

The poignancy of small things New paintings by Ina Van Zyl

My first encounter with the paintings of Ina Van Zyl resembled that unusual moment in the course of any normal day when one experiences a lapse in consciousness. One's mind slips into a state of limbo, and one's eyes fix upon some detail in one's visual field to observe it with a sense of intense detachment. This transfixed gaze decelerates the mind and things seem to stand still. One recognises the lapse only retrospectively when, just as quickly, all one's senses kick in and become attentive to the whole environment. The interrupted process of conscious sensory reading continues as before and one is back and awake in the present. It is a moment when the subconscious mind comes to the forefront and one's body is in a state of temporary hypnosis. But after the encounter with Van Zyl's paintings, the return to conscious reading has a heightened intensity. Suddenly the frame of "normality" is sprung. What the eyes have seen unsettles what one thought one knew. The body's sensory response to her work registers fascination, wonder, hesitancy and repulsion; feelings that sit on the opposite ends of the spectrum of emotive responses to things visual. The flood of disparate responses is unfamiliar and their proximity and reciprocity leave a residue of uncertainty. The detachment with which one began to view her paintings now demands a more critical enquiry.

Is this bad painting? Have the conventions of painting deliberately been inverted because the artist has little else to offer, or is it something more profound? Is it an art that harbours a sense of art's history and understands painting as a visual language and an instrument in knowledge production? The surprise of her work is certainly its difference to what one experiences in the visual arts right now. I am referring to the large, video projections, installations and oversized digital images that overwhelm through their media rather than what they mediate. Ina's paintings are imbued

with a power that belies their relatively small size. Their visual magnetism is perplexing. Size is dictated by the image, its nature and content. This gives it a rational feel even though one has the sense of being a dwarf in her world.

The images in Van Zyl's oeuvre are by and large details of things. They are easily recognisable but incomplete records of much larger subjects. I refrain from calling her images snapshots because that would place them too close to photography and the rapid capture of an image detail. They are just the opposite, because she carefully selects and constructs a detail that speaks for the whole, or encapsulates a larger environment. They are abstract because they exist as thoughts or as ideas but not abstracted in the sense that they are stylised designs. Neither are they realistic in the sense that they are accurate copies of real things. Every image is a fantasy, a step away from what one would call reality. Each painting is a carefully honed thought and this is one part of their magnetism.

Her fragmentary depictions are, at first reading, just that, banal bits of reality presented for what they are, a face, a toe, a peach, a pear, a breast or a string of pearls. But they harbour other layers of meaning that viewers will need to disclose as they look. It is Ina's way of bringing the hidden out into the open.

Following John Berger, it is a way of seeing; a revelation by deduction. Her paintings become signposts, pointing to larger and more complex entities. The reduction of things to a single referent asks for a more sophisticated reading from the viewer. To just glance at them is to miss everything they offer. One has to look and really focus the eyes and pay attention to what has been invented with paint. Each image speaks only for itself and of itself. There is no linear narrative, no beginning, no middle and no end. There is often no second subject and therefore no interaction between subjects in a painting. The exceptions are paintings such as "To Smoke", "Het Kopje" and "Ijs" which show

objects being held but these are essentially about the social gesture of an individual. Her single object images are bits of reality that inspire her to paint. Each appears to harbour an emotional tension trapped beneath layers of paint. As one subconsciously begins to peel back the layers, one turns an entranced gaze into a conscious act of looking beyond the recognisable. The excavation of an idea has begun.

Ina Van Zyl's intention is a quiet subversion of current trends. It points diametrically away from a populist formulation of art as a part of the rapid flow and consumption of images; art as a tele-visual or internet entertainment, that reduces the act of looking to a glance. Her small paintings are a covert invitation to do something that is rapidly vanishing from the public's engagement with the painted image or any other form of contemporary visual art for that matter. It is the act of visual reading. The slow, deliberate interrogation of an artwork using all one's senses to translate the physical encounter with art, into meaning. Van Zyl instigates a seduction of the intellect. She surreptitiously asks the viewer for an investment of his or her time, to process and encode images. Her invitation leads to an intense engagement with her artistic vision and in so doing, to the visions of other painters of her generation.

