

## Encounter

A small painting from 2014 served as the initial impetus for *Stage of Being*. Despite its dimensions of merely 30 x 40 centimeters, it has an enormous presence. The composition shows simplicity and symmetry. A wide, slightly curved screen in yellow stands out radiantly against the dark purple of the surrounding space. In the center a diffuse form, in the same purple, divides the screen in two. An opening was my first association, but then a second later the contours came across to me as a human figure *in front of* screen. Depending on how my own eyes perceived things the silhouette-like figure could be either absent or present, could change from background into foreground, from space into matter.

Three years later Zandvliet has returned to this motif and literally and figuratively, given it space in *Stage of Being*. The slightly curved screen extends across the full width of the immense canvases. The human figure in the middle has been further reduced and simplified into an elongated archetype. With those two visual elements Zandvliet painted seven works in which the motif unfolds, both visually and in terms of emotional content, in very different ways. In each painting the screen and the figure take on a different relationship with each other; this is contained not only in minor compositional differences, but particularly in the texture of the painted surface, in the character of the brushstroke and the intensity and tonality of the color.

## Fathoming the depths of painting.

With *Stage of Being* the theme that has occupied Zandvliet for more than twenty years is taking a new course. To the painter that he is with all his being, this

theme is both obvious and vast. The desire to fathom the depths of painting and to reinvent it has been, ever since his days at art school, his most significant motive. Already at that early point Zandvliet was captured by the magic of the medium. "I really wanted to understand it but wasn't able to put a finger on it. I simply wanted to discover the magic of the painting;" he once explained in a radio interview in 2014.<sup>1</sup> Operating in the grey area between abstraction and figuration, Zandvliet has explored diverse facets of painting over the years, adopting his characteristically methodical and analytical approach. Freely drawing on the painterly tradition, he chose motifs and painterly genres, but also specific works of other artists as the points of departure in his search for painting's potential. Aside from yielding a highly varied and rich body of work, this also led to answers. "By now I know much more, but the magic remains. My questions keep on coming. ( ... ) It's not that I want to spoil the magic. That's probably impossible anyway".<sup>2</sup>

## The metamorphosis of paint into an image.

The metamorphosis of paint into an image is one of the magical aspects of painting. In order to arrive at that image, Zandvliet tends to employ the motif as a means rather than an aim itself. He needs it as a point of departure; in the ultimate work it is often no longer recognizable. By then the image has broken free of the motif, and the paint has taken over. The painted surface of the canvas, the movements of the brush and the use or even the, absence of color determine the image. A knowledge of the materials, skill in painting, knowing what the effect of one's actions will be: the artist needs to develop this. And with every work the manner of

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<sup>1</sup> 'De Avonden', interview with Pieter van der Wielen, VPRO Radio, 22 August 2014

<sup>2</sup> Idem.

painting, the composition, the color and a range of other aspects need to add up to a whole; but the ultimate expression of a painting lies elsewhere - that's much more intangible. Moving around that issue, Zandvliet seeks new solutions. "Once I've moved on a few more years, the form changes again. I'm hoping, of course, that the images become more and more bare, free of the irrelevant, that I get closer to that essence all the time. At the start you're thinking: the image has to be very clear and sharp. At a certain point you try to find it in the color or in the brushstroke, or in the momentum. So with each period your focus shifts."<sup>3</sup>

Frequently the shifting of that focus comes with the choice of a new subject. The early paintings that involve objects sublimated into archetypes were followed by abstracted landscapes, portraits reduced to the brushstroke and the series *I owe you*, in which Zandvliet used his own visual language to engage in a dialogue with the work of other artists. No matter what genre or motif he adopted as his point of departure, however, the language of painting continued to be his main concern.

Consistent with that focus on the painterly was moreover the aim to make the painting as 'bare' as possible and the wish to achieve maximum expression with as few means as possible. The exhibition *Rückblick/neue Bilder*, held at Galerie Friedrich in Basel in 2008, can be considered a statement in that respect. In a series of paintings having the same size of 127 x 144 cm, relatively small for Zandvliet, he went back to images from his entire oeuvre.

Motifs such as the rearview mirror, the human face, the highways, open landscape and vistas 'framed' by coulisses emerged again in a different form, a

version in which everything was concentrated on the movement of the brush. The same austerity could be found in the palette. Black, white and grey were set in contrast to the warm hues of the linen which, in this series, was given an active role for the first time.

