Han Schuil's Signature

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In an interview more than ten years ago, Han Schuil said something that he would presumably still say today: "The best painting is the one you are working on; the other works belong to the past."[1] To regard these words as narcissistic rhetoric would simply be to miss the point. It is not so much that the artist is claiming that he keeps himself at the zenith of his own ever increasing artistic potency at each new moment but that he sees every work he creates as unconnected to those that went before. A new work bears no ongoing relation to the others, is divorced from them; for their part, they are to be seen as discarded, surpassed, lost. Today, this assertion must apply in turn to the painting that ten years ago was the best, because it was the most recent. In keeping with this proposition, in another interview with Han Schuil, the notion of progress in art and of personal artistic development carne to be questioned.[2]

Some of his recent paintings trigger the idea of an explosion. One can recognise something in them that could not be seen in the same form in his earlier paintings, even though Schuil had introduced the motif a number of years before and mentioned it for the first time at an even earlier date. The pictures in question are among the few that have received a title: *Blast*. This designation allows no doubts about the motif: the irregularly serrated star conveys the glowing heart of an explosion, and the concentric rays mark the directions in which the destructive force hurtles outwards. The order to which Schuil's painting belongs is quite evident: it is the order of representation, the depiction of something that exists outside the painting. Schuil flatly rejects every kind of painting except that determined by something external and prior to itself. But this is not

representation that relies on the pure transparency of its medium for the depiction of its subject. Rather, this is representation that allows itself to be determined by the fact that it operates with signs that do not lend visibility to what they depict but make it decipherable. Not that Schuil approaches a subject directly in order to create a pictorial relationship of verisimilitude. Rather, he paints pre-existent, culturally generated signs that indicate the intended object. To put it differently, he paints nothing that does not already exist in the codified form of an image.

With regard to this mediatory act that makes Schuil's work the representation of a representation, Dominic van den Boogerd has made a telling observation: "Sometimes you reintroduce a figure in the painting in a much smaller version, as if the painting is reproducing itself ... "[3]. Schuil rightfully rejected Van den Boogerd's assumption that this idiosyncratic step functioned as parody, because it is a reflection on representation in and through itself: inscribed in the representation is the fact that it does not grant a view of its subject but captures and specifies this in the form of a visual sign. This element of reflection within the represent-tation is kindred to the dialectical return of the subject to itself. This is why, in his reply to Van den Boogerd, Schuil said the doubled or multiplied sign in his pictures was his specific signature.

Given the conventional encoding of the picture, however, it does not actually need a title to ensure that the viewer knows what he or she is looking at. Han Schuil's sources are always recognisable, have already been etched into the general imaginary. So, here, giving a title does not function to provide an otherwise missing identification or divulge otherwise inaccessible dimensions of meaning. The title, a redundant designation of the individual image, enables depictions of various kinds to be superimposed on one another, as Rudolf Evenhuis has done in a

[1] Dominic van den Boogerd, "Aluminium icons: An interview with Han Schuil," in exhibtion catalogue Han Schuil: Schilderijen/Paintings 1983-1999, (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum and Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2000), p.
[2] "Is there progress in art? Does an artist actually develop? What were these ideas Mondriaan had again?" Paul Kempers

wrote after a conversation with Han Schuil in spring 2009. See Paul Kempers, "Clear with a Twist," in Han Schuif: Blast (Amsterdam: Galerie Onrust, 2009), p. 5.
[3] Dominic van den Boogerd, "Aluminium icons," p. 13.

video clip on Han Schuil's work.[4] All images have a similar visual arrangement: the filmed depiction of an explosion with a rising plume of smoke is followed in succession by one of Schuil's *Blast* paintings, an "explosive substances" sign, a painting by René Daniëls, and a Soviet propaganda poster showing the rays of a red dawn and a five pointed star with a hammer and sickle at its centre. Han Schuil has referred to the slightly older Daniëls as one of the painters he most admires. The work by Daniëls shown in Evenhuis's video clip is *Historia Mysteria* (1981-1982) - one of several variants featuring a schematic representation of the Arc de Triomphe in the middle of a regular star, the Place d'Étoile, which emits rays that are familiar to us from the map of Paris, one of which links the Paris landmark with a New York landmark, the Brooklyn Bridge.[5]

