

Johan Clarysse : Alle Lust will Ewigkeit, 2007

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In the paintings of Johan Clarysse the difference in nuance between 'seeing' and 'perceiving' becomes obvious. They are to be situated on another level of consciousness. Perceiving is not an act without engagement, it is very closely linked to thinking. In his paintings Clarysse stimulates this process of looking by materializing it. To be and creating sense follow each other closely but are on the verge of an existential ravine. This is related to his imagery.

The artist starts from an existing reality in the form of filmstills or any kind of photos which are in dialogue with sketches of his own. The genesis of his images has more in common with playing with language than with cinematographic editing. It makes us think of the writer George Perec who pretends in his 'I am born' that rhetoric on which literature functions has fallen to pieces. Out of a sensation of ruin, emptiness and powerlessness Perec tried to restructure something by making use of old rules and structures. The writer used palindromes (words and phrases you can read from two directions), anagrams (rearranging letters) and lipograms (leaving out a letter). In this way 'zin' (sense) is a lipogram of 'zijn' (being).

Johan Clarysse goes on about existing realities. He rearranges elements of imagery (anagram),leaves out some data on purpose, does not so much create palindromes but rather a layered look on reality. The photographic concept of 'punctum' plays an important role in his work. He chooses a revealing moment. And yet there is something remarkable about it. Because the moment is being isolated from the context, it is fragmentary, incomplete, or suggesting inevitable standstill.

The chosen moment does not conjure up the meaning 'being on the way' as in the word 'tao'. In the playful use of language 'Alles ist weg' can as well mean 'the way is everything' as 'everything has gone'. By means of a number of small shifts a near catastrophic climate is created. That is why the title of his recent work ' Alle Lust will Ewigkeit' implies the vicious potentiality of a whirlpool. His images are meant to create a sucking silence in the current (of images).

The vocabulary of the 'film noir' is fascinating him. Although characters are mostly entangled in obsessions, they are, at the same time, figures of a violent normality. In the end nothing is as devastating as normality. From this ambiguity sparks the femme fatale and the male protagonist; emotion doesn't seem to affect them. With regard to the acting process Johan Clarysse often chooses secondary, stolen moments. As a medium painting explicitly rests on fractions of time. It is of vital interest that these paintings do not seek to clarify

the carefully chosen moments. This enhances the atmosphere of alienation and surprise. The rather monochrome palette and the attention for the effect of shadow even emphasize this. Each brushstroke is controlled just as the characters in his preferred filmstyle want to control the situation they are in. And yet the paintings do not explain, essentially they 'show' but how and what?

The way in which the artist wants to show is very closely linked to the distinction the art historian Kenneth Clark makes between what he calls 'The Naked' and 'The Nude', applied here to the existential situation visualized. According to Clark 'The Nude' refers to an artificial category of beauty, a sublimation of the beautiful disguising of reality. 'The Naked' means the bare revelation of reality. This accounts for the rather sober and restrained way of painting by the artist. It is obvious he is not after the fabulous brushstroke or the virtuosity which can reduce an object into subordination. The artist is challenged by what the philosopher Pierre Bourdieu says in his essay 'On television' : 'nothing is more difficult than render reality in its banality'.

Clarysse paints the way the world mostly reaches us : an uncautious stream of very ordinary things. Only our memory seems to delete this reality constantly. Each memory, each image, a single word or slogan seems to be ready to rampant grow into a mythological status. This lust for eternity veils the nullity of the momentaneous; besides it seems to be a motor not in need of being cranked up. A paradox often present in the iconography of this artist is the discrepancy between engagement and nullity. In this very breach identities develop just as language emerges out of the folds of reality.

It is remarkable how, in many images created by the artist, language is a kind of symptom. Words seem to diagnose having a more implacable character than the very image. In a 'treeproject' we see photographs of adolescents on each of which a red word has been fixed. Beside adjectives such as adventurous or afraid we also read terms as aurorix, clozapine or anafranil referring to medication prescribed for depression, schizophrenia, psychosis, mania, obsession, phobia, neurosis etc. The use of red lettering enhances the idea of injuries in these youngsters. The mental and, by definition, inner disturbance is not obvious in their outward appearance; on the contrary they are rather depicted in a positive way. In fact Clarysse shows us a model of perception: adding language creates a qualitative shift in our perception. By presenting the photographs in a public space the words are given a tyrannical (dis)qualifying and stigmatising impact.