She is a painter who loves the idea of painting. Loves the tradition of this medium and its constant need to extend its boundaries and possibilities. From the manner she paints it becomes clear that she wants the painted image to add value to our lives, by being an exercise in cognition as well as an aesthetic pleasure. There is an intensity in the way she builds an image with paint. The process is hard won and signs of a tussle with her material can be seen across the painted surface. Her paintings are not agglomerations of dexterous, gestural marks. Nothing flows. There is no easy, one-touch, painting. Traces of the brush are

rare. She leaves no characteristic fingerprint of her dexterity and very little or no evidence of how the paint arrived on the canvas. The craft of painting is not foregone by stripping it of heroic gesture, but is subdued and made subservient to the subject of the work. The foundation for this way of painting can perhaps be found in her earlier use of charcoal for the cartoon drawings she made for Bitterkomix in the 90's. Soft solid masses of intense black mark a drawing style of high contrast. The characteristic linear mark of charcoal is lost by smudging the material into the paper. This technique gave her drawings an eerie quality that was out of character with traditional comic genre, but in character with the Bitterkomix post-modern ethic.

On her recent canvases, smears and smudges of wet and dry paint collide with heavy, viscous deposits. They build a glutinous looking surface that disrupts the reading of the image. They agitate between repulsion and attraction. There is no illusion of paint pretending to be flesh. The attraction lies in the manner an image is described through its surface, through the layers of coloured paint that bring it into existence. Soft, fleshy fruit and the erogenous zones of the body are made strange through this technique. It is a manner of painting that says something about the tactile world and allows the eyes to usurp the sense of touch. Visual reading replaces tactile reading. The eye is made to behave like the hand and this sensory shift relies on memory. One's body remembers what an object should feel like and because of its surface, the image does not match the memory.

Ina uses colour to convey and to disrupt moods, not to create spatial illusions. Skin tones in the paintings "Amandel" and "Valley" both of 2006 are incongruous to normative depictions of skin that strives to mimic sensuous flesh. Tones of pale pink and subtle ochre familiar from figurative painting, from Manet to photo-realism, are absent. Instead skin is described

with middle tone tertiary colours, which lean toward green or red. Flesh becomes a tough, thick epiderm that seems to protect something delicate inside. This strange choice of colour for her often intimate subject matter and the glutinous surface she builds for her paintings of fruit, jar the nervous system. In her earlier paintings it is startling and they had a visceral abrasiveness that evoked strong emotions of passion, lust, shame or greed. But it is a gentle shock in the most recent works from 2006. These display a subtlety that exploits the poignancy of small things. Desire, longing, hope, love and tenderness are triggered by tiny subjective gestures and a new found confidence in the use of paint.

The subtle shift signals a mature understanding of the whole or complete subject for which each painting is a synecdoche. Her paintings of fruit are slowly becoming an obsession. "Peach", "Vorm + Inhoud", and "Pink Ladies", could be paintings about her childhood. Perhaps her reminiscence of growing up on a fruit farm or the history of still life painting. But more directly they are about contact with the flesh of delicate fruit. Despite their rich warm tones the surfaces of the painted peach, pear and apples contradict reality. These fruity giants are not conventional still life images. They don't invite you to touch them let alone put one into your mouth. But their size and colour and surface commands one's visual attention and this manoeuvres how we think about these paintings. In Ina's native South Africa, peaches often have a hairy instead of a downy skin that hide their delicate, sweet fruit. Children are weary of biting into them lest their tongue makes contact with its fuzzy skin. Eventually they acquire a taste for it and loose this irrational fear. This suspicion also lies at the heart of many viewers' relationship to painting and the more they engage with it, the fruit of an artist's imagination becomes something trusted, delicious and full of expectation.

And it is expectation that sits just below the surface of "Troostmaten" and "Granny Smiths". The clear cellophane packaging around the tomatoes and apples are about the denial of touch and the invisible barrier between hand and object, between desire and need. It brings to mind a scene from Bernardo Bertolucci's "The Last Emperor" in which the teenage emperor allows himself to be playfully touched through a membrane of silk by his eunuch entourage. This idea of something forbidden yet visible through the membrane, evokes the former political reality of the fruits origin, South Africa, where an invisible barrier of legislation once separated a nation into racial groups, denying individuals direct and personal contact with each other.

Visually reading the many old and new paintings implicates viewers in their mystery and intrigue. One becomes a Lilliputian voyeur in a different world and everything feels up close and in your face. Yet this overwhelming proximity denies the sensory act of touch and leaves a sense of longing. The parts of the human body she has chosen to paint in great detail are areas of hypersensitivity. The underside of toes, a vagina, a mouth and a tongue, all evoke sensuality. This is the other part of her works magnetism because it addresses through pure visual codes an existential, carnal knowledge that underlines basic human relationships. One gets to know something intimately through touch, through the caress of a hand. A handshake is the most formal performance of this act. It is a way to control instinct in the social sphere of the "civilised". By casting an oblique spotlight onto these patterns of behaviour we are introduced to them anew. And it is their poignancy that Ina van Zyl wants us to see.

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