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**Jan De Vliegheer's Figurative Abstraction
Pretexts for a Painter's Passion**

Marcel Duchamp would have probably referred to Jan De Vliegheer's painting as 'retinal art', *i.e.* art which appeals only to the eye and not to the mind. Turning the relationship between art and the retina into an art-critical term is a feat of Duchamp's own invention, devised to express his contempt for the Impressionists, Fauvists and Cubists. Duchamp is the progenitor of this intellectual vision of art, later called 'Conceptual' and his oeuvre is a vindication of this. His heirs continue recycling his ideas and serving them as a kind of neo-neo-Dadaism.

The question raised by the art world in the 1960s and 1970s – Is painting still a relevant medium for contemporary art? – is as obsolete today as it was topical at the time. Painting has never ceased to exist and it probably never will. Paint, as a medium, is just too brilliant an invention not to survive the course of history. It is flexible and durable when dry. Gratifying us as it ages, it fosters the illusion of eternity. In contrast, there is nothing sadder than an aged work of Conceptual Art as it reveals impermanence in a non-artistic way.

The conflict between painters and Conceptual artists was settled around thirty years ago. When Tony Cragg created a work with waste plastic recuperated from a recycling plant, the result is a marvellous object. This is the case with his *Paint + Thing* (1984), a colourful installation in the shape of a painter's palette, which may be seen as a tribute to the art of painting. Nevertheless, it is doomed to the same fate as all plastic: to age in an ugly way. The *Passagen-Werk* that Joseph Kosuth presented at Documenta IX (1992), which consisted of his characteristic philosophical quotes in a white and a black gallery, was a breathtakingly understated form of aesthetics.

'Stupid as a painter' – the nineteenth century saying that Duchamp perpetrated – did not survive the test of time. It is as worthless today as when it was first pronounced. Since the 1980s, we have understood that Conceptual Art and painting are not irreconcilable. If all media are permitted in art, as the Modernist Avant-Garde posited, there is no reason why painting would no longer be viable in the ever-pluralist Post-Modernists' emendation. This is where we may situate De Vlieghe's oeuvre.

De Vlieghe is closer to Duchamp than one would imagine. Like the latter, his subjects are constructs, in the sense that they are meaningless. One of the principles that Duchamp introduced was that the artist is he who determines what art is, without necessarily having to produce it. De Vlieghe could have chosen other subjects for his compositions. Moreover, he could even have chosen not to paint figuratively. A painting by De Vlieghe may be viewed upside-down. It is figurative representation within an abstract framework. Duchamp's artistic constructs incite reflection, and even though De Vlieghe does not want his work to convey a social message, he too urges us to reflect on Western culture and especially on painting. It is precisely his neutrality with regard to the subject of a painting that results in meaning.

The semiotician Roland Barthes stated that it is impossible not to convey meaning: the absence of meaning is meaningful. Another of Barthes' concepts is even more appropriate in the context of De Vlieghe's refusal to engage in a social debate through his art: the Neutral. Barthes' definition of the Neutral, a concept that he developed in a series of lectures that he gave at the Collège de France (1977-78), is 'everything that baffles the paradigm', by which he means the opposition of two virtual terms, *e.g.* day/night, one of which we may choose. When we speak about the day, we do not speak about the night. The Neutral defies this either/or deadlock by leaving the possibility open that it is neither: the possibility of Neuter, *i.e.* neither male nor female, or, even a combination of both, a hybrid, a hermaphrodite. In his lectures, Barthes specifically stressed that the Neutral is not synonymous with neutrality or equate with a state of indifference; the refusal to choose or, in terms of colour, the grey zone between the black and the white. The Neutral is that which transcends and makes the two stereotypical options interesting and charged with intensity: the obscurity of the day and the brightness of the night, as well as the endless variety in between...

This notion of the Neutral, as neither of two options, manifests itself strikingly in some of De Vlieghe's paintings. For instance, in *Iznik Plate, Bunches of Grapes* (2012), where light and dark have unexpectedly exchanged places.

This is what De Vliegheer says about it:

While the background of the painting shades from light at the top into dark at the bottom, the plate shades from dark at the top into light at the bottom. This opposite play of light and dark creates a subtle tonal balance in the composition. The white background of the plate's interior is neutralized by the dark tones of its decorative motifs. Thus, the sum of the light and the dark tones yield a middle tone towards the centre of the plate that approaches that of the background. While the composition is balanced by the use of complementary colours, the rapid *alla prima* technique renders the painting dynamic and vibrant.

De Vliegheer uses the word 'neutralized' in a context that does not refer to a lack of daring. He characterizes his work as a precariously balanced colour composition. In fact, the Neutral is the rule of De Vliegheer's oeuvre. True to the principle of René Magritte's 1929 painting *The Treachery of Images*, the idea of 'This is not a pipe' pervades De Vliegheer's oeuvre. It is not a pipe, it is paint on canvas. Likewise, the themes in this exhibition are not what they appear: interiors, statues, glass and plates. De Vliegheer shares this with Surrealism. With the exception of his *période vache* (1948), Magritte never fully exploited the pictorial potential of the paint medium. His works remain painted ideas. De Vliegheer, however, does so. His painting is exuberant above all and regardless of the subject matter. De Vliegheer's paradigm poses the following question: 'Are we dealing with a historical or a natural reality, or with some kind of new aesthetics, a return to the discourse of the 'beautiful' in art? In the latter case, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is a suitable companion to De Vliegheer's oeuvre. According to this French exponent of philosophical phenomenology, painting is 'visibility to the second degree'. A painting is not a diluted copy of reality. It reveals a space which is nowhere. For Merleau-Ponty, painting is pure visibility, which means that it transcends what we see. It stimulates the viewer to construct a world where he can find himself. This process makes De Vliegheer's work fascinating.

