



AUGMENTED REALITY

An interview by Johan Leestemaker with Rombout Oomen.

What fascinates you about painting?

What fascinates me most about painting is getting a direct result from the actions you do as a painter, with each brushstroke having a direct impact on the canvas. For me painting is a direct result of my interaction with matter, in this case paint. I paint from concepts, but the painting process for me still a sort of collaboration between myself and the paint. The wealth of possibilities within paint is so immense that it's unacceptable not to go exploring. It's just a waste not to go there. I use paint - so better work with it, let it work for you. Literally. I paint subjects that appeal to me, say from the analytical part of my thinking and my perception, of what fascinates me. This is then translated into a specific image. And that image can be something very original, but just as often not at all.

Can you remember your graduation?

I graduated with a series of prints and two paintings. The graphic work, using 'piëzografie'-technique, was an investigation of the value of objects. In the first example, I photographed a locomotive, a nail clipper...a total of 49 different objects. All were scaled to the same size. I wondered what might happen from mixing scales and displaying them within the same visual plane - would the objects lose the meaning we attach to them, because we know them within a specific context? The second printwork included a detailed enlargement of each object 15 by 15 pixels to 15 by 15 centimeters, all neatly lined up, so that no value could be assigned at all anymore. So it became a color screen. And the third print was a model photographed like a Muybridge series. She was pretending to paint the space around her, with a huge Chinese brush. So she was conducting the reverse action of what a painter normally does.

The painting was a fairly large canvas onto which I poured liters and liters of red paint. My studio looked like a slaughterhouse afterwards, and had the unfortunate consequence of bringing about problems with the management afterwards. The other canvas was painted in the same method, pouring paint rather than painting, but with many colors. The paintings were color-focused. Completely abstract

Photography was a constant in your working methods?

At art school I took pictures to document a lot of subject material, or moments. Not so much as a starting point, but as a sketch. I did this for efficiency. Shooting is much faster and less effort than drawing. Since the academy, I've done much less photography. I think I started using the photos of others out of laziness.

You use the work of other photographers?

Yes.

Yes, and what's more you've asked me to seek out pictures for you to use.
I will happily outsource things, indeed. That gains me time.

So you once started your work with a few sketches, advanced to shooting, moved onto media extracts, and then asked your friends if they were willing to look for pictures for you!

That's how it goes. I am collating a collection of photographs from newspapers, which have been reviewed and discarded by the photo editor. So what makes its way into my picture archive is a triple sifting of material, reasonably efficient. The organizing process used in the scrapbooks is highly personal, applying a personal logic in terms of what I like and how it fits in with my vision. I have a particular view of our world, and comes out in my photo collages - and then in my paintings.

Will you tell about your quest of instilling meaning into your images?

Suppose I'm walking down the street and there's a bus passing. I'm able to consciously decide whether to walk into the bus or not. I can also think I'll walk under the bus, but don't do it physically. What is true then? If you carry that idea far enough, what is the real world and what is not? What I think, or how I physically act? But thought is also a physical act, because there is a message from a nerve from A to B which has a consequence. But I am the one sending those impulses, they don't move because they feel like it, but because I want them to happen. What is the value of something when I also can assign a different value to it? That idea has crystallized into the concept, such that there can be no "final" reality.

For instance you and I are in your house. You've been here many times before, you've experienced many things here I haven't. I've never been here, so I've had a very different experience today from yours. So my views on this specific space are inevitably very different than yours. But who is right, assuming there is such a thing as "right" or "truth"? Truth is a physical impossibility. There are a myriad of truths. Can you discriminate on the value of one truth from another, and declare one to be better than another?

So you're basically trying to come to a completely neutral point of view?

Yes that's the idea now, and was at the academy. I had a formal approach to painting. I wouldn't allow a personal touch or brushstroke to be visible, in order to avoid a subjective part of the

painter making its way onto the canvas. I figured that would made the work less true. But still, after a long time with that approach, I left it behind, because it seemed a pity not be working with paint and brushstrokes to show my view that way ... With my paintings I try now and tried then to show what my way of seeing the world. I've taken that liberty because I believe I can interpret images pretty well. That is my profession. Image Interpretation.

What kind of person are you?

I think I am a curious individual, raised and educated visually.

So basically, there was both a supply of images fueled by curiosity and on the other hand, that taught you a personal vision of expression?

Yes, it took me quite a while to develop my own vision and to be able to execute it. Because there is so much in this that's interesting. I don't know if it was really this long, but it seemed to be about ten years before I could clearly describe why I do what I do and what the underlying reasons were. In the days after the academy I studied all the forms I could think of with painting. Even with spatial design and other media, like writing. I just kept examined why something is as it is, whether we see it, and how I could depict it.

It's expected that you have a consistent line of work. This is seen as necessary, because it implies that you've found your own language and way of seeing the world. But how can you find your own language if one only seeks a style just to be consistent? That seems to me not an appropriate way of what you move. To display anything at all, the pictorial possibilities are endless. You'd have to try them all before you know what action and style fits you best. That takes time. Some people will be pretty lucky and quickly find a language that suits them. But I don't think many people really have that luxury. It's not an obvious thing, if only from the perspective of realising the range of styles and forms one has available for expression.

Human history has roughly 40,000 years of painting. I couldn't overlook this perspective in any case. To be conscious within your style requires knowledge and expertise. One can't just have it if one is not studying on it. I am aware of this 40.000 years of pictorial expression and that is mainly due to an excellent history teacher (Michael van Hoogenhuyze, red). That sparked in me a great love for art history and philosophy. It makes you think.

We now come to the “why” question. Why the perspective that you've developed over the last five / six years you've been working in? Where does it come from?

