

Toon Verhoef in conversation with Ines Goldbach

Ines Goldbach: Let's concentrate on the new paintings. Beside the technical aspect that we will discuss later, I would like to talk about the process, how you plan a painting or the concept of it but then finally leave the plan behind and react in a very spontaneous, artistic way.

Toon Verhoef: It is always a very complex combination of things. The planning is like writing a score - I have this score, not a sign language but a structure, which is very closely related but at the same time very different to what you finally get when the painting is done. This structure allows me to move towards the complexity of the finished painting.

IG: Is it initially above all a technical procedure?

TVE: It is something that you have to translate into action, into something that you have to make with certain materials, instruments and tools. For a painter it is immediately a question of how. Painters work with materials, which over thousands of years have been surprisingly similar, pigments, a binder, a support etc. These big paintings are of all time. It is not something that we invented, or artists in the 1950s in America - think for example Egyptian painting, or Romanesque painting, or Tiepolo ... The material is remarkably similar. So you have to consider what you can do with these ingredients.

IG: But first you have to have an idea?

TVE: Painters work with visual ideas. A visual idea is as relevant and as valid as an idea that is expressed in language. I think about how I want the work to be, what I want to see.

G: ... you mean instead of express?

TVE: Yes, it is more about showing and seeing than about expressing.

IG: Is it more that you want to see something or you want others to see something? Or is the process of making more important than the idea of the viewer?

TVE: The viewer does not play a part at this stage. I am not saying or expressing something, I am doing something because I want to know how it works.

IG: So it is more about how an idea becomes material?

TVE: A painter can either start with the idea or with the material. The two are inextricably connected - in painting they are the same. In a painting they become one thing. But even after 50 years of experience with painting, I am very distrustful of it. I distrust the whole idea of painting.

IG: What surprises you in or with your new paintings?

TVE: I subvert everything in the making of the painting. I transform the origin of the images endlessly through drawing and sketching until it goes in a completely unpredictable direction, hoping to see or to find something new or surprising. I subvert the technique. I do my very best to make the painting go in an uncharted direction.

IG: But besides planning and predicting - do your paintings have the capacity to surprise you?

TVE: I want to be confused, not in an unthinking way, but in a productive way. So what I do with the technique and with the construction of the image is to make it difficult. I want to be uncertain, to question how we look at things, how I look at things. I think all good paintings are also questioning paintings.

IG: You once used the word ambiguity for your paintings. The new paintings show something of how this comes into view and how at the same time it disappears and breaks up. Does this have to do with your understanding of ambiguity or with strangeness, a word that you mentioned as well?

TVE: Ambiguity is present in how we experience the world. Strangeness is what I am looking for, not the overfamiliar and obvious, but the profound mystery that can be found in the commonplace and becomes disconcerting.

IG: So it leaves you somehow uncertain?

TVE: What the viewer imagines seeing is unreliable and shilling. We cannot be certain about what we experience in the world and similarly about what we think we see in a painting. It is always more complex and different.

IG: Complex in which sense?

TVE: Complexity in the sense of fullness, complex where many things are going on simultaneously. Not complexity of content, but the complexity of experience of being in the world that every painter, every artist brings into the work.

IG: In your new paintings, but also in many of your other paintings there are forms that might easily be read and understood as figures, letters etc., but at the same time they are nothing like that. So they appear at first sight and dissolve in the same moment. Are the sources of your shapes objects taken from everyday life?

TVE: Yes. All these shapes come from objects. They come from the world of things. We experience the world in a complex, ambiguous, confusing way. This is the magic. This kind of magic - sitting here in this room of the Kunsthuis with this

beautiful daylight, and at the same time the artificial light from the fluorescent tubes and then the car outside fragmented by the window - sensing the world in its multiple complexity. It is a physical and visual sensory awareness of where I find myself. This experience is something I hope to see in the work. And, paradoxically, when you see it, it starts breaking up again.

IG: How do these shapes help you with that?

TVE: I choose these objects because they embody ambiguity. The shapes are familiar but I make them unfamiliar. I like it when the painting looks as if the substance has leaked out of it. It is still there, the configuration, but the reasons why it is there are no longer evident. They should not just read as geometric forms on a support. Forms appear and disappear, also because they are in different areas of the painting.

IG: You have not made big paintings for a long time. Now, once again, you have started this new series of paintings 2.8 x 5 meters in size. It creates a space and you, as a viewer, are immediately part of the whole work. There is no frame, no border and it is a very physical thing. Why did you start using this size so many years ago?

TVE: There is no immediate overview. The painting draws you in and you are looking at different areas. You have to move around. You have to move into it. It is a dynamic, tangible encounter. I started using these sizes when I was working at De Ateliers in Amsterdam in my early twenties. Of course there were direct influences from what I had seen: Franz Kline; Jackson Pollock; but also Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. I remember seeing a painting by Robert Rauschenberg in 1962 called "Rigger". It was unlike anything I had ever seen, and I remember thinking, "Yes! This is how a painting should be".

