

Johan Clarysse – Interaction/interplay

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The bipolarity of Johan Clarysse's personality was already obvious in his choice of training. He was interested both in the problems of the human existence and in ways to find partial and temporary answers to them. As philosophy makes use of reasoning in formulating questions and in suggesting responses, art appeals to creativity, intuition and the imagination.

This bipolarity marked his college years after his secondary education. After having graduated in pedagogy and psychology (1980) he obtains his degree in philosophy in 1984.

From 1979 onwards he is an art student at the Academy of Louvain and later in Bruges (1986-1987)

It is to his credit as a serious artist that his first individual exhibition does not open until 1990. Understanding the process of creation and making high demands upon your own work are more rewarding than a quick, passing and shallow success.

When the artist shows a series of paintings titled 'Odyssee' in 1993 it is very clear that we not only witness a real pictorial talent but also a reflective talent searching for the essence of painting.

Odyssee (1993)

Each work of this series is an odyssee, a search on the canvas in which the painter, layer after layer, balancing colour and form, colouration and matter, plane and sign, evokes a multitude of suggestions.

From the start Clarysse's aim went beyond the mere pictorial qualities of a sensitive skin, the subtle play of dark tones and luminous crevices, the power of nuance and the confrontation of the colours of the earth and the deep ochres. By means of multinotational signs, a mysterious representation, an enigmatic figuration of an object, he provokes the imagination.

On a heavily wrought surface, a dagger is floating by, or a sword, a boatlike form is gliding past, a keyhole is being opened, a shark's fin appears, a rectangle poses as a house, a square looks like a ground plan.

This ambiguity is deliberate, suggesting a multifarious interpretation.

A work of art raises questions, it is an open field and it is for the onlooker to act upon it. A work of art is not to be rationally understood nor grasped, it irritates, it provokes

Decoding and interpreting

In the series that come after 'Odyssee' it is beyond all doubt: painting is playing upon the interplay between showing and hiding, revealing and concealing, representing and alienating. On the background of an organic structure referring to earth, stone, water, night..., images and objects are recalling human presence, history, culture: a gate, a ladder, a skull, foot prints, instruments,...

The absence of context, the intuitive additions, the distortions, the blurring and concealing, set the images in a lyrical atmosphere bordering on the prelogic and the unconscious.

Decoding and interpreting are essential parts of each painting.

A text Clarysse wrote in 1995 shows very clearly that he is well aware of his intentions. He sees his images as pictograms and it is for the onlooker to detect and create coherence in them. He also explores questions regarding the status of the image: How do images function? Which effects do they provoke? What is their mutual relation? How do they achieve a symbolic value? What is the cause of a shift of meaning? What is the relevance of the relation background/ object? How come that common or even trivial images develop a poetic, mythical, surreal and/or meditative character once incorporated in a pictorial context? How do pictorial images differ from those in advertising?

Clarysse wants to probe the matter to the very bottom; hence his working in series. The relative unity of a series is due to its starting point. Thus in his series 'Dachau'

he incorporates images of the concentration camp and in 'From dust to stone' he integrates the impression megalithic stones have made on him during a trip in Southwest England.

Image and Word

The shunga prints, a series of Japanese erotic engravings of the 18th and 19th century, were the start for the series 'Spring Images' (1996). The interplay Clarysse already aimed at in his earlier work becomes here even more explicit. He confronts the patched, framed and veiled imagery of the Japanese prints with a second monochrom panel on which a word or a text has been painted.

Somewhere else he writes a word in capital letters or he draws a stencil over the image. The relation word- image and language- form heightens the ambiguity, provoking a shift in the significance, producing associations and stimulating a critical and creative approach.

From movie –image to painting

Why do some images of a movie linger on in our memory with a fascinating power? How does a painter react to this? How do you process them from your own identity? How different are they when you paint them, interpreting and transposing them by means of a medium characterised by handicraft and specific materials into a layered multireferential image?

In the series 'inside-outside' (1999-2000) the human face, marked by extreme emotion and expression becomes the central theme. Stills of Tarkovsky, Hitchcock, Bergman, Fassbinder, Kalatozov and Jarman are being transposed and confronted with monochrom planes with texts, sometimes written over the faces.

Clarysse's interpretations and transposing of intriguing images from the world of movies and media under the title 'ceci n'est pas de tristesse' constitute a new thematic and formal step in his development.

In 'inside- outside' the image was limited to the face; now we also meet with whole figures and a certain location or situation is being evoked. These referencies and interpretations are being processed in a very exciting way using a very specific palette of whites, greys, blacks, bluegreys, and greengreys. The text additions remain essential and heighten the complexity of the imagery and its meaning.

At one moment it are trivial, often used phrases, at another moment we read casual ly recorded utterances or quotations from the bible or a phrase of a well known writer.

Like in the earlier work it is for the onlooker to decode in total liberty.

Enjoyment and meaning are the fruits of the interplay between onlooker and the work of art.