

Against judgement

Marc Vanderleenen has always been a painter of shapes and colors that are still looming, or that are just as much already perishing, as if they are seen through the veil of a dream in greyscale. There are no clear and distinct ideas in his work, no final certainties of a thinking subject. Against Descartes, he mobilizes Spinoza's expression, forever expressing itself differently. Everything takes place in that hesitant, paranoid state in which something is still developing, and there is no definite answer as to what it is exactly. I assume that everyone knows such experiences from dreams: they often begin vague and undefined, yet there is always a moment in which one settles the undefined because it is too overwhelming. Although the dreamer knows the developing thing to be ultimately undefinable, he judges it has always been that one thing: a face, a friend, a rabbit. I myself have witnessed an endlessly abstract brooding transforming, in the act of dreaming, into the somewhat less monstrous form of a rapidly spinning composite body: horror.

The question Vanderleenen seems to ask, can thus be formulated as follows: what is it precisely that takes shapes through painting, and equally through looking, or living. And if something is indeed taking shape, if there is such thing as a shaped identity, does it not *deform* at the same time? Could it not already be something else when one defines it, by defining it? To paraphrase the well-known game of questions that starts from the premise that all that exists can be classified into three categories. But was it even a man, a thing or an animal in the first place? Could it not have been something of a different order? Vanderleenen doesn't trust well-defined identities like these, but he also doesn't turn away from figuration. He rather seems to wonder how figures can come to exist at all, in a cosmos that is ever in motion. The existential answer is: they can only exist in a process, and this process is finite. Between the big birth and the big death, there exists an endless amount of becomings. Sometimes something abstract happens, and this abstraction we call figuration.

But this is probably too philosophical, too broad and too abstract, not concrete enough. Nothing takes shape out of nothing, in a cosmic vacuum. Things come to existence as part of a wild history, out of an unrepeatable and ever incomparable material condition: the future actualizes itself perpetually from the past. In the waking delirium of the twentieth century, fascists emerge once again – but not the fascists of yore: these are transformed specimens. In a series of paintings by Vanderleenen, their not yet concrete faces already hook onto the abstract sun wheel, or grow their heads out of swastika stick figures. After his election, Donald Trump was labelled evil. And undoubtedly he is. But creepier is the possibility that fascism could just as well have selected another fascist if Trump hadn't been there. And in other place in the world indeed it did: Bolsonaro, Orban, Meloni, Van Grieken. Evil is not personal: it is positional, structural, relational, even if it is precisely a disavowal of all relations.

Vanderleenen's works have often been set in an existential or ontological space, a Beckettian no man's land where the problem of being – and not that of history – predominated. His existential battlefield is a struggle with figuration, which for Vanderleenen is not a means of representation, but a means to create reality: images produce shapes of visibility, and thus generate a world. Of course one can reproduce images. This means, as far as such a thing is even possible, conserving the existing image: being conservative, reactionary. One can also, however, let images bloom, transform them, pay attention to their becoming and artifice, keep them fluid. Even if his range is limited, even if his public is not the masses, the painter is entangled in image politics anyhow. This is why Vanderleenen has always balanced between making appear and making disappear. No image is definitive; everything is part of series, and series are never complete. Likewise, the works within those series are airy, not crystallized. Vanderleenen's painting is restless and temporary. Through practice he learns to deal with its responsibilities, accounting for all the liberties taken in practicing.

Yet if Vanderleenen's attitude implies image politics, perhaps his existentialism has always been silently anchored in a particular history: it has been part of a historical regime of signs, to which it resisted, to which it related. On many of the works the artist exhibits on 'The Pale Horse', history intrudes emphatically. As the series of fascists shows, history takes the form of an antagonist: a force that is not transformative but that destructively tends towards rigidity and fear, a fluffly bunny rabbit turned into a war machine. Something is in the air: the geese of the Capitol warn us it is at hand, just like they warned the Romans for the intruding Gauls, according to the legend. In Vanderleenen's series that refers to this famous story, they mysteriously express something that doesn't have a referent yet. Post- or perhaps again pre-Trump, this historical reference is in no way timeless. A culture or regime could collapse. But reality and its images do not stop fleeting.

Does 'The Pale Horse' herald an apocalypse? I believe the opposite may rather be true: in these 'late' works, Vanderleenen resists the so-called judgement day. Like Kafka's K., he prefers indefinite postponement. Maybe Vanderleenen's work itself is a pale horse? Colorwise, this could just be right. Rather than knowing what something will have been eventually, rather than finally getting things straight, the artist still paints against judgement.

Koen Sels, January 2024