In 2004, I painted a large mural in Amsterdam public space, called 'Roosje'. And that painting had a major impact on the society. Before I started I was totally unaware that art could bring such a riot. I didn't deliberately undertake a social engagement. With this painting there became a political buzz, for which I'd had no precedent to date in my artistic life. - from alderman to Imam to vandal. Everyone had something to say about it. I didn't realize what all was happening. The work was bombarded with paint bombs and shortly before Theo van Gogh was murdered. There was much news coverage of the Muslim reaction, and the media attention took on a whole life of its own. I must say I was very much on my guard. To die as a martyr for a mural, was going too far. After the whole project, I went to Berlin because I wanted to leave for a while anyway - after the debacle of the paint bombs, certainly. The blinders fell from my eyes discovering the impact art might have.

Why Berlin?

A friend of mine said that Berlin would better suit me, and I went there seven months to paint in

solitude, like a dream. I was there to be alone. I conducted personal inquiries into art, and not with other people. For me it was a solitary experience. I made some friends, of course, but they did not really matter in my work. I went inside me. There were of course many Dutch artists, but these I had deliberately decided to be removed from. But I often went to museums and galleries and shows. Which are fantastic there. My painting became more politically engaged, probably thanks to 'Rooisje'. I bought a couple GI Joe's, that plastic toy fighting hero with big guns. I made a series of photo compositions. Those were my models. I thought it was a good idea, given this is how our children get their knowledge of the world. It seemed logical to me, to use such models for my paintings instead of life models. I incorporated them into compositions of Goya and Rembrandt. A complete retrospective of Goya's etchings in Leipzig am Oder had an enormous impact on me. He became one of my most important inspirational sources. Especially his route to his final work. From frivolous Rococo to a kind of supernatural realism of the Enlightenment, that came to interest me.

Did you base your work on principles of The Enlightenment?

As Europeans we look at images a certain way. People say today we live in a visual culture, but this has been true for the past few thousand years already. It has, in fact, never been different (even more so, perhaps, in pre-literary times). For example J.L. David's "Death of Marat" is nothing more than, literally and compositionally, the taking down from the cross of Jesus the Messiah. From the perspective of the day, it must have been viewed as a liberation from shackles. An equally brilliant and obvious idea from the time of the Enlightenment! David's approach during the making of this canvas was that of an accomplished intellectual propagandist. I find that absolutely stunning and enthralling: The Pieta. But this is not new. Something similar has been happening all along. The Roman Emperors - with their grotesque images in the farthest corners of their empire - used the same visual language, the newer emperors of Rome, the Popes as well. The idiom is refined, up to Communism, to America and so on. It is one repetition from one to another. No originality in sight at all, just in expression, not in message, so thus in composition. For me, Marat became an icon.

I refer you to Luc Tuymans, from that time from when Ann Demeester was director of W139 (an Amsterdam based art-institute, red.) and he pasted pictures of stills from CNN reports to the wall He showed what CNN was doing. By using classical compositions, CNN viewers got involved in the war in Iraq. And CNN had a great success. Exactly what you just said.

But can we act different then?

That was his research question. And no, we can't help it.

I agree. Assuming that you have learned something, the teacher who taught you has learned that from his teacher and so on. Can we then state that every generation has its own authentic image interpretation? No, that seems impossible and pointless. And why should we? The compositions that we've used for thousands of years are there for a reason. Apparently they fit perfectly into our thinking, both chemical - what we are made of as human beings - and also how we emotionally and spiritually experience the world around us. Moreover, it is an interaction, a mutual Pavlovian response of man to image and back again.

Why do you still have to paint then?

The answer to that question goes to the heart of human experience, I think. That's not a question I

can answer purely using a rational framework. As an artist you're working with the Language of Beauty. My profession is one where we focus purely to shape an expression of that language. So others can use our findings again for other purposes. The Language of Beauty, harmony in mathematics, again in music, in rhythm and shape, so ultimately the manifestation of everything we see and yet don't see around us is our research area. That language is a universal language, but still not easy to express in rational terms. That is what people often find exciting about art. Or simply don't understand, and therefore often reject. But because everyone knows the language, anyway, because it is present in all of us, we want to hear and see it. We want to lap up that language and we want to understand that language. As moths fly forever to a lightbulb, because there is no other option. Our job is to picture, to translate that language, that light. We need to identify and express it in some way or another. Some link it with a religion. But no matter how universal the language is, it comes from an individual place, as well as the expression. The only similarity is that we humans are made of the same composition, and so looking for the same answers. As individuals, we see how that language manifests itself in as many forms as there are atoms. So I try to shape what ultimately can't be formed: the light. It is therefore generally useless. But because I can not do differently, think of the moth, I do it. My reason is that it is a necessity.

Is there a art discipline into which you fit?

My work has become more Expressionist. The time in Germany had a heavy influence in my work. You have Southern- and Northern-European art. Netherlands seems somewhere in between - Rembrandt was greatly influenced by the Italians. Dürer is a manifestation of northern European painting. The border is on the border of the Reformation, which in turn runs on the border of the Roman Empire, the Limes. Moreover, North-European art bears a darker, more intellectual, more philosophical approach to life. South of that border art seems much more frivolous, more playful and lighter. The Northern-European imagery has been around far longer than any empire in Europe whatsoever. What is striking is that the Germans never really been dominated, not by Romans, not by Franks, not Slavs. Perhaps briefly by the Americans. Therefore, the Nordic imagery has developed relatively unhindered. That imagery is remarkably mature. I count myself to the Northern-European painting. I feel most at home there. Political and cultural, scientific and philosophical. I think basically since day one.

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