

RIK MOENS – ARTIST CANVAS

In one of his last interviews in 1968, Lucio Fontana predicted that the art of the future would be something entirely different: No object, no form... It will have nothing more to do with bourgeois consumption or with the beauty that adheres to an object intended for sale. Art will become infinite, immeasurable, immaterial, philosophy. The bourgeois function of art must end. Throw the doors open! (1) In the light of the revolutionary and utopian visions of the sixties, it was only evident to regard the history-laden art of painting as a product of bourgeois society and for this reason immediately declare it dead. Paradoxically, in his work Fontana had nonetheless recently shown that new dimensions remain to be explored for painting and sculpture, as long as you don't allow yourself to be restricted by conventions and values. Fontana himself said that he did not make holes in order to destroy the painting, but on the contrary, to find something different. Time has since proved that the plastic thinking of Lucio Fontana and his generation in no way heralded the end of painting, but just a new beginning: the start of a new and liberating period full of experiment. The canvas no longer had to be the carrier of a theory or an illusion, transformed or otherwise, of reality; the paint no longer had to be a means to represent something other than itself. Rik Moens was born a year after Lucio Fontana died. Thus the revolutionary fever that raged in 1968 and subsequent years obviously passed him over. Even so, Rik Moens began his artistic career in a period of uncertainty as to whether painting was still (or once again) dead, resurrected, or indestructible. Although Rik Moens resolutely chose to study painting, from the mid 1990's his work consisted almost entirely of assemblages, installations and drawings. From 2000 on, however, a new game with painting developed out of his already unconstrained search for new plastic possibilities. Although his experiments on, and with, the canvas can frequently be interpreted as ironic retorts to painting, still they do not have the least pretension to undermine the pleasure of painting with a cynical undertone, quite the opposite. In many respects Rik Moens' work actually refers to 'the joy of painting', and the delight in viewing the work that arises from it. In my opinion, this finds expression in the experimental way in which he seeks out new possibilities, apparently as an autodidact, without allowing himself to be influenced by the so-called historical baggage of the medium. In much of his work, the representation of texture and the painterly touch are highly 'autonomated' and in a certain sense enlarged. On the basis of innumerable layers of semitransparent acrylic paint, he creates, for example, an extremely soft and mysterious haze that gives the canvas an immaterial quality and illusory depth. The tints of that which lies beneath the acrylic layers are muted without becoming unrecognizable. The texture of the layers is very smooth and uniform, whereby congealed drops of acrylic paint slip away along the edges, thus positively convincing us that the canvas is more than a two-dimensional plane. Against the congealed reality of this texture, which is the result of a long production and drying process, he places intuitive and fluently painted brush strokes. Sometimes applied as heavily as possible, and sometimes very fleetingly. Occasionally they evoke a reality such as a branch with blossom, an interior, a horizon or a still life with fruit, but even so they remain just strokes of paint or meandering lines. When we consider Rik Moens' recent production, two things are immediately obvious. There is the exceptional versatility of his oeuvre, as well as an almost logical consistency that arises from it. The consistency is primarily due to the genuine wonder and boundless enthusiasm with which he tries out 'all kinds of things' on and with the canvas. It is also conspicuous how he uses certain strategies from hobby painting, not only as an ironic reference, but equally because of the freedom that he thus creates for himself to extend his oeuvre in an uncomplicated way. In this respect, the emphasized use of industrially produced canvasses has a highly prosaic and desecrating effect. It just seems to be the case that technical ingenuity and artistic enthusiasm refuse to allow themselves to be captured on a product

of mass consumption. Moreover, Rik Moens manipulates and paints the standard-sized canvases even while they are still in the cellophane packaging with the logo of the canvas factory remaining visible. Is it then, for that matter, still possible to speak of oil or acrylics on canvas? He often depicts the least far-fetched motifs, in particular the image of the graphic design that indicates the brand of the canvas. As if very dutifully using the canvases for the purpose they are intended: for painting from example, as so many hobby painters do. His own, somewhat ludicrous signature also frequently reappears as an autonomous and reproducible motif: it seems the most appropriate way in which to proudly differentiate himself from other painters and gain brand recognition. In this way, the oeuvre permanently balances between a state of distant anonymity and position-taking recognizability. From his unencumbered thinking about painting, he thus poses a number of loaded plastic questions, without wishing to postulate grand stories or moralising visions. The production process departs from the meaningless and gradually becomes charged with meaning, by way of the choices he makes. The choice, for example, to work on the canvases while still in their cellophane packaging is not prompted a priori by some critical prejudice, but becomes meaningful during the production. Thus the meaning that is generated is above all fundamentally plastic in nature: the visualisation of all manner of experiments and possibilities with oil and acrylic paint, with composition, with styles... The visual language that so develops has a logic of its own, due to the maker's dedicated pursuit of an individual and reflective experience of the work by the observer. In this, Rik Moens' work is impossible to pin down with a premeditated concept, and instead creates an unpredictable and constantly shifting visual game. In an uncomplicated manner, he rethinks and employs elements, side-by-side and mixed together, which appear to derive from the formal language of pop art, abstract expressionism, sublime painting, and minimalism among others... He plays with the format, the image carrier, the colour and the stratification, with the controlled accident and the uncontrolled action. The painterly course that Rik Moens has charted since 2000 is thus strewn with unexpected collisions, the impact of which is different in each case. The collision between a straight and meandering line, between a reasoned slowness and impulsive speed, between baby-pink and earth-brown, between a drop of paint and a monochrome canvas. The works are pleasing to the observer, but might equally appear surprisingly incisive and even brusque. Consequently, observing the work of Rik Moens is a visually exhilarating trip whereby you never know what awaits you around the next bend. It is constantly in motion and gradually charges itself up with new energy. Fontana's Stanley knife was guided by the resolute determination to make a liberating statement on the future meaning of painting. Rik Moens' oeuvre is relieved of the necessity or duty to make another such statement. It can thus develop further, freely and impartially, as an ideal antidote to routine in painting. (1) B. HESS, Lucio Fontana, Taschen GmbH, Cologne, 2006, p. 88.

(Tanguy Eeckhout, 2009)