

## Marcel Vos

### Painting as Intrigue

It is generally thought that personal acquaintance with an artist gives better insight into the nature of his work and the way it is accomplished. That is partly true but, in one important aspect, totally untrue.

In my longstanding friendship with the painter Toon Verhoef it has become ever more mysterious to me how he thinks and works as a painter. We have shared countless experiences, many journeys dwell in our memories and there is hardly a subject that has not come up through the years, sometimes in passing, mostly in long discussions. And yet, again and again, when I see his new paintings I wonder where they came from and am amazed that they look the way they do. I immediately recognize their habitus, and yet to me they are as strange as they are familiar. It seems as if our friendship grinds to a halt at something that confronts me independently: paintings I love, paintings that slowly fit into the pre-existent body of work but about which I can barely think and largely feel no need to do so. I am aware, with an almost painful sharpness, that they stem from a sense of reality that is very familiar to me, and yet I am no longer able to trace them back to this. The latter may be true for all art, but close friendship makes that even more palpable.

Pondering, actually for the first time, about this intriguing personal experience, and thinking about the character of Verhoef's painting, the word intrigue began to play on my mind. Didn't each of his paintings have an emotional intrigue, like a novel or a piece of music has an intrigue? The more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that the term had a certain significance, not in that it could explain something but, rather, designate a fundamental condition in his painting and enable one to see the development of his work in perspective. Naturally one can say that every good painting is intriguing, but it came to mind that in Verhoef's work the idea of intrigue itself has become painterly substance. I know of course about Verhoef's love for the enigmatic paintings that De Chirico made from about 1910 to 1915. The idea of intrigue makes his love for them obvious, however much his work differs from De Chirico.

The intrigue in Verhoef's work developed gradually, although it is not difficult to discern the beginnings in his early work. But whereas, in the early work, a fundamental contemplation of what a painting could be for him somehow went together with reflections on the difference between iconological meaning and painterly content, in Verhoef's more recent large-scale work intrigue unfolds in all its dimensions, though these works continue to be inscrutable. Verhoef's paintings are usually triggered by everyday motifs: a logo, a poster, the colours juxtaposed on the lid of a pickle jar, or a Russian shower curtain. He is always reserved about these sources, apparently apprehensive that knowledge of this will block the perception of the image and convinced as he is that the subjective origin of his paintings no longer matters. Maybe also because, as opposed to work methods in music, for example, the everyday aspect of the "trigger motif" could be brushed aside as a trite banality. Nevertheless, it is just such a simple motif which generates a painting, activates the imagination, mingles with moods and emotions, memories and associations. In other words, develops into a subjective and intriguing whole that contains the prospect of a painting.

This process, dark and hidden as it may be, would become mired, from a painterly point of view, in the generality of a psychological mechanism, were it not for the motif's transformation by a

long process of adaptations and reflections. It first occurs in drawings, then in the actual execution of the painting: a transformation, to the viewer, into a recognizable and convincing image. That is to say, the motif acquires objective validity without losing any of its subjective intensity.

To talk about the intrigues in Verhoef's paintings is difficult. They are visible; they have become painting. As a metaphor for a subjective emotional condition they show themselves, completely and without reserve.

The point of departure most often consists of two components, two voices, two conflicting parties, their interests completely intertwined, at times in sharp opposition to each other, alternating as allies and besiegers. The peculiarity of Verhoef's paintings is that they display specific behaviour without allowing us to identify the forms within which that behaviour is "personified". This behaviour is discernible throughout the work, in the smallest detail as well as in the largest whole, in the way in which a texture saturated with consciousness activates colour fields, in the way that associative imaginary forms stand, lean or topple over, break off or float, capture space or lose space. In the later paintings the dynamics of these intrigues intensify into a competition between form and colour. This is not the place to bring up the age-old controversy between Poussinists and Rubenists, but it occurs to me that the struggle for the primacy of drawing or colour leads to new intricacies in Verhoef's more recent work.

The behaviour of Verhoef's paintings can, in my opinion, be understood as a painterly intrigue, analogous to intrigues in music and literature. But painting is not music, not literature, not theatre. The changing form that the intrigue in Verhoef's work has assumed remains necessarily ambiguous. There is no unravelling. If there was, then the intrigue would be lost, since all the components are present in the spatial unity of the painting at the same time. In music and literature, on the other hand, the intrigue develops into a temporal structure and can thus lead to an unanticipated revelation. Nevertheless, temporary concealment and tentative unveiling is essential to the build-up of an intrigue. Strictly speaking, the aspect of time is not available to the painter, only the dimensions of the canvas. How then can the structure of an intrigue be built up in a convincing way? What Verhoef does, consciously or not, is in my opinion the following: he explores the time that is needed to envisage a painting, he stretches time out, not infrequently by opting for large formats. In the management of his pictorial means he introduces a hierarchy to the build-up of a layered structure, so that only by longer contemplation do all the intricacies come to light, not only between form, colour and texture, but also between detail and whole, centre and periphery, diligent completion and apparent nonchalance. Through this slow relinquishment of all complications, one experiences, in time, that which operates simultaneously in the unity of the painting - even though a dénouement does not occur.

The contemplation of a painting is a complicated process that is driven by the structure of the painting itself. It is a process of approaching and retreating, of enquiring observation and embracing perception. The scrutinizing look goes from the centre to the edges, from the whole to the parts, from the parts to the detail - and back. It tries to penetrate into the shaping of the painting and the reason for this or that solution. It questions and analyses and attempts to understand the visual logic of a painting in all its detail. On the other hand, the embracing look does not primarily aim to understand but to experience. The detail is not its concern. It longs for clarity of ideas, simplicity without hesitation, beauty without reserve. It wants to presuppose the logic of the image.

Verhoef's paintings show an acute awareness of these opposite ways of seeing. It is in this very alternating process of embracing and scrutinizing that they reveal their intrigue.

Herein lies a paradox that is essential to the intrigue. Although embracing and scrutinizing complement each other, in art they never coincide. They cannot coincide, because in the psychological sense they are based on two different attitudes of the mind. The scrutinizing look, no matter how sympathetic, is rational and unyielding. On the other hand the embracing look is prepared to capitulate emotionally at any given moment. And that is ultimately what every artist strives for.

I do not think there are many contemporary painters who know how to express the ambivalences of the conflict between heart and reason with such precision.

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*translated by Pauline Verhoef-Levy*