

Johan Clarysse's focus on the gaze, 2014

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In the sixties and seventies of the previous century fundamental painting occupied a prominent place in the international art scene. It took till the early eighties before figurative painting could gain its place again thanks to movements such as the Italian 'Transavantguardia' and the German 'Neue Wilde'. These movements, showing an explicit colourful and keen kind of painting, were a reaction against the intellectualism and conceptualism that until then had dominated the scene. In the beginning of the nineties in Belgium a convincing form of figurative painting appeared which was called the 'Antwerp Grey School': painters such as Jean-Marie Bytbeier, Bert de Beul, Guy Van Bossche, Marc Vanderleenen, Luc Tuymans and Eddy De Vos made figurative paintings in reduced and softened colours.

Although common features were attributed to these painters they cannot be seen as a group because their subjects differ a lot. Moreover at the same time other Flemish painters – such as Gery De Smet in Ghent, Johan Clarysse in Bruges and Xavier Tricot in Ostend - worked in a similar way.

It was striking that these painters didn't focus in first place on questioning the fundamentals of painting (materials, technique, brushwork, etc.) but more on the effect of the image on the spectator and the relation between text and image. These items were prominent in their work and certainly present in the work of Johan Clarysse.

Several painters – amongst them Johan Clarysse – found their inspiration in the dominant visual culture of the nineties and in mass media such as film and television. Their work can certainly be interpreted as a kind of painterly reply to a visual culture of which they questioned the underlying logics. In certain cases it was also a response to the ontological falsification that formed the basis of most of the media images.

Playing with meanings

Since the nineties Johan Clarysse abstracts images from films, the advertising world and the internet. His starting point always is an image that catches or seduces him and that carries a certain tension or atmosphere. Images and fragments of text are taken out of their context and brought together in a new relation that generates new meanings. This way of working refers to the ideas on deconstruction of the postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida. It is a way of working and thinking that – according to the philosopher Willem Elias – can also be noticed in the nineties-work of Luc Tuymans, even if there are clear differences in the choice of themes and the way of painting between both painters.

On Tuymans's work Elias wrote: *'Images are approached as formations and as ways of looking that have become rusty cultural commonplaces but nevertheless change their meaning or need a new interpretation according to changing circumstances... In the nineties painting indeed is playing with achievements of the past. This 'playing' however should be considered in a serious way as using related elements that belong to one or more controlled systems in variations of their own¹.*

¹Elias, Willem, *Aspecten van de Belgische kunst na '45*. Deel I, Snoeck Publishers, 2005, p.118.

This is also what Clarysse does: playing with meanings. His way of working in series contributes to the creation of variations within the rules of a system. Various images show different aspects of the same theme that thus can be deepened and in its contents be canalized. Clarysse hands over keys to the spectator and at the same time he creates possibilities for him or her to add own interpretations.

At the base of a series there is often a questioning and a search that motivates Clarysse to work out the theme in several images. In the end and in first place these images themselves arouse (philosophical) conversation. One could also say that behind the seduction by the images there is a clear aim and a well-considered strategy.

Johan Clarysse thoroughly deals with the tensions that contentwise and on the plastic level create the specific character of his work. His existential view on man is essential. For Clarysse man is a complex and ambiguous creature whose underlying motives, longings and needs can never be caught and understood entirely. He is convinced that however hard one tries to know and comprehend the other there will always be something that escapes. In the plastic ambiguity of his paintings Clarysse shows this permanent ambiguity of man. His work carries tensions between detailed and unfinished parts, between the formless/organic and the formal/graphic, between nervous and more generous brush zones, between the abstract and the figurative, and between language and image as can be seen in his 2011-series 'Suspicious landscapes' .

In the series 'Confessiones' (2008-2009) Clarysse added 'signs' to the portraits of well-known philosophers. The thus aroused tension between the portrait and the sign or mark reveals something of the philosopher and at the same time of the ambivalent attitude of the artist towards the portrayed. So for example Clarysse added the word 'webmaster' to the portrait of Derrida as an intervention that not only brings a certain structure in the image but that also sets in motion the level of meaning.

