

In statu nascendi Dominic van den Boogerd

Rezi van Lankveld usually paints on a stretched canvas that lies horizontally on two beams on the floor. She prefers to work on one painting at a time. Serial production does not appeal to her. But when individual works are brought together in an exhibition, a certain resonance between the paintings emerges: striking similarities and unique characteristics come to light, as if every painting is part of the same family. The works also seem to ‘behave’ differently when they are in one another’s company than when exhibited separately. Van Lankveld attaches great importance to this imaginary conversation between the works and likes to show her paintings in carefully composed constellations. ‘Flitsen’ is a balanced group of this kind.

Promenade (2019), painted in warm shades of grass green, yellow and a pinkish brown, creates the impression of a garden, with two curving tree trunks and some vegetation here and there. This suggestion is disrupted by a large patch of white that looks like a nun’s headdress. The shape was not painted with a brush but formed out of a pool of paint that was poured onto the canvas. During the drying process, pigments created a dark fold. The headwear suggests human presence, even though there is no one in sight. There are good reasons to talk about a garden and a nun’s headdress. Yet there is no certainty that these are references to the visible world. Rezi van Lankveld does not paint a picture of living reality. She does something else: she brings what is painted to life.

It is a misconception to think that a painting expresses what the artist has put into it. All that the painting shows is the

history of its own creation, its own genesis. Art, as Theo van Doesburg established, is not a state of being, but a state of becoming. What *Promenade* shows is an unexpected gathering of pigments, a leanness that emerged after excess paint was scraped off, summery colours behind a gossamer veil. The painting lends expression to what happened on the canvas at the moment when it became what it is now. Something that did not exist before.

The image in *Golden* (2020) appears to have been torn to pieces; some lines look like ragged edges. The semi-circular shape in ochre, which has the sheen of glaze, could represent part of a ceramic jar. The irregular figure below, however, is more reminiscent of a smooth, veined pebble. Years ago Van Lankveld made a number of collages of her own drawings. Tearing and regrouping those fragments of images must have unknowingly influenced her way of painting. The painting shows how parts of the composition break away, demanding a high degree of autonomy. There is, as it were, a form of armed peace between opposites. We see fixed forms contrasted with amorphous patches, straight dividing lines next to undulating curves, vivid colours amidst shades of chalky white, carelessly meandering movements, but also a painstaking quest for equilibrium. As if nothing can exist without an opponent.

As soon as the painter has started a painting, she changes her plan. It is the act of painting that determines the progress, not the painter. At least as much paint must have been removed from the canvas as was applied to it as is shown by the studio's stained floor. Painting is not about filling a blank canvas, but is a process of adding and

removing, of erasing and starting over.

The beginning is always tense and exciting, a moment full of hope and anticipation. Then all too often there comes a phase in which the painting, slowly but surely, starts to grind to a halt. The enthusiasm cools, the work hits a dead end, the picture is too empty, too full, too beautiful, too boring, but certainly unsatisfactory in some way. This is the moment when the painting seems to beg for resuscitation. Instinctively, the artist ventures into experimentation, sometimes out of desperation. Rigorous interventions radically change the image a minimum of iconoclasm is inevitable. There is no creation without destruction. Until at a certain point, after a few hours, or a few weeks, the painting comes back to life and the excitement of the first moment returns. The conclusion of the process is just as surprising as the beginning.

The long way the artist has travelled is laborious, time-consuming and circuitous, but apparently necessary in order to achieve a result that can stand up to scrutiny.

‘Fundamental to all creation,’ wrote the Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgård, ‘is that it is not about transferring something one possesses and wishes to express, but about what is expressed emerging as something in itself. Only then can it come alive. It must not exist beforehand but come into being in the moment it is expressed. If that happens, it will also come into being in the moment we see it or read it, and it is this coming into being which justifies a word like “alive” used about art and literature, which in themselves are merely dead colours on a dead canvas or dead letters on a dead book page.’¹

Knausgård's emphasis on calling into being, on animation as the core of all creation, both by the artist who makes the work and by the viewer who looks at it, resonates in Van Lankveld's paintings. Her work exists, to use a term from the field of chemistry, *in statu nascendi*: in a nascent state, a permanent state of becoming. What is painted unfolds the splendour of freshness, the vitality of potential. This quality of Van Lankveld's art can also be recognized in the work of her fellow painters such as Varda Caivano and Amy Sillman.

