

## *Landscapes Beyond the Horizon*

It is a familiar phenomenon: a single horizontal line is drawn on a white sheet of paper - and the surface divided in this way extends into a lower and an upper space. If the line is placed onto the paper vertically, the result is that of a right and left field - without any suggestion of space. As a rudimentary, extremely reduced graphic expression, the horizontal line evokes the idea of a horizon and thus of a landscape.

As a floating line at an indistinct distance, the horizon separates the sky from the earth: it is always visible, but remains unreachable and continually withdraws. The mental line of intersection of what is down and what is up, of form and non-form, of what is material and what is immaterial defines a human being's idea and perception of landscape. As an extreme parameter of orientation in time and space, the horizon plays an essential role in human perception; it is, so to speak, the visual boundary of our being in the world.

The psychology of perception has long since proved that human beings will only see what they are able to see based on their physiological determination, and what they want to see based on their individual cultural determination. Perception is a constructive process, and as such it is always a selective one as well. Considering the endless flood of changing images on the retina, human perception has to recognize and to define constancy - so-called invariable elements - in its environment. Thanks to this talent, a human being is able to recognize for example a landscape as landscape - and in this process the horizon belongs to the most stable of all stored away features and thus becomes one of the primary invariable elements.

For some years now, Robert Zandvliet has worked on a larger series of works which he unpretentiously unites under the title 'Landscapes'. Thus the artist not only takes on one of the great subjects of the history of painting in which, as is well known, Dutch painters have achieved brilliant results, he also deals with a motif that is intensely present in our everyday lives. Images are generated by different media; they permeate everyday life and thus determine our concepts of reality. We are constantly confronted with landscapes: dreamlike beaches in holiday brochures, steep cliffs in cigarette advertisements, or vast plains in Hollywood westerns. Landscape exists in the human mind as a structure made up of determined signs - a mere horizontal line can already suffice.

A hundred years ago the sociologist Georg Simmel wrote that in an aesthetic sense, landscape does not denote a self-creating, i.e., naturally inherent, phenomenon, but that the recognition of a 'landscape' should be conceived of as a conscious mental process.<sup>1</sup> That would mean that the concept of 'landscape' should be understood as a culturally formed construction to whose character the viewer contributes in an extremely, subjective way. Simmel goes on to explain that parts cannot actually be broken out of a natural whole: 'Nature has no pieces; it is the unity of a whole. The moment anything is worked out of it, it is no longer wholly nature.'<sup>2</sup> These differentiations are important for an aesthetic discussion as they underline the interactive process that leads human beings to perceive a part of nature's whole as a 'landscape'. The object is the land, the surface of the earth, a tree, brushwood - but the landscape is something else. It denotes how the object affects us. As art historian Max Friedländer once put it: it is 'the face of the land'.<sup>3</sup>

Robert Zandvliet never gives titles to his individual works. And when asked about new contributions to his 'Landscapes', he only accounts for the starting point of the process of finding his pictures. In his small-format works in particular, visual memories of landscapes may be activated during the actual painting process, but they are melted into the rhythm and the gesture of painting, which generates

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Simmel, 'Philosophie der Landschaft' (1912) in: Michael Landmann (red.), *Brücke und Tur*, Stuttgart 1975, pp. 141-152.

<sup>2</sup> Georg Simmel, see note 1. P.144.

<sup>3</sup> Max Friedländer, *Über die Malerei*, München 1963, p. 27.

the picture. This painting does not refer to a view of specific landscapes, but rather to the concept and in a certain sense to the idea of a 'landscape'.

Two conditions are fundamental to the conception of Robert Zandvliet's work: 'landscape' is a topological concept that may look back onto a long tradition of landscape painting. Zandvliet starts from the topological concept and not from the topography of a landscape. But even outside the context of art, landscape today is an extremely determinate motif that appears as a fragment of rendered reality in quite different contexts and areas of life. This allows the painter the freedom that makes it possible to let the artistic act come first without abandoning reference to a motif. In a new way, Zandvliet examines the tension between a self-reflective, artistic practice and painting bound to a representational function: he goes to the limits to have his pictures fluctuate between these two tendencies in order to bring them into an oscillating balance. Zandvliet leaves behind the iconographic context of landscape painting; his landscapes do not allow themselves to be limited by a horizon. This kind of painting does not aim at the representation of a topographic reality or at the expression of personal feelings or sensations in painted landscapes. These works are not based on either emotional or mental self-expression. Rather, they adhere to their own visualness, from which the viewer's attention cannot be diverted either by an anecdote or by a narrative. Zandvliet makes people aware of the complexities and the possibilities of painting and pictures.