Daniëls's picture contains a star and rays but no explosion. Schuil has introduced the title *Blast* as a concept that confirms the link between images that otherwise have nothing to do with one another: a temporal, transparent depiction of an explosion in a film; a painting of a stylised image of an explosion, like those we know from comics (his own work); a possible source for a painting; a painting by another artist; and the prop-aganda poster showing a configuration of star and rays in a completely different context. In one direction, Schuil's picture is superimposed on a representational depiction of a slice of reality; in the other, on a formal constellation that first gains its real meaning from the specific visual context. Unlike that of the propaganda poster, the meaning of René Daniëls's picture cannot ultimately be identified. For instance, Philip Peters writes: "Thus Paris, the former centre of the art world, and New York, the later centre, are connected in an incredible dance."[6]

The superimposition of these images under the title *Blast* emphasises the abstract,

unmotivated side of the representational sign (star/rays), which makes it possible to link the same visual idea with various ideas of objects. This emphasises the fact that abstraction and depiction, representation and the play of difference are not the opposites they are normally taken to be. In every case, they are brought into being by a formal construct that ensures the sign function. Schuil has stated: "All art is abstract, because all art wants to transcend reality. The distinction between abstract and figurative is irrelevant."[7] We, however, would put it the other way around: the art of our times is able to relate to reality on condition that the signs employed are "abstract", shaped by laws of their own that are independent of objects.

With regard to what makes the recent *Blast* pictures different to the earlier works, or at least what stands out here as different: these pictures show an exceptional range and wealth of minimal details that have been painted with an unmistakably great amount of work and concentration, and thus are evidently so intended. And yet they remain invisible when viewed from the distance the viewer will assume in order to take a proper look at the icon – the painting of an explosion. These details consist of extremely fine lines in various colours, broken in differing ways, which run in the same directions as the rays from the heart of the explosion; fine, millimetre thick borders, not dissimilar to the effect produced in a multicolour print when one layer of colour is slightly off-centre; and tiny drips of colour that presumably were not intentional but have expressly not been removed, which join up with other elements to form multilimbed micro-constellations. To make the point more clearly: these details are not like brushstrokes, which show differentiations left behind by the hairs in the brush as units of a gesture and which are absorbed by the whole, whether it is abstract or figurative. The minimal details found in Han

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[4] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2u_DprJF9zo, accessed on 1 March 2011.

[5] The sequence of images discussed here is complicated by the fact that there is another picture by René Daniëls entitled Historia Mysteria (1982) that bears no iconographic similarity to the picture with the Paris-New York motif: it features a man with an umbrella in a three-quarter-length coat between some trees and a snail and a tortoise on the ground beside him. It

becomes all the more clear that with reference to Schuil's image - together with all that eludes iconic comparison - the dimension of meaning at work in Daniëls's painting gets completely ignored.

[6] Philip Peters, "René Daniëls: Imprisoned in the 'Fleece'," in exhibition catalogue René Daniëls (Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, 1998), p. 24.

[7] Paul Kempers, "Clear with a Twist." p. 6.

Schuil's works do not modify them and neither contribute to the totality of the picture nor merge into it. Rather, these particles existing below or outside the iconically active level offer an over-burgeoning wealth of autonomous painterly events which, although visible from close up, albeit at the loss of the overall figuration, elude any conceptual correspondences – assuming they are not called something that rigorously excludes them from visual accountability.

A fairly unfocused look at Han Schuil's works, together with a quick read of some of his statements, brings to light contradictory relations that may well be constitutive for his entire oeuvre, and thus pivotal in determining its importance: a (new) work is discontinuous from other (older) works (of his), even if the same motifs are used over time. Simultaneously, every single piece either goes back to an already established pictorial motif or could be associated with one. By means of an established visual sign that can be found in outside reality, this kind of painting defines itself as both the depiction of aspects of plain reality and as an autonomous pictorial construct. Schuil chooses visual sources whose sign function is highly conventionalised, and he relies thus not on similarity but on a differential construction and legibility. In this respect, both anonymously circulated signs as well as those individualised by an artist's name can be considered, even if Schuil prefers the former. And ultimately, the gulf between the overall iconic structure and a host of painterly details ensures a deep if not an immediately visible incoherence in the picture that finds an echo in the mutual detachment between the painted surface and the body of the painting. This observation, however, appears to have been curiously contradicted by Han Schuil himself. In the aforementioned interview, Dominic van den Boogerd remarked, "You use duplication, mirror images, formal rhyme and other techniques to create unity, but it still looks as though the figures live in isolation, as though they are hesitant to become incorporated in a coherent whole." Han Schuil

