

# The surface of things

*By Luk Lambrecht*

Contemporary art is a solidified image of a coma — of a withdrawal from the steady flow of things that culminates into an “ after-image ”. Art slows down the “ course of things ”, like a comma, a punctuation mark that creates a break, allowing us to reflect. The art of painting is the means par excellence — a unique, manipulable artistic means — to comment on the peculiar experience of life. The art of painting as an “ in-between ” that separates the uncertainty of reality and the material reality of art. Today, the art of painting is more alive than ever. It is even considered by many as a life buoy in the sense that — in a personal and unparalleled manner — it allows to transform personal experiences and comments on the reality experienced in images, which are a priori deceitful.

As such, because of its materiality, the art of painting is abstract. Furthermore, from the mid-1960s, it began to use photography — in a massive and large-scale manner — as a counterpoint to an idealized view of life, in which a painting figured as a “ flawless ” representation of “ a ” reality. The filtering eye that “ observes ” the world around us, proved to be a more neutral source of inspiration for the creation of images. It has become a leitmotif that recurs time and again in the recent history of painting, which has added the information highway and the concept of virtual images to its reference frame. Motifs have turned into ready-mades, reality is knocking at the door, echoing its own mimesis in mass media or whatever media for that matter. Amidst this thundering storm of images, we find the tender work of Charlotte Beaudry, which seems keen to comment on reality from the point of view of the technologically reproduced eye of the camera — a camera that according to the german artist gerhard richter observes more objectively that the artist could ever wish.

In times of “ uncontrolled ” reproduction of images (manipulated or otherwise), the art of painting has a material character. Images that belong to the realm of the new media are intangible — they disappear and fade from hard “ disks ” or other data storage media. The art of painting on the other hand, is more material than it ever was : paint manifests itself in a concrete (or otherwise) constellation of forms that refer to reality and comment on the world as we perceive it or on the mood of the maker/artist. Within the world of contemporary painting, the key question is “ what ” should be painted,

rather than “ how ” it should be painted. The deconstruction of the pictorial gesture was part of an evolutionary process that ended with painting degree zero around the mid-1970s. I am thinking of the famous pioneering “ band paintings ” by Frank Stella, who near the end of the 1950s worked his way around the concept of composition by following the contours of the support with a pattern of bands and stripes that are congruent with the “ shape ” of the support. I am also thinking of the white paintings by the american artist Robert Rauschenberg, of Niele Toroni’s systematic brushstrokes, or the grey tones of Gerhard Richter, in which the paint manifests itself in the neutrality and anti-narrative quality of the paint. The paint, applied within the context of a measured support or “ an ” architecture, constitutes the only trace left behind by the artist/maker — the only witness to an artistic production. Other artists, such as Ad Reinhardt and Olivier Mosset completely banned “ the hand of the artist ” from their work. With a paint roller or using industrial spray paint techniques, these artists attempted to avoid even the mere suggestion of an art that could be interpreted as a heroic achievement — the result of a strictly individual activity that involves equally strictly personal experiences.

Charlotte Beaudry’s paintings are born from looking at reality with “ the second eye ”. Her themes are inspired by videos or series of photographs. Because of the virtual origin of her paintings, the “ images ” retain a certain distance, which results in a more general/ exemplary validity that allows the public to appropriate the image for “ internal ” use. A striking example in this respect is provided by the series roads, which consists of a grid of twenty-eight small paintings that somehow resemble snapshots made with a polaroid camera, a particularly practical device that has been taken of the market recently. The work is actually based on a series of photographs the artist made during a walk in her native area. The walk is a “ loop ” ; the act of walking becomes abstract to the extent that the landscape loses its specific qualities and almost turns into a general “ scheme ” that might refer to any commonplace, stereotypical landscape. It becomes obvious and even tangible that in this instance time prevails over paint. The successive sequences evoke a cinematic experience of nature in which humans are entirely absent from the image — which is not the case in many other works by Beaudry. This is a special work indeed—a structured, ostensibly minimal patchwork that literally initiates the process of looking. The view of nature is reduced to a filtered/basic rendering of looking — without details and therefore without reference to any concrete place. In this series we catch

sight of fragments of an ordinary landscape, which are like a sequence of clichés of the path that winds itself through the landscape.

The technique Beaudry uses in this series to evoke movement in the process of seeing and thinking recurs in other works, though in a manner that tends to freeze the image. In paintings with anonymous motifs of trophies/cups, Buddhas, collections of knives and monumentally rendered girls, we notice the same intention to cause the image to expand so that it is absorbed by the “ mind and imagination ” of the spectator, where it should linger and move about. Beaudry’s compositions are like stills from a film ; they show us details of events and/or visual facts, which are perceptually decoded outside the frame of the composition. Particularly acute are the works in which the artist submerges the protagonist/a young girl — who never shows her “ true ” face — in a background of a monochrome colour that has been applied with a spray can or some action of the painter that is recorded as a visible gesture.

In these works the protagonist engages in a battle with the colour, with the background and consequently, with the illusion of the space of painting as such. The moving/dancing figure pushes aside the paint, the colour and... the space of the pictorial surface. The painting thus acquires an almost didactic quality and the deceptiveness of painting is highlighted by the medium of paint itself. In yet another wonderful work we notice a young woman “ walking out of the pictorial surface ” ; she has a mysterious aura and is scarcely dressed in a shirt that somehow resembles a glaring disco ball. The movement is particularly reminiscent of the early cinematographic experiments edward muybridge performed with sequences of photographs. Once more Beaudry uses framings in which the figure’s stepping “ outside the picture ” emphasizes the suggestion of movement. This is a truly wonderful painting, which also breathes something primitive and basic. It is as if the figure of the contemporary girl becomes an echo of a didactic image of the evolution of an ape into a human being. Because the hands and feet are depicted without details, the motif loses its human character and turns into a representation of a more general “ view of humanity ”. The american artist John Currin once stated that painting is an erotic act — in his view, the brush is engaged in an erotic-penetrating frolicking with the canvas. in Beaudry’s paintings, too, there is an erotic element ; however, it is never explicit, not is it is deliberately intent on sensationalism.

Beaudry's iconography remains close to life, yet her visual language could be viewed as involving a certain element of criticism on the society of the spectacle. Young girls dancing, Buddhas, corporal details of " national " beauty queens, draped with the flag of the country they represent, anonymous trophies and accumulations of knives — all of these images are perfect as elements of a collection of images which causes people/the masses to turn pale with pleasure. Charlotte Beaudry's art of painting is anchored in a quiet reference to the legacy of painting. The beautiful work with a target board is reminiscent of Jasper Johns, and the monumental dance of a young girl — once more depicted without any emotion — is undoubtedly Beaudry's own version of Henri Matisse's *Dance II* (1909). maybe the accumulation of knives could be considered a tribute to pop art and to the first artistic representations of accumulations of objects and things.

Beaudry's art can be situated between the folds of a representation that comprises allusions to film. Her paintings are an " open " dialogue with the public, which is left with a large amount of narrative freedom, as she leaves out details and merely confronts people with the tempting contours of reality. The paint does not speak to us — it portrays fragments of a zeitgeist with a language that presents itself as contemporary vis-à-vis " the time and the now " in which her art is created. In a sensuous, detached and insinuating manner, Beaudry's art stimulates our urge to decode images and find a coherent sense in them — a inherently human activity that is performed solely by the " free and autonomous " recipient/spectator.

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About the author :

Luk Lambrecht is a critic, author and curator at CC Strombeek, B.