

Sublime sloppinesses (Gerrit Vermeiren), Hart nr. 52, 2009

Until June 30th Marc Vanderleenen (1952, lives and works in Antwerp) exhibits a wide selection of relatively recent paintings at Annie Gentils. The presentation, entitled 'No Clear Thoughts', centres around precisely this: no clear thoughts. And similarly, no clear paintings either, even if the pale pictorial universe into which the viewer is invited exudes the persuasiveness and inevitability of a baroque altar. Through the act painting, doubt and decline have become the rather incongruous yet solid foundations that underlie Vanderleenen's work.

The works of Marc Vanderleenen exist in a realm untouched by sunlight. They are fully constructed out of the haziness of a modest and almost hidden artistry, weighed down by a melancholy that harks back to another century. Still, a certain sense of pleasure informs some of these works, not only through the (sardonic) humour that ultimately pervades its scenes, but also in the awareness of the malleability of the painterly image. Vanderleenen's technique of is both transparent and complex. He does not conceal how the painting is created - in different, often transparent strokes and superimposed layers (as is only possible in oil), yet the mystery of the moment in which a multitude of strokes blend together into an 'image' remains. The wiping off of paint seems to be as important as the brushstroke. Especially in the most recent work, this interplay between diffuse, pictorial zones and more graphical elements makes for particularly strong painting. Despite the restrained setup of most of the works, they nonetheless evidence a sense of depth and a coulisse-effect that is usually only found in landscape paintings from the 17th and 18th centuries. Marc Vanderleenen has in him the making of a great painter, indeed, Marc Vanderleenen is a great painter, but then a painter with a curious kind of reverse ambition. The scene manifests itself in part through the desire to remain invisible; the scene, moreover, can only be painting. Any attempt to translate a painting of Vanderleenen into to something else or even reproduce it (for example as an illustration to this article), is futile.

Certain motifs and scenes in Vanderleenen's oeuvre originate as a series - as is the case in much contemporary painting, one might think. But with Vanderleenen, the principle of the series is not one or the other clever editing devise or cinematic strategy used to spread a deeper content across multiple paintings. It does not stem from a sense of distrust toward the painting as a unique and multi-layered carrier of meaning. It is as if Vanderleenen wants this unique carrier of meaning to emerge from the act of pure painting, inadvertently, through several attempts, as 'collateral damage'. Accuracy underlies the darkness of the motif, much in the way unguarded moments and sloppiness are required in the exercise and the execution of the successful materialization of the image. The results of these efforts are remarkably similar in content and artistic quality, without, however, affecting the unique character of each particular painting.

Vanderleenen 'tries out' certain motifs in the third dimension - small sculptures (of equally modest scale as the paintings) which he himself calls models. In essence, that is indeed what they are. Bricolaged representations present an animist landscape and small, animal and subterranean life. Man as a rabbit, as an insect larva, as nothing. The contents of the oeuvre of Vanderleenen is perhaps most reminiscent of the impenetrable motifs in some of the prints of Goya. It is as if the artist were creating the image of a secular god, the image of a god who probably does not exist, but who, if he does exist, is certainly not on our side. The paintings series 'Flat Earth' presents a hanged man in a landscape, hanging horizontally, like a pennant in strong winds. Friends meet with a ridiculous degree of humility; vanitas motifs become totems; figures get lost without moving; every bow is strained; every structure is unstable and the world is silent. Elsewhere the sun breaks through a baroque cloud cover, as though something were preparing to descend. The artist, who might probably prefer to work on a self-portrait as someone else, only registers, in vain hope.

Gerrit Vermeiren

Marc Vanderleenen 'No Clear Thoughts'

Until June 30th in Annie Gentils Gallery, Peter Benoitstraat 40b, 2018 Antwerp. Open Wed-Sat from 14h to 18h.

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