declined to accept this, replying, "I am out to create a painting that is a single whole and I don't want it to collapse into two or three pieces. For instance, I like the paintings of Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden ... Every part is painted with great intensity, every detail demands attention, while the effect of the whole is still that of a single picture... I am not looking for balance, but for tensions." A little later in the same conversation, he underlined the importance of his own signature: "Han Schuil Was Here."[8]

A stand-in for a conventional signature can be distinguished in many of his works in the form of a small rectangle or square that Schuil integrates into the work, sometimes vaguely concealed at the side or more or less conclusively absorbed into the overall visual constellation. His strong objection to Van den Boogerd's observation that the relationships between the figures in the paintings seemed as arbitrary as those in a database[9] must be understood as a claim to an authorial centrality that is reflected in and proven by the overall unity of a picture. This seems, on the other hand, to contradict Schuil's rejection of compositional balance in favour of tension, and also to contradict his adoption of pre-established signs of various provenance and his assertion about the discontinuous relationship his own paintings have to one another. This inconsistency prompts us to try to establish the nature of the artistic subjectivity in Schuil's work.

Schuil noted a change around 1991-1992.[10] Up to that point, we can genuinely speak of an ongoing development that was oriented in a non-specific way to American colour field painting. Schuil himself named Ellsworth Kelly by way of reference, and Leon Polk Smith's name can also be mentioned, along with several others. Schuil placed simple curved, coloured shapes on a rectangular picture ground, remodelled three-dimensional objects as planar constructions, bowed to the dictates of figure ground equilibrium, and transposed the relationship governing colour form and rectangular canvas to the governing

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[8] Dominic van den Boogerd, "Aluminium icons,' p. 12.
[9] Ibid., p.12.
[10] Ibid., p.11.

picture form and wall – without, however, arriving at the consequences Daniel Buren did when he conceived of the wall as something other than a formal given vis-à-vis the pictorial object. As regards the relationship between the latter and its spatial surroundings, Schuil was closer to the open forms of Blinky Palermo, and ultimately closer to them than to Ellsworth Kelly's rational constructions. As his work proceeded, he widened the possibility of concrete associations and experimented with a variety of materials for the picture support and a broader range of applied shapes. By the late 1980s – earlier than the date he has given for the reorientation of his work – he was already introducing decisive changes to his practice by beginning to paint on the ground that continues to be his favourite, sheet aluminium, and adopting figurations from the cultural inventory of his surroundings, as in a work from 1989 that uses the markings found on a football pitch.

So up to that point, the question of whether artistic development occurred can be answered in the affirmative. Step by step, one can trace the way the young artist fresh out of art school took various decisions, fundamental and not questioned further, in order to come up with a set of visual means and procedures whose potential he worked through and extended in a reflexive process aimed at gaining experience. He hereby implicitly or explicitly criticised his own previous works, refashioned them, and implemented their possible consequences. This approach not only allows a historian to reconstruct a dynamic unity in a work; it also allows the artist to regard himself as the subject who stands at its origin and undergoes a process of spiritual growth in the course of a creative confrontation with both the work and the things in his surroundings.

But all at once, Schuil distanced himself from such forms of productive reflexivity. In the 1980s, the formative decade for him, the manufacture of visual works using ready-made images in keeping with the concept of "appropriation" and various notions of the "death of the author" was generally seen as a consequence and an acknowledgement of the lack of originality of the artistic producer. According to these notions, the autonomous subject that determines itself through creative production and a return to the self must be abandoned in favour of a recipient who is left to perform a determination based on a given structure. Roland Barthes called this the "birth of the reader". Han Schuil's painting of existing signs must be regarded as part of the process of replacing the original producer with the consumer, which has been high on the agenda ever since Marcel Duchamp's "initial gesture" (Harald Szeemann).

