

# PURE MATTER

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SHOW 11

10. Mai – 13. September 2014

JOS VAN MERENDONK

## The Return to Paradise by way of Chromium Oxide Green

At first sight the works convey the playful. Lines, forms and textures multiply from painting to painting. The artist's imagination projects itself into an otherwise infinite space of white with no limiting reference to an external object or model. While the imagination is crucial, the obvious traces of roller, spray gun and brush strokes running amuck make the hand, arm, and indeed the body of the painter tangible, not just as image, but more strikingly, as *motion*.

If one canvas is convincing, complete in itself, seeing several detracts from the finished quality of each and emphasizes a vitality that leads from one work to the next. This energy negates in fact the completeness and restrictedness of an artistic product or individual object. Motion, more than jarring the eye, transports sight towards various limits: the boundaries between the textures, the forms and modulations, even the edge of each frame. Taking a leap, positing a form, creating a border, these are gestures linked to the real world, one in which risk and doubt must be continually interrogated. Thus, *gesture* here deals with human measure, the precarious balance between man's dwelling (his own body and his place on earth) and the desire to go beyond. Taken in this way, these works should be appreciated more within the sphere of ethics than that of aesthetics.

It is better to speak of *play* instead of *playful* regarding Van Merendonk's canvases. Refusing to add yet another vociferous innovation to the already inflated repertoire of modern art, the artist opts for a relationship with tradition. For him the promise of tradition is ever present, neither to be ignored nor respected: a new use for it has to be found. These canvases seem to stem from an infinite number of imaginary works, in part transported forward from the past, in part pointing towards the future; they represent a weight that must be dealt with by the artist. Their variation in tools, techniques and materials is in no way linear; this imaginary



reservoir of works contains no germ of development, or progress, nothing like a series etc. But at the same time nothing appears random and there is little unrestricted freedom. Curiously, in the endless variations present on these canvases, a sway can be perceived. Closer examination reveals not only a diversity of techniques and tools, but also reference to past movements, even specific painters. Whether such references are intended or not is not the issue, rather that they support the sense of a projection on the part of the artist, the use of a conceived image. These references contrast greatly with the more or less corporal, visceral qualities of motion and gesture.

Refusing to add at least nominally to the ever-expanding line of innovative modern art, the artist makes use of an idiosyncratic, self-realized *Ur-phänomen*, actually an originary work that contains the characteristic lines of movement that will furnish a fundament for all the variations to come. As a willful act, this founding veers ever further away from any kind of self-contained art whose images do not relate to the exterior world or have a symbolic meaning. More than a flat surface, more than physical presence, more than the artist's physical dialogue with materials and tools, the very fact of the positing of a fundament carries with it an implicit commentary. The artist senses a loss, a broad imbalance within the realm of art; however, any intervention designed to blatantly purify would just naively add one more element to the imbalance already perceived. It is an allegorical stance that will allow the artist a form of non-explicit commentary, even with the possibility of expressing ambivalence toward the loss he is so concerned with. Since ambivalence leads to the danger of inaction, the artist opts for irony: the painter's hide-and-go-seek begins. Allegory appears not as an image-type, but an attitude, a sensitivity to loss. Furthermore, this form of commentary means the position of the artist, his clear intention, remains necessarily hidden. Thus, the so-called refusal of figuration or external reference is not what it seems. Firstly, the traces made by artist's tools are bluntly evident on many of the canvases as are various recognizable elements of known and established genres. These recognizable signs, sometimes parodic, are ever more noticeable, highlighted, when presented adjacent to one another. Secondly, the continual re-working of the painter's so-called *Ur-phänomen*, can be seen as auto-portraiture, a kind of figuration in the form of a feedback circuit, a continual self-quoting. These hidden figurations, albeit always involving references to painting or to the painter himself, are one of the major ironic aspects of this work.

What does he actually intend vis-à-vis this founding work that can be viewed hanging in his studio as well as being displayed in most of his exhibitions: does this initiate a process that will comment on the present situation in the world of painting or art in general? Does the method here speak implicitly of an adjustment to that world? What has been lost to start with?

Fundament suggests a desire for a return to tradition. But certainly not the tradition of figurative art, nor any modernist movements so concerned with coherent visual languages and their processes linked to the non-artistic (society, science, philosophy). When green is perceived as infinitely multiplying in the gaps of white or conversely, white perceived as an expanding mask, there is a sense of automatic (pro-)creation, the artist replaced by pure matter. Here is indeed an ambivalence regarding the creative act, far from the enlightened



view whereby allegory believes it can chastise and right the world. Variation upon variation suggests a devoted activity situated somewhere between the clerical and the monastic. The artist becomes a self-less tunnel working relentlessly to return painting to its lost fullness (the artist himself turned into pure matter?). Beyond tradition, here is the wish for a sudden and complete restoration of painting to itself. But this idea of plenitude regained can only be dreamt or fantasized. Moreover, the painter knows this well and demonstrates that dreaming takes place within the very real space of the painting. Fantasies arise thus between the earthly gaps of green or white in a studio during the light of day, not any longer in the mind in the dark of night. Each of Van Merendonk's canvases dreams the next. The metaphysical has been replaced by the canvas, the frame, the brush, the roller.

The painter must go on; another gesture is open to him. His knowledge of the impossibility of the restoration of painting to itself allows him only one solution. In the face of the weight of his beloved tradition, play challenges the artist to work from now on *aimlessly*. His swaying between the monastic-clerical, almost scribe-like and his willful, self-aware position as an allegorist results in a wry denial of himself. The act of painting is the only thing he's sure of and the more he knows tradition, the less it is available to him. He must affirm himself and it's through irony that he maintains the veneer of aimlessness. He has displaced painting at an immeasurably small angle from its place as Art. Finally, humor consecrates this work, this allegory of the *new painter*.

Stefan Majakowski

