

The secret life of unsold art

When Jacqueline Peeters decided to pick up her brush once again, she already had two careers under her belt. One as an up-and-coming talented painter who had studied at De Ateliers and been awarded a Royal Prize for Painting and had several exhibitions to her name, and one as a media researcher in Brussels and London, a career that had given her financial independence and enough time and space to bring up her child – until, after some years had passed, her artistic blood refused to be ignored any longer. Peeters opened up the barn of the former farmhouse where she lives, close to Belgium’s language border. The dim and dusty storage space was packed with more than a hundred of her paintings. Such a collection of unsold art might seem daunting, but not to Peeters. She might not have succeeded in selling these works, but that does not make them any less valuable. The prematurely concluded oeuvre of her younger years became the starting point for a reborn studio practice.

This process began in around 2015, hesitantly, cautiously. The artist pinned pieces of paper with words, names and scraps of text on them to some of her old canvases. She wanted to express herself, to give space to her personal thoughts and feelings, without immediately having to reveal them to all and sundry – which is why some of the words were taped or painted over. The result was new paintings on old canvases. An additional advantage of this reuse was that the stack of unsold work did not increase in size. [1]

Two Windows (2022) is one such painting, made on an old canvas. Almost the entire surface is covered with dark-green oil paint, with the exception of two original areas that have been left intact. These ‘windows’ offer a view of parts of the former painting, a schematic representation of a system of pipes running through various rooms. The view of the space is

also a look back in time. This work was followed by other window paintings. One of these, in inky black and snow white, was loosely inspired by Max Beckman's *Winterlandschaft* (1930), one of Peeters' favourite works in the collection of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the city where she grew up. The dynamic between overpainting and underpainting, between past and present, has become a fixed element of the painter's repertoire.

In some of the paintings, English words can be read, such as 'browned' and 'foxed', 'worn' and 'with tears'. These are terms that are found in catalogues for art auctions, used to describe the condition of the merchandise on offer. Some are also applicable to Peeters' paintings from the 1980s and 90s, a number of which have not survived the test of time completely unscathed. In *His layered gestures* (2021), the artist plays with the ambiguous meanings of this terminology. The caption 'his layered gestures' refers to the stratification in the (male) painter's brushstrokes but could also mean that the good man's actions are open to multiple interpretations. The adjacent 'strokes' might then be interpreted as caresses rather than brushstrokes, lending a mischievous undertone to the dry jargon of restoration.

After her flying start, Peeters was offered very few exhibitions, so she began to paint her own imaginary shows, consisting of floor plans of fictitious galleries in which she presents her work. The floor is equipped with a wooden herringbone parquet of the kind often seen in art galleries. Some of these paintings allude to the exhibitionist side of the exhibition practice, where the distinction between private and professional motives is not always clear. The bed in the middle of the gallery in *Zézette* (2022) could, for example, be seen as a metaphor for intimacy. After all, when they exhibit their work, artists open themselves up, exposing themselves. And when the exhibition is over, private outpourings might well end up in the bedroom of a complete stranger. [2] The painting's title is taken from a character in a novel

by Georges Simenon: Zézette is the woman desired by the protagonist. In French slang, zézette is a playful nickname for the female genitals. Both connotations suggest parallels between the acts of exhibition and erotic flirtation.

Back in the 1990s, the unsold painting was already a theme in Peeters' work. On small canvases featuring non-descript patches of paint, the words UNSOLD PAINTING were written in large letters, followed by a number. Ironically, the works garnered a lot of appreciation at the time; critics, for example, saw them as a witty commentary on the machinations of the art trade. [3] The creator, however, considers these canvases primarily the product of her own inability to conquer a position in the art market; if the *Unsold Paintings* make fun of anything, then it is the artist herself. Some of these works were included in an exhibition with the heady economic title *Ballad of Supply and Demand* (1999) in Brussels, organised by Philippe Braem, but by far the majority of *Unsold Paintings* have never been seen by anyone. *Unsold Painting no.383* (2021), a recent work, suggests that sales are still not going well, although a joke cannot be ruled out.