IG: Why did you stop painting these large-scale paintings for so long?

TVE: I stopped using these very big formats around 2001. There were practical reasons. They were hard to get out of my new studio.

IG: When you started out was it easy to get such big canvases?

TVE: No, I always constructed them myself, It wasn't something that you could get in an art supply store. For me they were more like a film screen than a normal canvas. The experience of images on a film screen shaped my visual thinking.

IG: But painting is material on a surface while film is fictional, illusion, and has nothing to do with material you can kind of experience concretely.

TVE: Fluidity and the unreality of projected images was something I wanted to bring into my work. Film shows reality in a new way. In Hitchcock's 'Vertigo' there is a scene where Kim Novak rests her gloved hand on a redwood tree. A close-up of this hand, which is 20 meters wide, is held for five, six seconds. Talking about magic - you know exactly what it is, it's a hand on a tree. It is not an invented image, it is not surrealism. It is hyperrealism. And at the same time it is totally out of sync, out of context, strange. It is a completely new thing that you see in front of you.

IG: Instead of becoming a filmmaker what interested you in painting?

TVE: Painting is something you can do alone, for free, unconditionally. The possibilities of painting are boundless. You can do so much with so little.

IG: I would like to learn more about the technique of your new paintings. The grid seems to be something that is common to all the new paintings.

TVE: There is a reason for the grid that has to do with the nature of the image, but

there are also practical reasons. I make transfers, skins, on Lexan film with colourless acrylic binder. The images are painted on this acrylic skin that is glued to the canvas so the image is on the inside. The maximum size that can be handled is about 1.5x1 meters - which creates the grid. The outside of the skin is rubbed with very thin layers of oil paint, which is very translucent and immaterial. There is very little paint in these paintings.

IG: Why do you somehow paint inside out?

TVE: It creates different layers - the canvas, the inside of the transfer and the outside. Everything is in a different place. It is in the same field but not in the same place. It creates a non-illusionistic space. This is something I can only achieve by using this method. The technique is not something that you should be too involved with. I started to use this technique about ten years ago. In a big painting I have to use different segments. In the four new paintings I use similar shapes that I turn around, mirror and reverse. The grid is like a succession of forms that makes sense. I thought of billboards with election posters, more or less the same size but all different. There is an anarchic structure in the way they grow. I wanted to have something that is not solid but unstable and shifting. Unstable and unhinged. Something that you see evolving and at the same time disappearing.

IG: Looking at your paintings is always somehow difficult, in the sense that you might have a loose idea of what you see, but you do not know this exactly.

TVE: Yes, because viewing is made difficult in the sense that you can't immediately place it. A friend of mine wrote about 'drift and shift' – you see things that are drifting, drifting out of view and you see things that are shifting, falling out the frame. There is a dynamic displacement.

IG: You feel slightly disorientated?

TVE: Exactly. Uncomfortable about where things are. There is a kind of uneasiness about where everything is, which takes time to get used to - it doesn't feel right. But of course, it is not about a painting that doesn't work. It is about making a painting that works, but which escapes conventional reading.

IG: For the show at Kurhaus, we will have paintings that you finished quite recently and paintings that you made many years ago. What is interesting for you in this kind of encounter?

TVE: They form different visual experiences. There are different sounds to them which I found through pushing in different directions. But one thing comes out of another. There is no linear development but it is amazing how connected they are. This deep connection means one thing: art is made by people and people change and you see these changes in the work.

IG: This will be very interesting, seeing your work and experiencing your paintings here at the Kunsthuis - how they are connected and how they react to their surroundings.

TVE: It doesn't have to make any sense at all for me. I didn't set out to make sense. It is not autobiography either. But they belong to me and to each other, so much is true. About some old works I would say I wish I could make work like that now.

IG: In what way?

TVE: That I see something fresh, good or strong about it. What I really like about this idea of bringing unrelated works together is that it creates unfamiliarity and anxiety.

IG: This might also be interesting for you as the painter, but hopefully as well for the viewer and visitor: how the paintings

combined with the architecture create a situation and a new experience.

TVE: That's right. In all the exhibitions I have made I was involved with installing - feeling, handling, moving. So I know how important this aspect is, the very different settings where the work is expected to perform. This is what I want to see taking place - it is much more than hanging a painting on the wall.

IG: I am sure it will be also very surprising seeing your work here at the Kunsthuis and then seeing it later, when the exhibition goes to the De Pont Museum in Tilburg.

TVE: What I like about the architecture of the Kunsthuis is that although it is big, there is a kind of intimacy, which is different from the spaciousness at De Pont. I like that here you can create single moments with not too much happening around it. Each painting will have its own space - and so will the viewer.