Artists traditionally use the horizontal format for landscape pictures. In Robert Zandvliet's work, some formats (101 x 501 cm) go way beyond this, thus illuminating the artist's basic intention: far from any mimetic purpose, artistic means are used to transform a landscape into a dense picture, a picture that is both a construction and an experience. These landscapes cannot be grasped with one look. These landscapes only reveal themselves to the wandering eye. Zandvliet causes a certain amount of ambivalence in those who look at his paintings: they cannot fix their position towards the picture, alternating between viewing it from close up and from a distance. On the one hand they are overwhelmed by the openness of the landscape; on the other hand they are seduced into losing themselves in the artistic wealth of detail. The eye closely follows each unevenness in the painting's surface. It seeks the horizon, roams over the landscape, and in the end only follows the traces of the brush. The gesture of the brush seems to be of surprising ease and the characteristic flow of the colors' paths make it appear as if they were painted on swift impulse. However, when the view returns to the picture as a whole it becomes obvious that the in part ferocious brushstrokes cannot be interpreted as mere self-referential carriers of effect and expression: they have to subordinate themselves to the artist's strong creative intention. In contrast to his small formats and his monotypes, which originate in a much more process-oriented manner, Zandvliet has clear concepts about the formal composition of his large-format paintings even before he places his brush on the canvas. The positionless space of the painting demands a curved line reminiscent of a hill. The structure of the artistically suggested brushwood obeys the inner coherence of the brushstrokes.

It is striking that the earlier works of the current series, which was created over a period of five years, are more characterized by clearly distinguishable references to landscape. For example, in a picture painted in 1998 several elements can be identified that are reminiscent of both the atmosphere and composition of Vincent van Gogh's famous painting *Wheatfield with Crows*: there is a path leading into the depth of the painting's space; a waving wheatfields towers to the right and to the left; the sky- and a horizon - vault above. Robert Zandvliet has used this elementary compositional structure several times and in different formats. All of these works have a specific atmosphere: in one painting the path leading into the depth of the picture is bathed in sun; in another the sky has darkened and a dismal atmosphere takes over. But Zandvliet is not interested in representing the different moods of nature dependent on times of day and on the perceptual impressions they evoke. Neither are his pictures the stenographic notes of an agitated soul, as is sometimes the case in the paintings of Van Gogh. Rather, Zandvliet's work accentuates a way of painting that quotes and paraphrases the process of painting as such. The dynamic style gives rhythm to the painted surface; the characteristic

gesture of the brush and the broad brushstrokes create a dense structure of surfaces and lines, out of which landscape emerges only in part.

Robert Zandvliet employs invariable elements more economically in his later works, and those landscape fragments that can be precisely named disappear completely. The painter reduces the share of elements that reproduce reality in favour of those artificial elements that construct reality. Although it suggests the line of a tree, a vertical brushstroke is connected with the painting's surface in such a way that such associations become elusive and are only present as one interpretational option. Landscape elements do not have a privileged position in the painting as a whole; they are not at the center of significance around which artistic subplots are arranged. Rather the various parts of the painting are linked to each other without any hierarchy. All of its elements are subordinate to a strict but apparently natural composition that seems to have been created in an energetic and gestured manner, but whose precision reveals a controlled genesis, thus causing a certain distance. Individual elements are connected by the artistic means of color, form and gesture and anchored in the picture's surface. However, as landscape is still latently present, Zandvliet liberates us from the fiction of seeing pure color and form. In these paintings a specific line may be perceived as a horizon, a trace of color, or as both. Zandvliet is undogmatic about leaving both of these options open to us, and in a subtle way he emphasises both the meaning of what is visible and what becomes visible.

The cunning game of depth of space and surface, of looking through an being prevented from doing so, and the dynamics of the paint applied to the canvas and the subtle brightness of colors and constituent features of painting that do not want to represent the reality outside of painting, but that want to represent themselves. The eye does not slip into a three-dimensional infinity, but rather onto the apparent depth of a layered surface. The path of color often created with help of wide brushes suggest a motion that sweeps away everything. The dynamics of the picture create a wake that also affects the viewer. The eye is captivated by the tectonics of colorful brushstrokes, by the painted landscape's zones of light and shade. The viewer's attention is emphatically directed towards the artistic means themselves. The thematization of difference between medium and picture becomes central. Robert Zandvliet's [paintings withdraw from the rapid conferring of meaning and inquire about the basis for both the creation of a painting as a painting, creating his or her own space and the landscape beyond the horizon. Zandvliet provokes an associative way of seeing that continues the visible.

On their adventurous voyages long ago, seafarers would spot the coastlines of new continents. The horizon is always before us, but it is never reachable. That which lies behind the horizon becomes, as it were, a space for projecting everything in the process of becoming. The horizon disappearing in a distant, blue mist is the topographic equivalent of the future.

A mere line - a horizon - is sufficient to 'see' a landscape. Robert Zandvliet's painted landscapes do not even need this. They are landscapes with a different horizon: a horizon of their own.