

Hans Theys

**The Duplicity of Life**  
**A conversation with Johan Clarysse, 2014**

**Introduction**

Few men have that kind of mildness that Johan Clarysse has. It is a pleasure to meet him. You can feel that he has transferred his doubts and uncertainties to his work in which they can find expression in a steadily development that ancient scientists would have called dialectical. There is a thankful atmosphere in his studio towards the way everything can find its way.

His work develops on various levels. First of all there is the narrative character, the contents that arises and canalizes impressions, for example in the decision to report in a plastic and painterly way on the Semana Santa in Cordoba and Granada, or to make portraits of mentally ill persons, artists or philosophers.

Then there is the thematic approach that is described by Clarysse as a problem of the gaze and the impossibility to fathom our inner world only by the expression of the face or by body language. (Funny business: When we say that an author is able to characterize a character we mean that he or she has caught the psychology of that person, whereas the character only exists in the words of the novel.)

But it is not only a question of the state of mind or the gaze of the person or subject. There is at the same time the mutual gaze of painter and model, the relation between the painter and the canvas, the link between the subject and the spectator and between the spectator and the canvas. It is an old matter that for example already occurs in the work of the Flemish Primitives who revealed a world in which God showed himself by hiding and hid by showing. See how bold the Virgin Mary's tears express her compassion! How difficult it is to read a state of mind from her face! Just look at the first pages of the most famous art history publications to experience that Nefertiti is at the same time called proud and humble, cruel and good hearted, sensual and cold. We can also refer to the necessity of the mask in the theatre that is used not to hide the face but to reveal a personality, and we realize that Greek tragedies not only showed the decline of heroes, but also the arduous birth of the individual who needed the mask to distinguish him- or herself from the formless choir.

The third aspect in the work of Johan Clarysse to which I want to draw attention is the painterly aspect that in recent years more often comes forward, not as an increasing virtuosity but more as a growing conscience of what it means to make paintings: objects with distinctive features that destabilize and at the same time empower the image.

**Conversation**

- *You work in series?*

Johan Clarysse: Series offer the possibility to canalize the associations and thoughts that rise in my mind. But in every set there is evolution and variation. One of my former teachers often

talked about 'variation in unity and unity in variation'. It's a principle I still try to translate into practice. There is not one theme or style that I cling to, but on the other hand there are no ruptures either, it is always a matter of evolution.

Initially I created abstract works, but after a deeply affecting experience in a concentration camp in Dachau, which I tried to catch in images, I felt that my language was inadequate and so I started making image-word paintings. In general I am fascinated by the human gaze as the so called mirror of the soul and by the notion that man has an outside and an inside but that there is always something that escapes when you try for example to paint a portrait.

At the same time I have become more and more aware of my desire to make paintings as a way to create an object, a painting, that visualizes the tension between the mere aspect of story and theme on the one side and the really painterly aspect on the other side.

*- You often use film stills, especially in your early work but again in your most recent series. We recognize images referring to Antonioni, Bergman, Fassbinder, Kubrick, Resnais, Hitchcock and many others.*

Clarysse: My origins lay in a working class environment. I first discovered the power of images through movies, even if at the age of seventeen I had already been in the Groeninge Museum or visited from time to time the Ghent Museum of Fine Arts. One of my aunts was a nun and in the library of the convent she gave me the opportunity to meet more images. I remember the Latem School and Piero della Francesca. In the Ghent Museum I was especially touched by *The Kleptomaniac* by Géricault.

*- That painting is an example of the so called 'typologies' that were fashionable in 19th century scientific, literary and artistic worlds. Your work often departs from the impossibilities of typology or even of the personal portrait. One of your most recent series is entitled 'Suspicious Portraits'.*

Clarysse: I have also made a series of philosophers' portraits called *Confessiones* after the work of Saint Augustine. Amongst them there are also philosophers with whom I disagree. It was just a matter of putting them on a pedestal by portraying them and knocking them off by a painterly intervention. A portrait of Lyotard was covered with dots that can be read in braille as 'difference'. In other paintings a grid or red dots occur, or in the case of Foucault there are images of black swans. Sometimes these interventions are subconscious associations, sometimes they are symbols. But first of all they create a somewhat weird poetical atmosphere. They can also be mere areas or frames, painterly elements that suggest the tension between the finished and the unfinished. So for example in the portrait of Foucault there are those separate areas behind his head, three swans that seem to float in front of him and one that partially hides behind his white shirt.