However, life is not so simple. From an existential point of view, an artist may claim that his subject matter is irrelevant, that it is merely a pretext for painting. Nevertheless, a pretext is a text and we cannot ignore its existence, even though it may mislead us. Pretexts are ancient artefacts that we inherited from Western culture, utilized to dissimulate our real purposes. The artist's passion is veiled by recognizable subject matter: interiors, statues, glass and plates. Not only does subject matter mask the act of painting, it is also part of a material culture that has existed from long before contemporary painting. The viewer sees the subject matter before the painting in terms of both time and space. He does not see the forest for the trees. The average viewer wants to know where is the interior, who is the

subject of the statue, which kind of glass and porcelain or faience is represented. In Jacques Lacan's words, here lies 'a trap for the gaze'. The viewer is dominated by De Vlieghe's pretext or subject matter and believes that it is what his painting is about. De Vlieghe's technical bravura seduces the viewer. The ancients' pursuit of *mimesis* – the imitative representation of the real world – is just around the corner. De Vlieghe's painting brilliantly avoids the facile and boring pitfalls of Hyperrealism. He presents us with a vitalized reality.

The foregoing discussion does not imply that an artist's choice of subject matter is irrelevant. We could say that this choice is random – or is it? In any case, the choice is relevant. Noble interiors, the portraits of mighty Roman emperors, as well as rare and precious glass, porcelain and faience may be insignificant in terms of denotation – as semioticians may say – trivial and exchangeable subject matter. However, in terms of connotation, this subject matter reveals an ancient aesthetic of the power of Beauty that is confirmed by the Platonic triad, which associates it to Truth and Goodness. They illustrate how power is not measured by the weight of gold or the extent of one's possessions, but by the outward manifestation of wealth. This semiotic structure is at the core of De Vlieghe's oeuvre, which depicts the signs and symbols of faded power and glory. In spite of De Vlieghe's apparent impartiality to subject matter and his joyous, as well as his passionate personality, he palimpsestically depicts Western culture and what it ultimately represents. Whether he does so intentionally or not, he also questions it. The signs and symbols of faded power and glory hover over his subject matter. It is not a coincidence that his rapid *alla prima* painting technique emphasizes the transience of material wealth, the outward manifestation of power and glory.

Regardless of the figurative representation in his work, De Vlieghe learned from Abstract Expressionism. Pollock's Action Painting, which was the historical apex of painterly freedom, and De Kooning's creative destruction of characters, were his first inspirations. Without a doubt, the drips in De Vlieghe's painting reveal the search for a new aesthetic that is rooted in the old. Against the established order of society, he posits a new and lively disorder. He paints from the shoulder, a liberating technique that he inherited from Action Painting, which allows a stronger articulation than the traditional one of painting from the wrist. In this spirit of dynamic vitalism, he cannot muster the patience required for glazing or waiting for the underpaint to dry. He paints *alla prima*, wet paint-on-wet paint, like the nineteenth century innovators Claude Monet and Vincent van Gogh.

De Vliegheer's early style is austere, it often evokes alienation and the period of the Second World War. It contrasts with his subsequent vitalist style. His oeuvre is a tribute to painting and to the Postmodernist reconciliation of abstract and figurative representation that was deemed impossible by the Modernists.

De Vliegheer's paintings may be viewed upside down or obliquely. One could even mount one onto a flywheel and turn it into a 'spin painting', a dazzling display of pictorial beauty in the spirit of Damien Hirst. Again: the subject matter is but a pretext. The Latin word *praetextum* originally referred to the ornament on a toga from which the rank of the wearer could be inferred and hence, the derived meaning of 'ornament'. De Vliegheer uses historical subject matter as ornaments to compose his abstract paintings, which are ornaments themselves. He balances monochromy and polychromy in his compositions as if he was a paint acrobat.

Roberto Polo Gallery's exhibition is titled *Jan De Vliegheer / Collections*. This title refers to the four series of paintings, representing museum interiors and works of art, which are shown. The activity of collecting is an important part of human culture. Before agriculture, man relied on the vital practice of gathering food for nourishment. At a later stage of evolution, man collected functionless artefacts for intellectual and spiritual nourishment. These artefacts were first collected in curiosity cabinets, marvellous hybrids of art and science, many of which later became museums, also symbols of private or institutional power and glory.

Collecting is part of high culture, a statement that is supported by etymology: *-lect* is the common root of 'collect' and of 'intellect'. It is also the root of 'lecture', a text which is read out loud to an audience and which is derived from a verb that refers to the ability of discerning different letters, a prerequisite for reading. The word 'collection' implies that a collector is able to make choices based on judgement. It presupposes that the collector has the means to acquire and collect the artefacts which he chooses – an activity that is 'elitist', term etymologically cognate to 'chosen' or 'elected'.

De Vliegheer paints 'Collections', the underlying concept of his art, for he is a serial painter. New media have dramatically democratized art, and like many contemporary artists, he has – for years – used the camera as a hunting arm and the computer drive as a storage for a rich collection of trophies: digital images that he may use for his painting and that he organizes in files and sub-files in his iPhone – to date, a collection of over forty-thousand in four-hundred and forty-one files and sub-files. He composes his paintings digitally, much like painters from the past did with charcoal and paper. These paintings will often become part of series or 'Collections'. Moreover, we

could pocket his digital catalogue, rather than carrying a burdensome paper version.

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