between organic forms and architectural organisation, Kris' paintings create a chaos that is somehow kept in check by a visual logic. It is the logic of tectonic plates, of planes and forms moving gradually over each other, both overlapping and uncovering each other in a vast surrounding space. If this logic can be called romantic, it is because it brings to mind Caspar David Friedrich's *The Ice Sea (The Wreck of Hope)* (1824), which seems to prefigure the poetry of geometric shapes drifting together and piling up.

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One of the most striking features of Kris' paintings is their sheer beauty. In recent theorising about art, beauty had gone out of fashion. There is much happening in current art, however, to suggest that beauty is ready for a comeback. But the beauty and energy of Kris' paintings are not the easy gratification of a picturesque charm. Rather, there is a restrained energy at work here that is responsible for the remarkable dynamic of his paintings. Kris' new paintings are intricate compositions of irregular geometric shapes, solid beams, flowering clouds and vast empty spaces. These elements interact with each other. The beams stretch from the edge of the canvas to the core of the image like cosmic highways, guiding our eyes to the heart of the composition where all balance is at once shattered because shapes, lines and shards of colour converge at wrong angles, mingling in a flurry of energy that shoots out in all directions. Like refracted light breaking out of a prism these beams cut through the visual space like lasers through a darkened room. They rip and soar, wreaking cosmic havoc on their surroundings. *Atomic* (2008) is an overwhelming example of this cataclysmic style: we can see the light ram through the gaps in the land, as Kate Bush puts it in 'The Dreaming'.

It is fascinating to watch this chaos increase from canvas to canvas. In paintings like *Germinations* (2007) there was still a sense of order to the work, the feeling of a grounded landscape that was besieged and ultimately overtaken by a perverse architecture of geometric shapes run amok. After that, the paintings evolved very fast, losing their steady ground and taking off into new spaces. Through this development, which can be sensed in *(Like a) Sticky Butterfly* (2008), we can almost feel Kris' growing trust (and thrust) in this new direction. When he finally breaks through the surface of the earlier paintings, the effect is startling. Grand canvases like *3-2-1-0 Square Push* (2008) and *Needle* (2008) emerge, shamelessly cosmic vistas which balance narrative elements (the obvious reference to the shapes of cinematic spacecraft) with the abstract play of architectural forms. But there is still an organic element here too, which is reminiscent of the terrestrial landscapes of earlier works. This organic element is the recurrent motif of green, purple or white clouds. In paintings like *Needle*, *Grundig* (2008) or *Poltergeist* (2008) white clouds invade the image like giant tidal waves, shattering everything in sight with primal force. These waves have a calligraphic quality which is strikingly reminiscent of the seascapes in the prints of Hiroshige and other Japanese masters. Thus, the history of art makes its entrance in these paintings, pushing them beyond both their abstract character and their obvious links with popular culture.

One of Kris' finest creations is *3-2-1-0 Square Push*, which has an unexpectedly rich iconography. At first sight, the work obviously brings to mind the spaceships of science-fiction-films, moving into battle with some enemy force. From the left, geometric forms (that look like spacecraft) move towards the right; from the right an ominous tide of giant waves or mushrooming clouds is moving in the opposite direction. Collision is imminent. At the heart of the canvas, however, there is a void. The composition teems with energy because it withholds from us the action it announces. This void, with its sensitive modulations of purple cosmic light, harks back to the romantic tradition, which hovers visibly over all the paintings in this recent series. For example, the stellar battlefield of *3-2-1-0 Square Push* remarkably mirrors a similar empty battlefield of the early French romantic era: Eugène Delacroix' *The Massacre at Chios* (1824). In this famous work, Delacroix shows the aftermath of battle (which in Kris' painting is about to begin). What links both works is the ominous void at their hearts. It was Delacroix' intention with this work to subvert the tradition of history painting, which used large canvases to depict glorious triumphs in noble wars or the memorable deeds of national heroes. Instead of a conquering hero, however, Delacroix puts the muddle of butchery at the heart of his painting, surrounding it with maimed victims and slain soldiers. In a similar way, *3-2-1-0 Square Push* takes its cue from the kitsch culture of science-fiction and depicts it on the grand scale of history painting. It

takes what is generally considered to be pedestrian and gives it splendour.