It should come as no surprise that the creator of these unsold goods has developed a considerable interest in the pricelists that galleries offer their visitors, those printed A4 sheets lying ready and waiting on the counter, with the prices of the exhibited works of art neatly listed, including sales tax and excluding transport costs. Since 1995, Peeters has from time to time made paintings in which she offers her own works for sale, stating the title, dimensions and materials used, followed by the price, once in Dutch guilders or Belgian francs, nowadays in euros. Recent price indications mention significantly higher amounts than twenty-five years ago – inflation and the economy have not failed to have an impact. *EDNA OFFENBACH TO LEE LE GAC* (2019) shows a list of paintings named after fictitious galleries, each with a first

name and last name from two different languages: Jérôme Marquez, Jane du Pre-Arenberg, Alistair Cardozo – the illustrious company opens up vistas of an imaginary aristocracy of art-loving cosmopolitans. Galleries are like people's last names: some sound more expensive than others.

Names appear frequently in Peeters' work – not least of all her own name. *An exhibition of artists named Jacqueline* (2021) lists the names of participants in a fictitious exhibition, all of whom are called Jacqueline, including Jacqueline Mesmaeker, Jacqueline de Jong and Jacqueline Humphries. Peeters is a common surname in Dutch-speaking countries and therefore not very suitable for anyone who wishes to stand out. When the artist lived on Rue de Parme in Brussels, she decided for a time to adopt the chic-sounding Madame de Parme as a pseudonym.

All manner of names converge in Peeters' lexicon. Names of famous people, of characters from novels, of relatives, of paintings, of historical figures depicted in art. The artist once saw a photograph in a newspaper with the caption 'Jacqueline and John F. Kennedy' and a thought flashed through her mind: hey, that's about me! – which occurs to everyone at some point when they happen upon their own name. In *La Wally Boolean Poem* (2021), Peeters lists men who have had a Jacqueline by their side, from Pablo Picasso to Tony Oursler. Their names are in parentheses, like search terms separated or connected by operators such as 'and' and 'not', which Peeters was accustomed to using in her former life as a media analyst. The title of the work is taken from an 1892 opera by Alfredo Catalani, a melodrama about unrequited love in the Alps, which, like the Kennedys' marriage, ends in catastrophe.

Red Table (2021) does not list names, but instead descriptions or types of people. They go past like the credits of a film: *la mulâtresse, la Javanaise, la fidanzata*. All the terms

have some kind of connection to the artist herself, to her profession, her appearance, her past, her origins. The allusions to painting are subtle. *La Brune*, for example, refers to Édouard Manet's somewhat vulgar portrait of a brunette with bare breasts. *Gitane à la cigarette/Indienne fumant une cigarette* is a reference to a different portrait by Manet, which was found in the artist's studio after his death and had never been exhibited before. The identity of the Roma woman depicted is still the subject of debate. With her raven-black ponytail, her left hand confidently on her hip, and a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth, she in no way conforms to the nineteenth-century stereotype of the respectable Frenchwoman. Alternative titles of the work therefore refer to a Spanish woman, a Mexican, even 'a smoking native'. Manet also painted a portrait of a Madame Brunet, who was in fact called Caroline de Pène and who, like so many other women, went through life as 'the wife of' (in this case of a mediocre sculptor named Brunet).

Origin is a key factor in the construction of identity. The family tree of Jacqueline Peeters goes back, via her mother, to Sephardic Jews who settled in Amsterdam and later in what was then the Dutch East Indies. In *Ije Ngadisa or A concise family history of migration* (2022), Peeters has provided the branches of her family tree with patches of white labelled with terms such as 'olive', 'white', 'off white', 'brown' and 'dark brown', categories that could well be related to her ancestors' skin colours. Ethnicity is a hot topic in art these days. The focus on changes in skin colour within Peeters' family from generation to generation could be seen as a light-hearted way of putting overly rigid identity politics into perspective. The genetic pattern of continuity and intermingling inherent in family trees is reflected in how this painting came about: as an overpainting of an older work, some traces of which can still be seen.

A painting in which all words have disappeared, in which all names, characterisations and categorisations have dissolved into white mist, is the monumental *Madame Monde Vanishes* (2021). The title is a variation on *La fuite de Monsieur Monde*, or *Monsieur Monde Vanishes*, the name of a book by Simenon. This novel is about a successful middle-aged businessman who decides one morning to leave behind his bourgeois existence, including his sleeping wife. His unexpected disappearance illustrates the unpredictability of human behaviour and how feelings that have been pent up for years can suddenly find expression, sometimes with devastating consequences. Perhaps *Madame Monde* personifies the appealing but almost impossible desire to abandon everything and embark upon a new life. The disappearance of *Madame Monde* could, however, also relate to the failing memory of the artist's mother, formerly a poet and translator, whose recollections, like her words, are now slowly but surely disappearing.