In the more recent series 'Looking at (for) the invisible' (2013) Clarysse cracks the classical portrait by adding abstract images to the look of the portrayed. The tension created by the abstract element in combination with the physics of the face turns the attention towards the mysterious gaze of the person that takes on different forms throughout the whole series.

Focus on the human condition

Clarysse's view on human condition appears more explicitly in his recent series (2008-2013) than in previous ones. The formation of identity, communication versus non-communication, individuality versus collectivism are recurrent themes.

In more than one work one feels a rather negative climate of detachment, alienation and isolation. Together with his sense for deconstruction and his introduction of doubt covered with some irony Clarysse clearly takes part in the postmodern discourse of the eighties. It was the time in which the end of all great stories was proclaimed. This led to a strong relativisation of the image of man and world, and to individualisation and fragmentation. Every human being lived and lives in an own fragment of reality which made real communication difficult.

By focussing on the gaze Clarysse strongly manages to show that kind of fragmentation in his paintings. He approaches the gaze or look in various ways: on one hand it is clearly absent

(especially in his group portraits), on the other hand it is explicitly present (especially in the individual portraits).

Fixed on the gaze: portraits of groups

The absent-minded and empty looks that appear in his group portrait seem related to what the philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote on the empty look in his *Passagen-werk*. In this work Benjamin wrote on the fragmentation of reality caused by industrialisation, urbanisation and material progress. He noticed in modern society a terrifying instrumentalisation of every aspect of life. This leads to a lack of communicable experiences because experiences are no longer imbedded in a common frame, in a tradition or a collective project. This lack is making man's gaze empty. It is not any longer able to give a significance to the other because the other has become a stranger. At the same time the other's gaze has become alienated itself? This means that the other looks at me without really seeing me. Mass has destroyed the gaze of the other and has converted people into strangers for each other. The individual has disappeared and has lost himself in the mass.²

Looks without significance, people who don't want or who are unable to make contact out of inability or because there isn't anything to say to the other: they are the matters that Clarysse expresses superbly in for example the series 'Change is coming' (2010). In this series there is a grim and ironic undertone. The group portrait 'Walden 2' shows a group of sneering persons who rather stiffly stand in equal distances to each other. They are without any contact and don't seem to see anything. 'The whispering of dancing II' shows dancing dervishes wandering aimless in a circle. In 'The whispering of dancing III' they become wooden dolls with heads chained to each other and that almost motionless hang down in a dreary way.

In the series 'Is evil of great importance to good?' (2007-2008) Clarysse examined the impact of religious and political ideologies on the individual. Here he is occupied by the question how people willingly borrow an identity from an ideology and how they afterwards (in a group) often behave in a radical way. As an artist in residence in the southern Spain village of Callosa d'en Sarrià Clarysse in 2006 he took part in the events of the Semana Santa in order to experience at full the religious group atmosphere. Photos led to a series of paintings showing in alternation people in religious processions carrying baroque platforms and statues, persons with pointed white hoods and restrained ladies in matilla's. A closer look shows that some other added images do not really seem to fit in this series: a parade of members of the Ku Klux Klan, or a group portrait of nazi-officers and their aids with faces erased by white paint and having a party and relaxing near Auschwitz. These images shed a different light on the Semana Santa images.

Here it is quite interesting to compare Clarysse's visual interpretation of the Semana Santa with the version of British socially engaged photographer Craigie Horsfield who from another point of view dealt with similar themes such as the formation of identity or individualism versus collectivism. While Clarysse chooses for a critical and a detached way of artistic research Horsfield shows more concern and focusses on relations. In his book 'Relation' (2006) he writes: *'No self is conceivable in isolation and consciousness is born in relation.'* As a photographer he translates this emphasis on relations in the fact that he always has a deepening conversation with his subject before photographing. He needs a kind of

² Heikens, Martine, De blik van de ander volgens Sartre, Levinas en Benjamin, <http://filosofie.be/blog/frans-existentialisme-en-de-status-van/3201/de-blik-van-de-ander-volgens-sartre-levinas-en-benjamin/>

identification with the subject. That's why most of the time his individual portraits show family members and friends. For what concerns his pictures of collective events he preferably looks for popular and public places where he can be fully aware of the sense of community. His series on the Semana Santa is a clear example of this approach. In this series it is striking that by a strong use of light and dark Horsfield accentuates the mystical dimension of the individual merging into the group. Clarysse on the other hand confronts images from different religious and political contexts and thus shows an ambiguity that rises thoughts on the danger of such events.

