

TRANSIT. PAINTING AFTER THE MODERN

Time capsules

Low-tech has a high tolerance. And modern painting is the living proof of it. Many times, its death has been pronounced in order for it to rise again from its ashes. Painting has been murdered and reanimated (and vice versa) with every new generation. In short, the many endings of painting are an indication of its eternal life. The medium is flexible and fluid enough to stand up to the ravages of time and to grasp the ever-changing spirit of the times. That doesn't mean that painting is 'timeless', on the contrary. In translating this ancient medium to an actual relevance and in competing with other and newer media, each painting, whether intentional or not, is a portrait of an era. After all, painting is capturing and freezing. Each painting is a solidified experience and a materialized observation. Therefore, each painting is a time capsule.

Consequently, it is no surprise that art historians used to focus on the painted representation. Pioneers such as Heinrich Wölfflin and Erwin Panofsky applied their art historic methods, formal analysis and iconography respectively, especially to paintings, as they make an interesting subject for historical reflection: they are relatively easy to transport as well as to reproduce. For a long time, the history of art has been a history of painting, even though monumental sculptures, garden and landscape design, architecture, the organisation of inaugurations, festivities and commemorations played a much more vital role in public life.

The intimate, one-to-one relation between a painting and its spectator is a major handicap for the avant-garde. A painting represents private ownership and hence, bourgeoisie. Dadaists and Constructivists rejected it as a symptom of outdated 'passéism'. Born out of 19th century painting, radical modernism has slowly been distancing itself from the canvas in favour of the object or the street: Duchamp, Rodtchenko, Lissitzky. On the other hand, modernist critique often takes the form of classical tableaus: De Chirico, Magritte, Dali. But in

fact, every *contemporary* painting is *historical*, burdened by a history of conflict, but without which it wouldn't exist. Each painting is hereditarily challenged. The pictorial medium is therefore not only mature, but also very complicated.

No way back

Kris Van Dessel (°1967) was born in an age when painting had lost a lot of its appeal. At that time, Pop art, Op art and hyperrealism had already been milked. In the late sixties progressive exhibition makers (the first autonomous curators) started to shift their attention to the process and project strategies of Conceptual art, Arte Povera and Land art. Van Dessel took up painting in the beginning of the 1990's after experimenting with installations. The new figuration and the neo-expressionism of the eighties had just come to a halt. Intimate and rather sober and dark paintings were the ironic answer to the highly exhibitionistic works of the New Wild Ones. Van Dessel was never into their heroic and monumental approach of the New Wild Ones, nor the pictorial response to it. He started painting from a completely different perspective.

In 1993 he made a promising little work, using various techniques. He applied a geometric raster in light blue and black to black-and-white pictures from a German exercise book from the fifties for self-made furniture. The result of the collage is a kind of DIY Constructivism, a heartwarming homage to Modernity. But there is more. Visual arts and exact sciences are not opposites according to Van Dessel. Painting is not merely an ejaculation of paint. Lucidity, systematics and precision are equally important. Not Expressionism but Constructivism, not action painting but hard edge, not Pop but Op art, not Neo-Expressionism but Neo geo belong to his historical frame of reference. Van Dessel is a very conscious painter, especially in his methodology.

His self-restrictive use of canvas and colour creates a fixed pattern, which he wants to take to the extreme. Occasionally, he abandons the canvas to make murals or billboards that represent the limits of two-dimensionality in relation to a specific architectural or urban

context. Van Dessel sees this limitation as a radical point of view and an authentic commitment. For Van Dessel there is no way back in painting. From the composition lines to the right colour combinations to the appliance of the layers of oil paint; painting is, above all, a systematic and precise process. But control isn't everything. Just when you start to go off the track, new images appear and interesting developments are made. Restriction and control are constantly in interaction with a certain degree of unpredictability.

Uncannily modern

Van Dessel's love for geometry and precision naturally led him in the direction of architecture. Bold modernist buildings and geometric landscapes are an iconographic constant in his drawings and paintings. *Wildwissels* (2001) and *Obstructies* (2002) depict a crisscross of motorways and viaducts. The paintings in his *Public Garden* series of the same period are built up around unearthly geometric shapes in sloping landscapes. The continual tension between the slopes, the growth and the geometry are the fuel for Van Dessel's series of paintings. Sometimes the buildings and intersections are realistic; sometimes they seem to evaporate in a compositional game of perspective lines and coloured areas. A play on construction and deconstruction, on coherence and incoherence gives these representations a remarkable lightness. There is no sign of the despair and desolation often associated with late modernist buildings.

The utopia of modernism has made way to the uncanny. The flats and brightly lit interiors, the motorways and the intersections are highly recognizable, but are free of details and anecdotes. Architecture and urbanism have been reduced to their most basic form and are, both literally and metaphorically, uninhabitable. There is no sign of human activity. Remarkably, some of the paintings and drawings resemble the sketches of hardcore modernists such as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe.

Van Dessel belongs to the first generation that grew up with the legacy of the International Style. The pioneering work of prewar

functionalists determined the look of our cities and landscapes in the sixties and seventies and clearly also inspired Van Dessel. It's not always transparent though whether he is being nostalgic or critical. Certain images seem to be a subdued form of ecological criticism on modernism. In others, he seems to embrace the ratio and the order of the modernist dream. These subtle and implicit interactions between memory, homage and distance add an extra dimension to his work.

The ambivalence of his paintings and drawings makes them even more inviting. The smooth, almost transparent, touch, the rigorous language of shapes, the monochrome areas of paint and the occasional retro colouring (bringing to mind hip interiors, applied graphic design, logos and textiles from the sixties and seventies) create a loungy atmosphere that connects wonderfully well to certain aspects of the spirit of our times. The ambient music of Moby and Air are ideal soundtracks for paintings such as *Discount Spare Parts*, *Entrance II* and *Mega Station* from 2005. In his most recent work, though, there are some cracks in the fake world of superficial perfection. In *Space Decadence* clattering beamlike shapes are in sharp contrast with the cleanliness of the modern gallery space. The landscape paintings from *The Red Sea Gallery* series contain slightly disturbing ingredients such piercing laser beams and flashes of explosions, suggesting a *clean* and thus esthetically acceptable violence, like the nighttime war footage of CNN.

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