In 2009, Schuil remarked in an interview that he now had around thirty motifs at his disposal.[11] Some of these can be listed:

1. Arrow
2. Road sign (horizontal bar in a circle)
3. Sign for regulating shipping (diagonally split rectangle; also horizontally or vertically divided lozenge)
4. Road marking (broken line)
5. Five ("gate" with four vertical bars and one cross bar)
6. Erased line of writing / blank line (single or bundled multiple horizontal bars/fields)
7. Speech bubble (with geometrical or organic outline)
8. Jigsaw (irregular, geometrically edged interlocking forms)
9. Eye (with off-centre dot, lateral wedge or star as the reflection of light on the pupil; also increasingly autonomous signs for the pupil with highlight)
10. Skull
11. Body of a sportsman with spread arms, headless and inverted
12. House with windows and chimneys
13. Car
14. Explosion (irregular star, rays)
15. Cloud (conglomerate of circles)
16. Tiling/chessboard patterns (also constellations that assume the character of script)

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[11] Paul Kempers, "Clear with a Twist," p 7.

Schuil has also brought the concept of the archive into play for the sum of his motifs, even if in another passage he brushes aside Van den Boogerd's suggestion that his shapes or objects are stored with as little connection as items in a database waiting to be retrieved. The idea of the archive is basic to the possibility of heterogeneous works being projected onto one another and swapped around, and to Schuil's belief, cited at the beginning of this essay, that there is no continuous relationship between his own works. Individual motifs are taken from the archive, in which they are present as disparate units, and turned into paintings. Each is painted of its own accord and formed anew. No motif or painting is ever developed from another, and the consequences of one picture are never used for another. It is these circumstances that led to Schuil's scepticism as to whether progress exists in painting, and individual development in a painter. It would, however, be nonsense to solely envisage selective connections between the archived inventory and the painted pictures on the one hand and on the other to claim a total foreignness between one painting and the next. As Rudolf Evenhuis's film shows, ongoing connections are replaced by transformations that al low elements of a given constellation to be rearranged or swapped around without their structural link being affected. While it is at all times possible for Han Schuil to draw on various stored motifs without adhering to the chronological date of their original inclusion in the archive, there are obviously motifs that have greater potential than others and are hence used more often.

To demonstrate the transformational character of Schuil's production, a few examples from the *Blast* constellation can be looked at as representative of many ethers: Transformations in the vertical, rectangular format:

1.   Black star at the centre of a field of rays / broad rays, radiant colours; black rays separated by slender coloured lines.
2.   White star on a field of red, orange and black jigsaw pieces.

3.   Concentric rays in red, yellow, blue and white/scattered jigsaw pieces in red, green and yellow.
4.   Large white star in front of concentric rays in white, grey and yellow.

In addition, each of these paintings has also two horizontal bars, one above the other, which seem to serve as a signature, much like the somewhat unobtrusive square.

Transformations in the smaller square format:

1.   Betty Boop's pupils with round light reflections at the centre of a field of rays in red, blue, yellow and white.
2.   The upper half of Betty Boop's eye / upper half of a field of rays.
3.   Betty Boop's eye with wedge-shaped light reflection on a blue field.
4.   Betty Boop's eye at the centre of a diagonally split field.

From here on, the diverse transformations of work featuring Betty Boop's eyes can be extrapolated, and so on.

Normally, the colours are applied in a flat, unmodelled fashion in which individual shapes are clearly separated from one another by means of masking tape. The painted surfaces stand out distinctly from the unpainted aluminium ground, which is often bent, buckled, folded, dented, perforated or transfixed by blind rivets, either before or after the painting has been executed. Han Schuil also commands a wide range of strategies for manufacturing paintings, which can be employed in their transformation: repeating the same motif (through identical repetition, mirror image, change in size, positive/negative swap or reproduction) and combining a number of identical motifs to form a new one; combining several motifs and then recombining them; isolating a component from a motif; creating different relationships between motifs (large/small, many/few, coloured/uncoloured, etc.); differentiating colours (different-coloured characters in individual works) and mode of application (matt, shiny, transparent); changing the format and the relationship

between front and sides; shifting the ratio between untreated material and painted surface; and, finally, deforming the pictorial body.