In *Stage of Being* a motif from Zandvliet's early work is once again a key focus. Just as in the *Cinema* works from 1996-'97, a large, slightly curved screen constitutes a visually defining element. In other recent paintings as well, Zandvliet has returned to motifs from his early 'object' paintings. The intention with which he does this, however, is very different from that of *Rückblick/neue Bilder*. While in that series he wished to take a step further toward an autonomous visual language, in his recent work he is trying in fact to create space in order to make his painting more profound in other ways.

In his focus on the language of painting, the image had become increasingly concentrated on the movement of the brush. Zandvliet had developed immense virtuosity in his handling of that brush. In his hands even the widest brush had a nimbleness that allowed for dancing, nearly transparent strokes as well as a single flowing and drawn-out movement across a thin canvas, meters in width. Around 2013 that virtuosity began to become an obstacle for him, and returning to the object was a means to connect with both the motif and the painterly process in new ways.

### **Seven Stones**

In *Seven Stones* that shift in Zandvliet's approach took shape in seven monumental paintings that comprise a single work. Taking the place of the man-made utilitarian objects in his paintings from the 1990s, a stone is now the motif

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<sup>3</sup> From an unpublished conversation with Louise Schouwenberg, 2013

that occupies the entire image. Not a particularly special stone, just a 'perfectly ordinary' one. While shapes of the most common objects do involve considerations and decisions of all kinds, a chunk of stone that has been formed by natural processes over millions of years possesses a robust power that requires no justification or explanation whatsoever. That quality makes the motif an ideal subject. During the year that he spent on the project, Zandvliet sought a painterly equivalent and arrived at the realization that it isn't the right color, composition or any of the other formal aspects that make a difference, but that it comes down to the energy of the image. "I had to sacrifice a number of things in order to take that step, and not adhere to everything that constitutes the external, but to get closer to that other facet that empowers the image. That was much more a conflict within myself than a matter related to painting or depiction."<sup>4</sup>

In his struggle to break with aesthetics and virtuosity, Zandvliet gave up his brush and took up the far more unmanageable paint roller; and while the stratified quality of the image previously came about in gradual stages, it was now being sought in the moment. In order to capture the energy of the image in a single coherent gesture, he painted each canvas in one session.

In the seven paintings that make up *Seven Stones*, the power of ruggedly formed boulders has been transformed into compressed energy. The painted image is both the monumental representation of a piece of stone and the visual expression of the painting's developmental process. The alternately transparent and concealing, scant and substantial strokes in brown, black and blue-grey yield not only a portrayal of the heaviness, the volume,

fractured surfaces and other qualities of a stone; to an equal degree they provide a sense of the physical movement and force with which - thinly, sometimes with a coarse-grained effect - the acrylic has been applied with the paint roller onto the rough linen, which in turn is the support, the background, light and form all in one.

### **The (void) image as a motif**

In Robert Zandvliet's work the reflection in the painted image functions not only as a conceptual context; over the course of years it has in fact become a recurrent theme, in which the screen figures most prominently as a motif. In 1996 and '97 it makes its debut in three works titled *Cinema*. In these paintings the projection screen appears not as an invisible support for images but as an isolated object. The surroundings of the movie - its walls, the ceiling and the backs of seats in the first row - have been pushed to the edges of the canvas. The empty screen occupies nearly the entire image. The three immense *Cinema* paintings deal with the notion of framing, but also with looking and seeing. Zandvliet has taken on the challenge of painting an image-filling 'void' in such a way that the focus shifts from the depiction to the potency of the painted image. "To me, the white canvas / the silver screen," he remarked in an interview from 1997, "is the place from which all images come. It's a surf gives off light ( ... ) I wanted to produce a painting into which all the images that we know would be fused."<sup>5</sup>

In 2009 the power of the 'void' image once again surfaced as a theme in *L'atelier de 'La Californie' à Cannes*. The painting is part of *I owe you*, the series in which Zandvliet was guided, in choice of inspirational works from art history, by what moved him in a particular painting.

<sup>4</sup> From a conversation with Hanneke de Man, 27 October 2016

<sup>5</sup> Dominic van de Boogerd, "Haviksoog", *HP/De Tijd*, 7 February 1997

In Picasso's eponymous paint from 1956, he became fascinated with the white rectangle in the middle of the composition. In Picasso's work this 'empty' and, in fact, unpainted surface is embedded in the totality of the studio scene and derives its justification as the still virgin-white canvas on the easel. In Zandvliet's version the image has been stripped of all narrative detail. He has zoomed in on the center of the composition and transformed the originally white surface into a deep-black hole. His aim for austerity is also expressed in the use of the material. For the nocturnal, nearly abstract-looking work he has used only black gesso. Where the central shape is concerned, this has a richly dark, velvety quality. The surrounding shapes have been painted in dry, open strokes, among which the unpainted linen functions as contouring.