But there is a sense of playfulness in Kris' work, too, the childlike enthusiasm of discovery. New ways of looking and ever more complex ways of organising the visual plane are constantly being explored. Sometimes the effects are dazzling, as in the extremely baroque structure of *Shift* (2008). Here, the explosion of the other canvases, which rushes out at the spectator, is turned inward. The forms no longer jump out at us, they implode and seem to be sucked into the black hole of the canvas. But this heavily wrought composition is grounded on a most unexpected element in Kris' hard-edge canvases: a drip. From the heart of the canvas a drop of paint seems to have slowly etched its way down. It is like the single thread holding a balloon. Like many of Kris' gestures, this drip entails risk. Sometimes, Kris will splatter paint onto a finished canvas. Since the composition of his works is the result of a long and laborious process involving many overlapping layers of carefully applied paint, this final gesture runs the risk of destroying weeks' worth of work. This risk-taking is another reference to the history of art, echoing the heroics of Abstract Expressionism. Although the drip of *Shift* lacks the energy of Kris' usual splattering of paint, it is very essential to the work. Think away the grounding drip and the canvas loses its balance and becomes airy. The image would deflate. It is through grounding it that the visual dynamic of the work is set in motion. It is the risky introduction of a rather homely drip that accomplishes the image.

Equally surprising is *Inside the Blueberry* (2008), which is lush and luxurious and looks as if it belongs in a black velvet box lit with black-lights to bring out the sickly purples of sexual lust. It is one in a series of paintings that take us deeper into the black hole of *Shift*. These canvases have a brooding animosity reminiscent of Goya's darkest palettes. *Blow Back* (2008) is a landscape which takes its cue from Bosch' *Garden of Delights*. Its dark geography is crowded with the surreal shapes that make up the landscapes not just of Bosch' imaginary worlds, but also those of Patinir and other painters of mountain landscapes in the early Renaissance in the Netherlands. And the brown masses of *Polar Face* (2008) at first seem unbalanced until we look again and see coloured shards cascading down in a blaze of white light, tumbling through the canvas like the debris of some emerald city. This cascade is the pivot of the painting, the eye of the storm which rages through the image. The massive energy and speed of *Polar Face* are suggested by the storm of specks and clouds rushing horizontally through the image. The same destructive speed can be seen in *Grundig* and *Bounce* (2008), once again bringing to mind arctic ice storms or the scorching sand storms on desert planets of science-fiction lore. If the grandeur of *Needle* takes us to futuristic worlds, the darker canvases show the annihilation of these worlds, reducing them to a rocky wasteland that is fundamentally

uninhabitable. The collision that was only imminent in *3-2-1-0 Square Push* has finally occurred.

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All of Kris' paintings are either an aftermath or a rush towards collision. Looking at them, it is always clear that something shattering has either happened or is just about to. This extension in time, the feeling that not all is shown in the images, is the energy that exudes from his canvases. Moreover, it often seems as if the canvases themselves can barely contain this energy. Kris' paintings exist at full throttle thrust. If we read them as science-fiction (a reading they certainly invite), then Houston has a problem: ground control has been blown asunder. Kris' eyes are the voyeurs of this destruction, as beauty. His spacescapes are architectural disaster areas, but like the Romantics, Kris celebrates the vibrant beauty of ruin. He substitutes dynamics for order and revels in the rubble. Visually, he kicks up a right lordly racket, but his supernovas are stars giving birth to movement, not universes in demise. This, then, is the joy of his architects' eyes: the sheer pleasure of bringing forth beauty from chaos. It might be violent, but violence rarely looked so good.

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