In this way a pictorial depth emerges that is relatively new in my work. The Foucault portrait is exclusively in acrylic paint. Until recently I only used acrylic paint, but nowadays I also make use of oil paints, especially for the finishing coating and the highlighting, because they enable me to make them more pasty and opaque. In this way I discovered a new way of creating painterly intervention. Another way, which I already mentioned, is to strengthen the tension between completion and incompleteness by finishing parts in a more or a less detailed way.

*- Can you tell something about the use of photographs as a model for paintings?*

Clarysse: This painting (*Looking at (for) the invisible XVI*) with four persons is originally based

upon a still from a film by Resnais. It is a scene in a glorious castle. First I had also painted columns but they have been painted over. They were too anecdotic. They strengthened the picturesque as if it was an illustration I had made, while the painting over of the columns made the image a real painting, for example by the traces of my intervention that are left over. See for example the borderline in the middle. In this painting the spaces in between are very important. The teacher I mentioned before also often said that the spaces between the jars of Morandi were as important as the jars themselves. That's what I aimed at by painting away the columns and the décor.

People often think that painting from photos is very decisive, but you can step away from them or keep as close as possible to them. It is a matter of the painting, a matter that surpasses the image. While painting you make a hundred and more little decisions. Every spot is influenced. You can't do that in the same way when you make a photograph. When you paint you can choose to work in a more transparent or a more covering way, a line could be partially corroded by an added field or a background ... That's why I like studying the old masters, observing which decisions they have made. Recently, during a stay in Paris, I noticed that Courbet as well as Manet have put the material aspect in the foreground. How Manet has solved in a painterly way the portrait of Baudelaire's mistress! How Vermeer's *Female lace maker* offers a view on the world! The touch of Rembrandt! For example in the portrait of his son Titus sitting at a table. Such things feed me. They make me happy.

Thirty percent of my paintings have been painted over. But more than before I preserve parts of the original painting. You can see that for example in the painting *Looking at (for) the Invisible III* in which I have conserved a piece of a shirt. Many conceive this as a building. I was fascinated by the encounter of the vague elements of a woman's portrait and the sharpness of the shirt. Something occurs that you cannot identify and in this way instead of a rendering a painting appears.

In the painting *Looking at (for) the Invisible I* you can see a dotted line that reminds of a frame used to transfer proportions. The lines are almost chalky because I mixed the drying oil paint with chalk.

- *You work with substrata that sometimes shine through or even remain uncovered.*

Clarysse: Yes, I make an underlying layer with acrylic paint. On it I make the first drawings and I create contrasts between light and dark. Currently I continue in oil paint. I couldn't do that in earlier days because it gave me a headache, but today turpentine can be replaced by a substance that is not harmful to me.

- *You keep on using texts in some of your works?*

Clarysse: In the past this was almost a matrix: a system of which I became a captive. Nowadays I only use words and sentences occasionally: when I think they are essential or that they can be an additional part, as for example in the series 'Suspicious landscapes'. In this sense there is a clear evolution in my work.

- *The gaze is a very important theme in your work.*

Sometimes I have the impression that it has become a taboo in contemporary painting. My subjects look at something but you cannot tell what it is. It is as if they express emotions that you

cannot define immediately or name with an epithet such as happy, sad, angry or frightened. Their expressions vary from serenity to ecstasy, but in fact they remain impalpable. It has to do with reality that always escapes and that you cannot grab in words or images. It is comparable with what you see in *La Pluie*, a film by Broodthaers, in which freshly written verses are almost immediately erased by rain. But on the other hand it is that impossibility that gives me the drive to go on.

- *Could you tell something about the use of colour in your work?*

Clarysse: Most of the time I use tempered colours. I beware of overstatement. The more emotional or intense the original story or image is, the more distance one needs. When you emphasize certain subject-matters by bright and sharp colours you get an emphasis that turns itself against the work. In my last series I use a lot of variations of violet. This seems restricted but in such a seemingly monochrome painting there are at least ten different colours. I especially like English red to which I sometimes add a touch of Napoli yellow and some white so that it becomes a kind of Tuscany pink. Cadmium red seems to me too intrusive, I cannot create sufficient nuance with it.

This painting for example has been painted in a very light touch. The figuration has been drawn in a rather sketchy way and has been elaborated in bluish grey, shades of brown and a little bit of ochre upon the underlying layer of sienna and ultra-marine that is still strongly present and shines through in the final result.