For the final work in the series *I owe you*, in 2011, Zandvliet adopted his own *Cinema* paintings as the point of departure. This work, which even surpasses those painted fifteen years earlier in terms of size, has also been carried out in black gesso. A dark, loosely suspended curtain dominates the image. The indication of a ceiling and walls has been reduced to a simple frame. As with the previous 'cinemas': there arises the question as to whether we're looking at the depiction of a work or its manifestation. The effect of the light further heightens that ambiguity. Light has not been painted into, but out of the image. Whereas, in the early *Cinema* works, the illuminating white version and the receding blue one contained the promise of images, here that image has been realized in the curtain. At the same time, it obscures our view of other images. Not completely, but almost; along of the edges of the curtain, light gets through.

This veiled image will never be revealed, but that makes it no less true.

In order to bring light into the image, Zandvliet made very deliberate use of the bare linen's potential. While the edges reduced to contouring in his version of Picasso's studio portrayal were sooner a fortunate incident, here those narrow unpainted strips of linen are what the painting is about.

The linen transformed into light was the starting point for a number of nocturnal landscapes, but this *Cinema* casts it shadow in other ways as well. Between the two curtains, precisely in the middle of the image, there is a small crack of light, a forerunner of the main motif in *Stage of Being*.

#### **Human Scale**

Until now, the human figure has been strikingly absent in Zandvliet's oeuvre. Apprehensive about anecdotes, he has always avoided this motif fraught with all sorts of narrative and emotional connotations. A change is beginning to occur in this. Over the past two years, parts of the human body, such as the hand and the eye had already been the subjects of his paintings. There is also a tendency toward greater recognizability in the motifs, without a 'hijacking' of the painted image by the heightened realism. Zandvliet allows more room for the narrative, and in his experiments with polyptychs in 2014 and 2015, he has consciously sought this.

"I think that my work is becoming more personal, that I'm gradually moving more toward the subject," he said in one of our conversations. "There are two tendencies: on the one hand, I want the work to be increasingly my own, to be personal, and on the other I want to vanish from the painting. I believe that if you can paint yourself out of the painting, it has a greater chance of becoming archetypal,

more universal. It then breaks free of personal anecdotes. That's why I was always wary of having people in the image; I preferred to eliminate them. But we *are* people. When you look at all of art history, it's about us. You have to let this in, but then in such a way that it becomes isolated from yourself as the creator.”<sup>6</sup>

The decision to use the human figure as a motif, and the way in which this manifests itself in *Stage of Being*, is linked with Zandvliet's own development, but at the same time it has found concrete origins in Caspar David Friedrich's *Rückenfigur*. At the start of the nineteenth century, this German romanticist introduced into his landscapes a lonely 'Wanderer', seen from behind, as a mediator between the viewer and unspoiled, divine nature. Situated centrally in the foreground, his presence implies an invitation to follow him in his contemplation of the landscape. In *Stage of Being I* Zandvliet adopted this construction. Instead of a landscape, though, the screen is the object of attention here. The work has been painted with a roller. Its parallel, horizontal movements have left a rhythmic pattern of tracks, against which an angular, elongated figure is silhouetted from the top to the bottom of the painting. In the space tersely defined by the floor and ceiling lines, screen and figure have been juxtaposed with each other as equal entities in a contrast of dark and light. The way in which they relate to each other, however, is not unambiguous. The presence of the dark figure resonates in the transparently white texture of the screen. At the same time, like a shadow, it lacks volume. While Friedrich's *Rückenfigur* conveys an idea concerning nature and man's place in it, here we are faced with the reality of the painted

canvas, and the figure/ screen, relationship is inherent in the paint itself. Added to the chemistry between figure and screen is moreover the dynamic relationship between that shape and the viewer. Due to the dimensions of the canvas and the size of the figure, we as viewers become not only visually, but also physically drawn toward the painted image.