In the same series Clarysse explored the narrow border between authentic emotions and those put in scene by both participants and spectators of a procession. He doesn't shirk the showing of expression on the faces of the depicted but there is always a certain restraint and distance towards emotions. There are no fierce outbursts nor strong expressions on the faces. The 'portrait of a weeping woman with mantilla' is a clear example of this. In a distant and monochrome way of painting the emotion is at the same time soothed and accentuated by the subtle shadows of a lace veil on the face. The image becomes ambiguous and full of quieted drama. The photography of involvement by Horsfield leads to more modest and intimate portraits like that of 'Carla Rosseti' (Naples, 2010). Horsfield doesn't go for any specific emotions. He tries to reveal the 'gaze of the soul' while Clarysse is convinced that it is impossible to catch the whole and the depth of a look or a gaze. He states that there is always something that escapes.

Fixed on the gaze: individual portraits

In his series of individual portraits such as 'Confessiones' and 'Looking at (for) the invisible' Clarysse tried to break the classical genre of portraying. This certainly is the case in his series 'Suspicious Portraits' (2011-2012) which is one of his most original series of portraits. His confrontation with Géricault's 'Kleptomaniac', one of the main pieces of art in the Ghent Museum of Arts, was the cause. His interest in psychiatry and pathologies and the way in which they are (whether or not) manifested physically drove him into a search for pictures of patients in l'Hôpital de la Salpêtrière in Paris and in the Museum Guislain in Ghent.

Afterwards by painting he examined the diagnostic look in his series 'Suspicious Portraits'. Portraits based on the archive photographs are combined with portraits of well-known artists who show deviant behaviour such as Lars von Trier, Francis Bacon, Camille Claudel and Antonin Artaud. Next to these he portrayed members of his family and friends whom he asked to show something suspicious in their gaze. During the presentation of the series in Siegfried De Buck Gallery and in the Guislain Museum in Ghent the portraits were deliberately hung through each other so that the spectator was not able to make a difference between the so called normal and the so called abnormal and sick. In this way the spectator's perception was truly questioned.

When we compare the portraits of the Monomaniacs (1820-1824) by Géricault - of which ten could be seen in MSK Ghent - with the Clarysse series 'Suspicious portraits' (2011-2012) we seem to have a similar experience at first sight. We are confronted with people who look normal but who probably aren't.

A lecture in MSK taught me that Géricault painted the so called 'Monomaniacs' by order of the well-known French physician Etienne-Jean Georget who needed these realistic portraits to

justify his thesis that a maniac has a normal look. This was in full contrast with what was then stated by physicians.³

The personalised look of the Monomaniacs is focused on something or someone outside the frame. Their head is slightly turned. The clair-obscur on their face marks their features. They all express a kind of melancholy. The maniac is painted and presented with compassion and not stigmatized as 'the other'. Géricault was able to give a dignified personality to those people who were on the edge of society. This was really unusual in a time in which only the rich and dignitaries were portrayed. And in fact this is also the base of Clarysse's 'Suspicious portraits'.

In this series one can clearly notice that the painter didn't chose for classical cut-outs. The gaze of the portrayed is often turned aside, upwards or down so that contact with the spectator is clearly avoided. The posture is static but there is a fluent movement in the way the head and the arms turn which is rather bizarre. This is obviously present in the portraits of Agnes and Johanna. Johanna lies in bed, clenched, tense and with eyes wide open. She looks upwards and has her arms stretched out horizontally while her fists are balled up. This portrait shows a maniac or at least what we expect a maniac to look like. The expressions on the faces of the portrayed are melancholic and heavily earnest. They are in a kind of fuzz between normal and abnormal.

In Johan Clarysse's paintings the gaze of the other remains in a distance and is ambiguous. You are not able to penetrate it at once. The essence of the other always remains strange, unknown and mysterious. He or she cannot become part of your own world but at the same time this experience carries an ethical appeal for compassion in the sense of Levinas. This is the leitmotif in the work of Clarysse. This is what he tries to make palpable by painting.

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