Ultimately, *Madame Monde Vanishes*, like all of Jacqueline Peeters' works, is about the artist herself. About her fears and desires, her memories and expectations, and yes, also about her market value, albeit in a tongue-in-cheek way. Painting is, for Peeters, essentially a solitary activity, with one's own ego as the centre of the universe. Painting is the kaleidoscopic mirror in which the painter can view herself from all sides, as a woman, as a daughter, as an artist, as a brand, as a supplier, and so on. 'All my work is about me,' says Peeters. 'It is sometimes seen as a criticism of the art world, but it is in fact a cry for attention.' [4]

Peeters' decision to use her unsold art as material for new works is perhaps reminiscent of Marcel Broodthaers, who as a relatively unsuccessful poet once decided to consolidate a stack of his unsold poetry collections in plaster and to exhibit them as a sculpture (*Le Pense Bête*, 1964). 'I, too, wondered whether I could not sell something and succeed in life,' he

wrote about his debut exhibition. 'For some time, I had been no good at anything. I am forty years old...' [5] Peeters came to Broodthaers' work relatively late. Despite undeniable similarities, it did not do much for her – as a painter she is above all attached to the lively movements of the painting hand. However, her work fits seamlessly into a tradition of work from the southern Low Countries, leading from James Ensor and Leon Spilliaert via René Magritte and Broodthaers to René Daniëls. She mentions the Belgian Roger Raveel as one of the artists who have inspired her.

The windows, parquet floors and tables are placed directly and seemingly carelessly on the canvas, in a way that is almost off the cuff, without preliminary studies, without composition sketches. Even Peeters' most sophisticated works have retained that sketch-like, rudimentary character. The palette is limited. Lots of black, off-white, vermilion, a dirty brownish yellow. Only the bare essentials are depicted. A wooden floor, for example, is painted coarsely on the canvas with a dried-out brush. Pale-grey paint residue gives the work a raw and punky edge. Peeters: 'I don't try to make things look more beautiful than they are. I find a lot of painting boring and pretentious. I wish for my work to be "artless".' [6]

Passion rages beneath that bleak, forbidding, gruff surface. A recent series of works was based on an extremely romantic painting by Max Beckmann, *Sommer* (1930), which depicts a summertime rendezvous between two lovers. In a hut at the foot of a hill, they lie naked in each other's arms, half under a red blanket, which represents not only the secrecy of this intimate encounter, but also the fragility of the idyll. The painting is known by five different titles: *Sommer*, *Liebepaar (Sommertag)*, *Summer (Lovers)*, *Sommertag mit Liebepaar* and *Kleine Gebirgslandschaft*. In Peeters' drawings and paintings, the two lovers appear to dissolve into the surrounding hills.

There are many painters who, disappointed, have thrown in the towel in their later years. The exceptions are the ones who reconsider that decision. Peeters' successful restart after a break of around fifteen years is motivated by the same dreams and ambitions as before, but the failure, the inadequacy and the inability to make those dreams come true have now become a distinctive and iconic element of the work. The desire for a great and compelling life, a glorious artistic career, may not yet have come to fruition but passion still triumphs over disenchantment. Jacqueline Peeters' faith in painting, as a visual language in which she can effectively express herself has only grown stronger. As, incidentally, have her paintings.

Dominic van den Boogerd

[1] Not all of these old works have been reused. A select number remain in their original state.

[2] Bedroom paintings are expensive. When David Rockefeller's private collection went under the hammer in 2018, the painting from his bedroom, a female nude by Picasso, fetched the highest price, over 115 million dollars.

[3] The art critic Laura Ferrini, for example, describes these works as 'open criticism to the art system and its economical laws' ('UNSOLD PAINTINGS. Jacqueline Peeters at Zazà', *Made in Mind*, 5 November 2020).

[4] Jacqueline Peeters in conversation with the author, Idegem, Belgium, 8 August 2022.

[5] Marcel Broodthaers, quoted in exh. cat. *Marcel Broodthaers*, The Tate Gallery, London 1980, p.13.

[6] see note 4.