In *Trunks*, a number of works from the autumn of 2016 that have a tree trunk as a central motif, Zandvliet had already made the human scale and the viewer/image relationship a subject of investigation. In the seven paintings of *Stage of Being*, the chemistry between the figure and the viewer has become even more important. Sometimes, as in *Stage of Being III*, the pictorial space is expansive. The screen and the limits of the canvas coincide, so that the slightly curved screen actually seems to envelop the viewer. After a period in which Zandvliet employed a very restrained palette, color has now made a radiant comeback. Due to the effect of the ultramarine blue, the viewer is drawn into the image and discerns, in the middle, the shape which is part of the screen's texture. The open whisks around the figure, applied with the roller, resemble trees. They surround it in a play of motion and countermotion, and then assume their original texture again at the sides of the canvas. In *Stage of Being II* the pictorial space has, by contrast, become condensed. The image has turned inward; the viewer is kept at a distance. Between the viewer and the figure, a transparent but impenetrable partition seems to have been drawn, thus making that shape inapproachable, as if it resides in the beyond, in another realm. The characterization 'person' would be too concrete for the figure. Its elongated, sometimes frayed, angular and, in the final

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<sup>6</sup> From a conversation with Hanneke de Man, 18 January 2017

work, fluid silhouette can sooner be described as a shape, an apparition or creature: as various qualities of being. Just as in *Seven Stones*, the energy that emanates from the works is indeed palpable here; but while the physical energy was given visual expression in the previous work, that expression is less direct in *Stage of Being*. Its atmosphere is more meditative, its energy more soul-like. Sometimes the figure stands out in contrast to the painted pictorial space; at other times it nearly vanishes in it. In *Stage of Being IV* the shape dissolves in the deep, warm black that has been applied layer by layer. A fine edge of blue light lifts it from the surroundings and gives it a mysterious presence. The contours of the screen can scarcely be distinguished any longer, now functioning merely as an indication of space. In *Stage of Being VI* spatial context has turned into surroundings resembling landscape, which evokes associations with the fog and haze paintings by Caspar David Friedrich. Four cloud-like formations are symmetrically situated within the picture plane. Their irregular edges mark off a horizon. The fluid movement with which they envelop the figure in the middle gives that shape a feminine quality. Highly ambiguous is the chemistry between this figure and its surroundings: the voluminous clouds contrast with the airy, thinly applied turquoise hue of the figure. It seems as though she is situated not opposite, but beyond the cloud formations. It is not only her position that makes her seem impalpable, though; her manifestation contributes to this as well. From a distance she is clearly present, but the closer we get to the work, the more her shape dissolves into the azure of the sky.

### **Absence and presence**

Absence and presence, existence and nonexistence: that opposition is intrinsic to the entire series but becomes explicit as a paradox in the last three works. In *Stage of Being V*, which for the first time in ages has again been painted completely with the brush, the screen extends to the sides of the canvas in a grand gesture. At the top and bottom the lead-colored screen is defined by the dark purple of a floor and ceiling. Appearing in the center of the painting, occupying its full height, is the figure. Despite the silhouette's narrowness and lack of definition, its presence is imposing and literally forces open the pictorial space. The figure is the bare, unprepared linen; and at the same time it renders this visible as a different space. The ambiguity of space and matter, of background and foreground, is further heightened by the fact that the greyish, indistinct contours give volume to the figure and that the canvas's materiality tangibly contrasts with the screen's metallic shine.

In *Stage of Being VII* Zandvliet also uses the expressive power of the unpainted linen to give shape to the figure in the middle, and yet a greater difference in character between the two works is hardly possible. The severe, archaic figure has given way to a much more immaterial presence; light prevails instead of darkness. While the reflection of light plays an important role in *Stage of Being V*, here the light seems to come from within, and the figure itself is a source of light. The color white, with which Zandvliet began the series, has returned. The rhythmic pattern of the roller, so prominently evident in *Stage of Being I*, is now subdued, just as the screen's contours and the 'horizon' line have been softened. At either side the screen disintegrates into yellow, open brushstrokes, by which the figure in the

middle has taken shape in order, ultimately, to vanish into the unpainted linen. The contrasts of paint and image, played out in the seven works of the series in ever-changing ways, are kept in balance in the final work of *Stage of Being* .

"Only then, when figure and ground compete and when the components of a painting alternately recede and come forward, can an imaginary space, in which paint becomes entirely image without ceasing to be paint, be created between the two – as if from nothing. The genesis of images in this imaginary realm of painting remains an infinite mystery."<sup>7</sup>

The quote comes from an essay that Marcel Vos wrote, in 1998, about the early work of Robert Zandvliet. Although the text is nearly twenty years old and refers to the object paintings, the passage reads as if it had been written yesterday, as it so aptly applies to *Stage of Being*. It remains a beautiful characterization of what fascinates and motivates Robert Zandvliet. That is the desire to create works in which the magic of painting unfolds with growing clarity.

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<sup>7</sup> M.M.M. Vos, "*Het witte doek* – On the paintings of Robert Zandvliet," *Robbert Zandvliet*, Galerie Onrust, Amsterdam 1998, p.12