- *Next to your painterly aims and themes such as 'the gaze' you are also stimulated by stories such as that of the Semana Santa in Cordoba and Granada.*

Clarysse: From a plastic and pictorial point of view these processions are interesting but you also feel how religion and political ideologies can influence the individual. The processions are really fascinating: they are at the same time attractive and repellent. They are very emotional, everybody is involved but it is also a setting of which you cannot see what is acted and what is real. I have enhanced that duplicity by combining the images of the processions with images of the Ku Klux Klan: you don't know what you see.

- *Some of your 'Suspicious Portraits' make me think of images from 'Senso' and 'The Damned' by Visconti: there is that mixture of theatre and real threat. Can you tell something about the female portrait that for the most part is hidden behind those red lines that look like chicken wire?*

Clarysse: When you look closely you can see that one eye turns away. On condition that it is not too emphatic this kind of twist can add something to a painting.

- *The figure makes me think of Carlotta in Hitchcock's 'Vertigo' and also of certain female portraits of Buñuel. Whereas she plays the part of a deceased the female swindler in 'Vertigo' pretends to be fascinated by a woman's portrait. The eye that turns away awakens thoughts of Catherine Deneuve's wooden leg.*

Clarysse: They are both film makers I like very much. For what concerns Buñuel I especially like that film in which a group of burghers is enclosed in a country house. At the moment I can't mention the title of it.

- *What do you think of this painting representing a thumb sucking man?*

Clarysse: I still have my doubts about this work and I wonder if it isn't too emphatic. Up to now I haven't shown it though it looks as if the painting has almost vanished due to the rigid framing and the broad and slightly distorted arm that covers almost half of the canvas.

- *The Wittgenstein portrait has been painted in a very transparent way.*

Clarysse: Yes, and in a very determinant kind of blue. Due to this blue the addition of the black dots, that represent a kind of meaningless family groups, creates a new pictorial depth.

- *After the series 'Change Is Coming' (2009-2010) you painted the 'Suspicious Portraits' (2011-2012), then the 'Suspicious Landscapes (2012-2013)' and at last the series 'Looking at (for) the Invisible'. 'Change Is Coming' shows people from unusual points of view. The 'Suspicious Portraits' contain portraits of mentally ill as well as of artists and friends. We never know who we are looking at. The 'Suspicious Landscapes' make me think of a comparable series with works of Ed Ruscha.*

Clarysse: Yes, that series was created apart from Ruscha's paintings but of course it refers to them. I would like to use the words of Mitterand: Et alors! More artists have combined landscapes and words. Also relations with romantic painting and Pop Art could be indicated in my works. I try to play with an old genre and at the same time add something personal. I have based images on landscapes in travel brochures but also on pictures I found on the internet or on landscapes that I saw and photographed myself. Most of the time there is already a twist in these images, for example when they show melting ice caps. I extract the clouds, the ice floes or marines from their context and I combine them with commercial or political catch-phrases that can whether or not be distorted. You can't read the image without the words or the words without the image. You can't zap either. You get entangled by the confrontation of the rigid and stencilled letters with the organic images. Their relation is irreverent in a different way to an advertising image or a political poster. Such differences fascinate me.

On the other hand these landscapes are atypical in my work because they are free of human beings even if it is so that man appears in the slogans. 'Deus, Patria, Familia.' On one side this Roman expression contorts the image while on the other side it fits an image that almost looks nationalistic. It makes me think of *The Sound of Music*.

Oil paint was of course of good use when I painted a foamy sea. You can't create the same effect with acrylic paint.

But there is also the so called coincidence: in one painting the shadow of a kneeling man almost becomes a separate area. In another painting the shadows of four women standing and holding a bowl in front of them look like wings. It is always nice to notice how one can contradict an image by a painterly intervention. The same goes for colours. Pink stands for innocence. Violet is just past innocence.

More recently I experiment with the touch of the brush that can be more generous or rather nervous, light, rigid or hesitating. It is something you do in an intuitive way but you can also sharpen your methods.

I consider myself as a searcher. When I fall back into old habits I try to escape from these comfort

zones even if my escapes are seldom spectacular. In the last series *'Looking for (at) the Invisible'* my works are elaborated in a very rudimentary way. Some figures are almost spots. Nowadays I try to preserve the freshness of the first layers. In past days I generally covered them while today I search for a duplicity. I'd like my work to give shape to the duplicity of life that can be great and meaningful but that at once might drop us into mud and give us the feeling that we are futile and vulnerable, that it is absurd, fundamentally slippery and complex. In that sense my work is anchoring in my life and it is not just a matter of formalities.

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