The white canvas with which the painter begins is more than a blank page. It is a screen onto which the artist, before she begins, unconsciously projects her ideas. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze called it 'the painting before the painting'. This 'painting before the painting' is an arena, a battleground of well-known platitudes, unprecedented possibilities and everything in between. The painter operates within this field of influences. She knows what she wants, but she does not know how to reach the goal. The only way to find out is by painting. Painting puts the artist 'in the moment', beyond doubt, beyond calculation. For a long time, the painting is a combat zone of blind manoeuvres, false steps and strokes of luck, until something crystallizes out of it that leads to a fully formed whole. If the outcome seems vaguely familiar to the painter, this is perhaps because the result is in part a residue of 'the painting before the painting'.

For many years, a newspaper clipping has hung on the wall of her studio, an article from *The Guardian* about the painter El Greco. Van Lankveld is a great admirer of the master from Toledo. She appreciates the unfettered freedom

with which he painted his incandescent images, coarse and expressive, seemingly bold and free and yet very specific—and astoundingly modern. El Greco is the king of the fold. In his work, the depiction of folds is not limited to fabrics and garments: folds transcend all boundaries, extending into infinity. The entire space appears to fold, in undulating, curving movements, with the foreground and background colliding and bursting apart. El Greco does not depict a body or an object with a cloth draped over it; he seeks the depiction of the fold itself, the dark space of the crease, from which the total painting germinates and comes to fruition. This ‘genetic element’, as Deleuze calls it, is the ‘operative function’ that is characteristic of the art of the Baroque.²

At first glance, El Greco’s flickering brushstrokes and feverishly glowing colours are far removed from Van Lankveld’s cautious, exploratory way of painting. However, in a painting like *La Vie de Rêve* (2019), this same ‘operative function’ is at work, albeit on a modest scale. Parts of the image appear to be folded or gathered together, creating dips and wrinkles in the surface, as in a rumpled bed. This is all about tonal values, rather than about the contrast between blue and pink. The battle between light and shadow occurs in different places, but this fight does not happen in the same way all over. The contradictions in the play of shadows threaten the coherence of the image, which is at constant risk of falling apart. Above the twisted architecture of brushstrokes, small blue clouds float by with a smile.

Although all the works have been created in a similarly small format, the methods of painting show great variety. While in her earlier work everything seemed fluid, the

textures in the recent work are more differentiated. There are parts that seem like glass or ice, hardened and impenetrable, and places that look soft and woolly, as if they might gently yield to pressure. Sometimes the surface is reminiscent of a grainy photocopy, and sometimes it is more like velvety cream. The fanningout brushstrokes in an aubergine-coloured patch in *Creature* (2019) bring to mind an extraordinary association with downy plumage puffing up in the wind, while a festoon of short loops in *La Vie de Rêve* (2019) is reminiscent of eyelashes. Although neither feathers nor eye- lashes are depicted, their materiality is almost palpable. Paint, pigments and binders have here become raw materials that evoke a rich spectrum of physical sensations.

In Rezi van Lankveld's paintings, the image (we cannot call it a depiction) sometimes appears folded or pleated, sometimes cracked or torn. Fault lines and turning points mark the constitutive moments in the painting process. The component elements grate and grind, twist and turn, manoeuvring themselves into precarious positions in order to prop up the whole and to save it from collapse. Everything contributes to a delicate balance, a temporary entente that has just been established and whose future is uncertain.

1 In: Karl Ove Knausgård, *So Much Longing in So Little Space: The Art of Edvard Munch*, Harvill Secker, London / Penguin Books, New York, 2019, p. 87 (translated from the Norwegian by Ingvild Burkey)

2 On Gilles Deleuze's *Le Pli*, see: Sjoerd van Tuinen, 'Verwikkeld in een soort van serpentine: Deleuzes concept van het maniërisme tussen Bacon en de barok', *Esthetica. Tijdschrift voor Kunst en Filosofie*, published on 17

April 2009, <http://www.estheticatijdschrift.nl>