

A picture should always be the reflection of a profound sensation, and by profound I mean strange and by strange I mean uncommon and completely unknown.

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO 1913

Toon Verhoef's recent paintings are a richly diverse and enigmatic group. Sharing only common dimensions, each work asserts its own presence, its own strangeness, its own unity of those elements that paintings hold in common – composition, color, form, space, surface, facture. This has always been characteristic of Verhoef's oeuvre, for seldom do his paintings group themselves as anything like a series. This is not to say, however, that motifs don't repeat, that new painterly processes and structures aren't interrogated and extended after their discovery. To the contrary, the investigation of such enigmas is the passionate puzzlement that propels the artist's imagination forward and backward in time. Rather, it is to say that each work has always been seriously uncommon and that the distance between works in the current exhibition appears to have opened to a degree not previously seen. Why might this be the case? Perhaps it is because the stretch of the artist's imagination has become more freely extensive.

Verhoef has remarked that he reached much further back than usual for a drawing on which one of his recent paintings is based. It is the horizontal canvas with crimson forms posed broadly against a faded green field (p. 43). For this reason, one might speculate, a link with paintings of more than twenty years ago springs to mind, paintings based on similarly bold figure-ground relationships. The K shape found in those paintings is also recalled, a figure whose vertical and diagonal elements were initially called to life by the need to both acknowledge and activate the minimal qualities of a stretched canvas. Here, however, its rigor relaxes as ends and edges soften and round. While the character's elements loosen their central join, this slippage further opens the figure's metaphoricity. The vertical's shift and lean, combined with the associated oval's lack of attachment to the painting's right edge, initiates a torque – an effect enhanced by the thin white arc that crosses the lower canvas. Curves frequently entered earlier paintings' bottom edges, swelling up or in to suggest a ground plane or cycloramic space. Here, however, the shape seems to hold the surface and keep the viewer at a distance below, while causing the sanguineous, disjointed forms to loom and tumble in space above.

Do such pictorial qualities have any relationship to a Verhoef aside that the arc in the old drawing was stimulated by "Kim Novak's steering wheel in *Vertigo*"? Possibly, but only in the profound way that Jimmy Stewart's turning of a white steering wheel back and forth while following Kim Novak's car disorients thought and feeling by leading one into a void, producing an anxiety only partially relieved by the realization that one has returned home. Such strange sensations are the terrain of Giorgio de Chirico's paintings, works much beloved by Verhoef, so perhaps it is best to let that artist's words address such an issue.

A revelation of a work of art can appear suddenly, when we least expect it, and can also be provoked by the sight of something [...] When the revelation results from the sight of an arrangement of things, then the work that presents itself in our thought is closely connected to the arrangement that has provoked its birth. It resembles it, but in a strange way: [...] the revelation is a demonstration of the meta-physical reality of certain things that happen to us from time to time; of the way, of the disposition in which *something* presents itself to our gaze and awakens in us the imagination of a work of art; an imagination that something stirs in our soul the sensation of surprise, often that of meditation, always the joy of creation.

Turning to another recent work (p. 34), the juxtaposition of very different painterly modes in the large yellow and grey diptych seems to look forward as well as backward in time. On the left a clearly drawn, doubled K stutter-steps in its creamy ground, its life caught like a body in a Muybridge chronophotograph. Its shift is repeated in the fainter cones glimpsed in the ground below, where orientation has also shifted. Rotation occurs in the right panel as well, only there the compositional and painterly process has become one of drift. Flow creates these forms' surfaces, which have been extracted from larger dried pours of paint. Their varied transparencies and densities materialize a mingling of mediums. While one knows that the artist has positioned and layered these transparent skins of pigment, their result as experienced suggests drift rather than volition. The contrast of drift with the strategy of shift opposite makes one feel that the *informe* has begun an important dialogue with the will.