Evidently, Han Schuil performs different manipulations of the material with the aim of highlighting the physical reality of the pictorial body, as opposed to the painting applied on it. Generally, the surface of the painting dominates the visual object, and it often appears as a projection on a support which, while striking in its materiality and visual appearance, is indifferent to the image. The distortions in the metal body of the picture, in particular, become very noticeable when they produce uncontrollable reflections that change with the movement of the observer, and that act on the minute differentiation of the painted forms, disrupting them or joining them up.

The incomplete list of Schuil's motifs given earlier suggests groups that show that a taxonomy of them would not, at least, have the incompatibility of categories that led to the unintelligibility of that celebrated list of object types cited by Michel Foucault. Apart from this, the iconic representations are images of limited complexity, whose informational and organisational value is based on strong oppositions, such as those between line and plane, contrasting colour, organic and geometrical, full and empty, large and small, etc. The list covers a limited, well-ordered spectrum, which, however, was upset by the unheralded differences that suddenly appeared in another list in one of the interviews mentioned earlier. Here is that list: "An explosion. One of Betty Boop's eyes. A fold by Rogier van der Weyden. A work by Blinky Palermo. A Frank Lloyd Wright-style bungalow, squashed flat onto the surface. A dent in a car."[12] This detailed description of the origins of individual paintings, above all, highlights categorical differences that allow anonymity and personification, high and quotidian culture, voluntary and involuntary design, three-dimensionality and two-dimensionality to meet on a non-hierarchical basis. But this list also includes patterns of

order that ward off the incommensurability of the purported Chinese encyclopaedia entries. In his choice of paintable motifs, Han Schuil sticks to that "order of things" that shapes his own culture and is essentially marked by oppositions. As a painter who decides what he paints and thereby excludes all else from his painting, he presents himself as embedded in a cultural nexus of inclusions and exclusions. By adopting pre-existing images as the subject of his painting, Schuil acknowledges that his work is connected to a system of exclusivity that he cannot influence and affirms his abandonment of the concept of an autonomous artistic subjectivity – however much bearing it might have had on the early development of his work.

The interviews, however, contain a number of statements in which Han Schuil seems to assert his position as an authorial subject – namely when he enters into the matter of how he decides on the images he makes subjects of his painting. The only things he can paint are these that already exist, but not every one of them can be painted. At the same time, the rules for what can be considered for painting in individual cases and what cannot are unknown. With reference to the famous remark by Picasso, Han Schuil empha-sises that he does not look for models for his painting, as he has no idea what might prove suitable, but that "[i]t has to excite me and I have to be able to justify it to myself ... If I am lukewarm I cannot start on a painting."[13] He responds to an image's surprising appeal by heightening it in a painting and expects that it will rivet the viewer, because the painting itself is the seizure and expansion of a moment through time-consuming labour.

Schuil appears to think that his right or duty to mark a work with his signature comes from his own personal reaction to certain images, which he also refers to with the term "intuition". His expectation that he will feel stimulated or excited by one image rather than another, complete with the psychosexual implications Bert Jansen examines in his essay "Han Schuil: Marking and Masking"[14], is understandable. But it is question-able

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12 Ibid., p.5.
13 Dominic van den Boogerd, "Aluminium icons." p. 8.

14 Bert Jansen, "Han Schuil: Marking and Masking," in exhibtion catalogue Han Schuil: Schilderijen/Paintings 1983-1999

whether this reaction that he judges to be his own is enough to ensure a subject for his subjectivity. Quite possibly, his personal response is coloured far more by ethers' anticipated reac-tions than he would admit to himself.

Against all expectations, the painterly work's de-subjectifying connection to a system of sign formation - which presides over the represen-tation and stands out in the autonomous play
of difference - also seems to have an inherent tendency towards subjectivisation, in fact, where images and objects lose one another. Indeed, the question is to what extent Han Schuil's pictures use conventionalised signs to represent what they refer to or whether in fact by depiction
of the iconic sign the representation does not divest itself of its object. Historica! examples of the radical division of image and object may be found among the avantgardes of the twentieth century. The fundamental significance of Alexander Rodchenko's tripartite work in the colours red, yellow and blue, exhibited in 1921, lay in the factuality of three adjacent panels that severed all reference to a reality lying outside them. Since this spelled the end of painterly representation (and of painting itself, because it could not place itself outside representation), Rodchenko turned to the medium that records the objects it is pointed at with zero resistance: photography. In this he adopted an extreme stand point that pushed the subjective determination of the exposure to the fore. When Marcel Duchamp, at the other extreme, stripped the object of every outward sign of representation and presented it in its own very objecthood, he linked the withdrawal of the productive subject with a call to every single viewer to participate in the completion of the work. With that, he unleashed an unexpected tide of reconstructions and interpretations to which he himself also contributed, if enigmatically, with his published notes and interviews. Han Schuil's work is marked by a singular and baffling vacillation between the exclusion of

the autonomous subject in favour of attaching the painting to an established system of image creation and a penchant for subjectivism.