The use of letters, words and phrases in relation to images brings about complicated constructions. Using language implies different colours, typography, abbreviations, affirmative phrases or questions. Dutch, French or

English suggest each time a specific atmosphere and an own referential context rendered in capitals, minuscules or handwritten. Advertising is very aware of these special effects which are being manipulated on purpose. In the paintings of Johan Clarysse the messages evoke desires and expectations but often they radiate alienation and powerlessness. This is also obvious in the theme of the tongue. Exactly in these images words are lacking.. The appearance of the tongue in the act of love gets in the context described a rather sour character. In those works a scheme strikes us : the inner world is being explicitated but this always involves injury.

The recent series *Semana Santa* is in keeping with the above mentioned tree project. Contrasted concepts such as public and private, mass and individual are met in both subjects. The adolescent, on the verge of adulthood, is to be situated somewhere in the middle of these contrasts. With regard to building up identity the adolescent seems to be our alter ego. This role can be taken on as a pseudo-morphose by a dementing senior or a little girl asking : ‘Masculinity how would you define it?’. The question is pursued in the painting : ‘Who are you today?’ as if one has a choice to take on an identity. This confusion is also present in ‘Are shadow and substance identical?’. Finally this amounts into a series of metaphysical and ethical questions.

Notwithstanding secularization doubts do arise such as : ‘Can the world be improved by eliminating evil?: ‘ Do heaven or hell exist?’ or ‘Is there any indication that God may have a sense of humour?.

As a result of a few visits to the Spanish Cordoba by the artist the paintings of the series *Semana Santa* originated. They deal with a demonstration of public atonement whery statues of the Virgin or scenes from the passion of Christ are being carried along the streets on platforms. Large groups of penants or onlookers attend these processions. Some are barefoot and wearing capirotas, pointed caps dating back to the inquisition period. Already Goya was much interested in this motive and in his paintings he mixed religion and madness, power and its punitative aspects. Although such processions are clear anachronisms in our media times, these rituals are answering a deep need still felt today. It concerns the inner world, emotional, and spiritual aspects which can hardly be physically materialized. And yet such data can be detected in many present day talkshows or entertainment formats where we are confronted with a variety of public atonement stage-managed or not. That is where they differ from the Spanish procesion ,which in the experience at least of Johan Clarysse ,conveys a feeling of authenticity

The concept of anachronism, within the context of the present day media,can be extended from the religious procession to the medium of painting.

How can a tradition survive and keep its sense? The study of the communicative capacity of painting is therefore the most important motive for this artist. How is it possible for the pictorial image today to speak up with all the other media around? The details show that the paintings belong to our time : in the series of the *Semana Santa* we see a young woman with a small lip piercing. She is a victim of sorrow and although this happens within a procession she obviously carries a heavier burden than is implied at that very moment. This is often demonstrated plasticly in many paintings by the importance given to shadowing. The paintings of the American 'Airstream-caravans' do clearly contrast. Here we meet the world of positiveness : 'the sky is the limit'. It would be unrealistic to deny that with such a mentality is unable to score, to get along. Only this trail seems so ultimate and unique that it doesn't take into account possible side tracks or derailings. Is it feasible to assume that the presentation of a non perfect world invites us to a deepened existential experience?

Regularly we meet the word 'acts' in the paintings of Clarysse. Literally it refers to the bible but the question arises if it is to remain a word without life. Although paintings do create a fictitious world in the real world it remains possible to act or to deny acting. This is shown in the reference to 'A Clockwork Orange' in which the main character presents the trivial remark 'Is there bread for tomorrow morning?'. And yet, Clarysse, fortunately lets the onlooker free. His use of texts is cryptic, word and image constantly invite personal reflection. Events do not reveal themselves in baroque rhetoric but mainly in small gestures. In this sense the framing of the image plays a subtle role: what can be seen and what not. What is beyond the edge of the painting is obviously to be filled in by the onlooker. That is the general rule. It also applies to these paintings but perhaps even of more importance is that the very picture shown also needs to be deciphered. That is why these paintings resist a rapid consuming eye. It is obvious that such images are the result of circumspection.

Although the artist uses drawings in preparation, photography and cinematography play also an important role in the genesis of his paintings. Drawings in pencil are regularly elaborated by brush strokes of waterpaint and do get a value of their own. They originate in personal observation and try to render a certain event using a scarcity of tools. Although the paintings are suggestive we are challenged to recognize their layered and elaborated composition. In contrast to film the use of words doesn't result in subtitling the image. They never are a literal translation of the painted scene. Or put differently : in so far as we could speak of a translation we are conscious that there is always a communication breakdown. And this is one of the most exciting aspects of Clarysse's paintings. The language evokes, refers to a certain reality which is in tension with the image. A kind of Magritte tension field is

created. The artist is well aware of his own and former image production. Continuity and breach that's exactly what we need to define history.

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