New characteristics of figures and grounds emerge through this dialogue. Paint was poured in a trough to create strips that are fixed to the canvas where they constitute the fractured fields of some paintings. In one case the result is a fairly continuous, chalky magenta surface (p. 29), while a more mottled ground is created in another by the mingling of green with white (p. 25). In a third painting bands comprised of distinct red and white streaks are affixed off register, vibrating the field, like static interfering with its continuity (p. 16). In all three cases, a grid, which contains varying magnitudes of order, emerges – a ground that provokes new types of figures. Some respect this structure, while others resist it. Brushstrokes sometimes trace and fill its junctures, while forms rise over it, spread across it, flow down it, vanish behind it, and defiantly float free of it. One might characterize some of these forms as "gothic," the return of a quality found in some of Verhoef's earlier works, paintings enchanted by the edgy shapes that erupted in Clyfford Still's scabrous surfaces. Now, however, that sensibility is touched by a wit and irony quite alien to Still. Other new qualities

of form develop through a more overt display of collage structure – the layering and arrangement of the pigment skins. This is found, for instance, in the horizontal rectangle that is surrounded by the very open, delicately drawn yellow and green grid (p. 13). Its relationship of shapes cut and torn from dusky associated hues reminds of Matisse's response to collage, an artist with whom one doesn't usually associate Verhoeve's work. Similarly unique are the indexical quality and contrast of scales found in the painting dominated by the large X (p. 21). These forms appear to arise from the physical relief of the collaged strips that lift from the surface of the painting's sketch. However, the gesture of cancellation is equally unique. As in works by Jasper Johns, surfaces are effaced and a psychological dimension of the formal process seems to step forward as content. The enigma of the hidden is heightened by the fact that the lithographic version of the motif reveals a family camping scene from the 1950s under its marks of negation. This being the type of collage ground from which Verhoeve begins sketches for recent paintings, one wonders, keeping de Chirico's insight in mind, about how the form/content dialogue will develop within the expanse of metaphysical reality.

The nature of time in the making and contemplation of painting is an issue that Verhoeve has addressed in a lecture about his favorite painting – Diego Velazquez's *Las Hilanderas* (*The Spinners*). Speaking about that work's abstraction and fusion of content and form, the artist turned to the following words written about the painting by José Ortega y Gasset:

Velazquez paints time equal to the moment, being or existence, which is doomed not to be, is transitory. That is what he immortalizes and considers to be the task of painting: immortalizing the moment. [...] The immediate way in which the painting shows itself to us is paradoxically the reason why painting is the most hermetic art. The ease with which we can perceive a painting induces our inertia. There is an essential contradiction in painting between the clarity of its signs and the secret of its meaning. We won't see anything appropriate when standing in front of a painting if we are not persuaded to respect its peculiar essential silence. This means: firstly, that we do not require an immediate declaration of its intentions, and secondly and conversely - because it doesn't say anything to us in the strictest sense of the word, that we accept and must presume that a precise meaning is encapsulated into even the smallest detail.

Verhoeve has been increasingly interested in complicating the viewing process, in extending perception in time. For this reason the cinema and comics are frequently experiential models, for which he finds equivalent painterly processes

and structures. My choice of the terms – “shift” and “drift” – aspires to suggest verbal descriptions of pictorial experiences. “Shift” for me suggests an action that is extended, but fairly immediate, in the moment. Time is ordered like Muybridge or space like Cézanne, relating duration to instant, space to surface, revealing pathos in experience. “Drift” suggests something slower, harder to see, more unconscious, more unbounded in time and space, more related to natural and cultural rather than individual human processes. In *Las Hilanderas* Velazquez created a revelatory shift between the Arachne myth's time and space and those of ordinary labor in contemporary Spain, but he was undoubtedly aware that the Fates were also spinners.

When I was invited to write this essay, the ideas of Victor Shklovsky immediately came to mind, particularly those expressed in “Art as Technique,” an essay written in 1917. Perhaps it was because Shklovsky's formalist literary theory arose at the moment that the Russian avant-garde was rediscovering the abstraction always contained in art and I sensed that those ideas might be of help in considering Verhoeve's abstract paintings. Responding to Malevich's paintings and Khlebnikov's poetry, Shklovsky critiqued a critical position previously held by the Symbolists that argued that art was “thinking in images.” He claimed instead that artistic language involved “enstrangement,” a process that countered an over-automatization of perception, the effects of which he described as follows:

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.

Too Verhoeve's paintings certainly achieve this artfulness, this “enstrangement” of the world. The artist's creative response to the uniqueness of his moment, which increasingly extends into the metaphysical dimensions of past and future, stimulates meditation and constantly gives rise to new surprises and joys, since it is, at least in part, our moment as well.

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