The revolt against the de-subjectifying subjugation of painting to the dictates of an established structure has nothing to do with attempts to resurrect the relinquished subject as an individualised authority that chooses and interprets. lt starts with the primacy of the structure of systematic inclusion/ exclusion of what can be painted, to which painting is attached and which determines the abandonment of the autonomous artistic subject. This shift in artistic practice is above all necessary because no tendency towards re-subjectification, no reaction to certain motifs that excite the individual, no interpretative padding with different kinds of images and objects, changes anything in the structure dominating the division between the paintable and the unpaintable, which Han Schuil seems to acknowledge
in his paintings of extant images. He seems to acknowledge it, over and beyond his attempt to focus on subjective decisions playing a part in choosing the object to be painted. The question for painting might then be: How can one paint what is excluded from painting? How can the unpaintable be painted and the ruling system of exclusivity thus be subverted? The question could also be: How can elements of re-subjectification be countered, since their sole effect is to support a de-subjectifying structure? Obviously, the answer cannot lie in the inclusion of what has been excluded, because every inclusion is based on a new exclusion.

The most important answer to be found in Han Schuil's painting consists in the introduction of painterly excess – that is to say, elements of painting that are realised with a great output of energy and in vast numbers but are of no consequence for the iconic form of the painting, as they can be seen only when the viewer comes close to the work and loses sight of it as a whole. This means there is something inside the painterly depiction of an encoded sign that is not involved in the representation. lt is impossible

to paint the unpaintable, to escape the system of inclusion/exclusion in representation, to which Han Schuil's painting is attached. But it is possible to paint that which lies outside the paintability of the pictorial sign that brings about the representation. That which may be painted outside the paintability of the sign may be designated as included/excluded or as present/absent. To use a term of Michel Foucault's, we are dealing with aspects of a heterotopia. With the realisation of a transitional zone of this kind, the systematic exclusivity of the determining structure is, if not dissolved, then at least opened to the possibility of assuming a distance from the subjectified choice of certain images at the expense of others. As soon as this possibility becomes clear, one recognises that Schuil's work is replete with incompatibilities that grant access to that which has been excluded by the representation. Particularly worth mentioning here are the extreme differences between large and small picture elements noted by Van den Boogerd[15], decor, accessories and trappings, but also differences between individual works, which Han Schuil refers to when he says: "It is the case that at one moment I want to make a calm, orderly painting, and at another an energetic, baroque painting. Apparently I have a need for that alteration."[16]

On another level, the appearance of the unpaintable in the field of the painting makes itself felt in the deformations and material hyper-trophies of the picture support, which produce unexpected distortions in the painted figurations, and reflections whose effect on the figures in the picture are unforeseeable and uncontrollable and change with the viewer's every movement. Han Schuil has said, "I [don't] want to emphasise the object quality of the painting. I1 use them [i.e., material effects - UL] because they fit into the image... They are not commentaries on the picture plane or on the medium of painting or on the border between painting and sculpture."[17] What he

calls the picture's object quality causes some of the excluded to seep into the painting.

By assailing the exclusory structure of the representation to which it is simultaneously bound, the painting turns against the reintroduction of a paltry authorial subject that distinguishes itself simply by making decisions about what can be painted and what not. Han Schuil's painting reveals an artist who is ready and able to dissolve the boundaries of what can be painted. Only that which transgresses and undermines his work, its own excess and the intrusions that elude its control, deserves his signature.

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[15] "The enormous differences of scale and the strong contrasts between light confer a recalcitrant, baroque dynamic on your work." Dominic van den Boogerd, 'Aluminium icons," p.12.

[16] Ibid., p. 13.
[17] Ibid., p. 18.