

SOME NOTES ON JO HEIJNEN

Jo Heijnen's oeuvre was produced in the last thirty years of the 20th century within the artistic context of pictorial abstraction. His adoption of a purely abstract language was not only an aesthetic choice but also – given its intrinsic absence of narrative references - a conceptual one. It was his belief that figurative art had been politically subverted for manipulative purposes at various times in the course of the 20th century. While consciously distancing itself from political art, the characteristic stance of his own work is one of subtle social criticism.

Considered overall, Heijnen's oeuvre reveals two areas of activity, both equally critical of society and of the parameters that determine what passes for good taste. His pictorial work, which accounts for the bulk of his artistic output, is abstract, virtually monochrome, and verges on the militant in its opposition to the representational systems that govern pictorial tradition in the western world. Meanwhile, his works on paper, produced in parallel, function rather like a private diary, structured by reflections on events in his personal life, in European society as a whole, and recent history.

Pictorial work

Heijnen's pictorial work was primarily concerned with analysing matter, using painting more as a medium of presentation than of representation. His works contemplate the 'physicality' of paint, and are almost reduced to mere objects laden with matter in the process.

These paintings make their first appearance in the mid-1980s, and contain identifiable references to North American abstract painting of the 1950s and German painting of the 1980s, with nods in the direction of artists such as Barnett Newman and Sigmar Polke. His earliest works, already abstract compositions, were reflections prompted by his observation of matter and its constituent atoms. These are very flat paintings with very smooth surfaces, the organic nature of their imagery recalling American hard *edge* painting.

In the 1990s, Heijnen's investigative approach to matter moves forward: those flat images now have accretions of pictorial material – generally oil paint – superimposed upon them, applied in clots onto the surface of the paintings which have been laid down flat and allowed to dry. The images thus created are of an organic, sometimes mineral nature, and totally abstract in character.

In the series *People are afraid to merge* (1989-91), the accumulations of matter grow to exaggerated proportions. The paint is no longer applied with a brush but squirted vigorously over the entire surface of the canvas from which it stands out in striking bas-relief. In this kind of painting, paint is 'applied' rather than 'painted on'. It is the matter itself that endows the work with its image, while the work becomes an object rather than a painting.

Pictorial experimentation continued with *A painter's memory* (1992-93) in which formats return to the two-dimensional, albeit still with accumulations of matter on the surface. At this stage, Heijnen shuns colour in favour of shades of brown and grey, thereby deliberately depriving the paintings of any colour-contributed beauty.

These works are pure accumulations of earthy-looking oil-paint. The installation *A painter's memory* (1992), exhibited in Madrid and Amsterdam, featured huge mounds of paint laid out on wooden planks resembling the shelves in a great library in which the books – knowledge, the experience that books communicate – have been transformed into pure paint.

Later, in the mid 1990s, the paintings regain their smooth-surfaces, now superimposed with layers of paint - sometimes in various colours, sometimes almost monochrome - that have been gouged and scratched to form long parallel lines across the canvas. The coarse scratches that typify the earliest works of this period become gradually more refined, with the result that the paintings – devoid of figurative reference – sometimes call to mind the ploughed fields of the Dutch countryside and, indeed, the structured compositions of Mondrian and De Stijl (*Colores Dolores*, *U Turn Me*, *Bare Fields*, *Dutch Landscapes* series). The literary references that are a constant throughout Heijnen's oeuvre could now be said to become more subtly obvious. The work of Dutch poet Hendrik Marsman, descriptive of the natural landscape of the Netherlands with its expanses of flat fields traversed by canals and rivers, merits a particular mention here.

The composition of forms is given particular importance in Heijnen's work. Sometimes, the surface area of a single painting is geometrically compartmentalised into different blocks of colour within which the textures, colours and qualities are all different. This use of blocks of colour as salient features of a composition makes its first appearance in 2001 - 2002 (the *Proximity of Distance* series) in works consisting of a virtually monochrome, yet vibrant, surface upon which great sweeps of colour are applied, tracing wave-shapes, circles, rounded angles, executed with a single brush-stroke. Unlike those pieces produced during the 1990s in which matter shaped the composition in an apparently casual manner, these display a visibly controlled structure, combining areas of colour, brush-strokes and broad gestures over the surface of the canvas. The chromatic understatement that typifies the earlier works now gives way to brilliant, life-enhancing, sometimes even aggressive, colour. The vitality they communicate was to be abruptly stifled by the sudden onset of illness which, diagnosed in mid-2002, claimed his life six months later.

Works on paper

Heijnen's works on paper are, for the most part, intimate in character. Throughout his career, he consistently drew and made preliminary sketches for future compositions, working mainly in water colour and pastel.

In addition to these studies and sketches, however, his works on paper include the products of an area of interest that engaged his attention in parallel to his pictorial work. For the most part, these took the form of specific projects on particular subjects, each explored through pieces grouped into series.

Heijnen used his works on paper for direct contemplation of the human condition within the context of society. The ethical dimension of humankind concerned him particularly. In 1990, he produced a series of large-scale, imaginary, pastel portraits of victims and executioners of the Second World War: portraits of Nazis alternate with the silhouetted heads of murdered Jews. This was the context that engendered the *Operation Paperclip* Project (1992), thematically devoted to a specific aspect of the Second World War: those scientists whose skills enabled the Nazi regime to scale the heights of military might and who, after the war, were recruited by the North American

Government and welcomed to the United States to work on the arms race during the Cold War. The project throws into relief the cynicism with which power can tailor ideologies to serve its own ends, and the lack of ethics that permits science to be deployed in the degradation and destruction of human beings.

These themes are deeply rooted in Heijnen's oeuvre and receive special attention in the pictorial series entitled *Absalom, Absalom* (1990-1997) –first exhibited in 1997 as part of the collective project *Ik heb geen zoon om mijn gedachtenis levend te houden* (I have no children to keep my memory alive) – a series of large-scale oil portraits of some of the major intellectuals who supported, tolerated, or failed to speak out against totalitarian regimes: Richard Strauss, Leni Riefenstahl, Martin Heidegger.... The series reflects on the fact that intellectual brilliance and ethics do not necessarily go hand-in-hand; on the moral obligation – and the limitations - incumbent upon the artist in society in particular and upon human beings in general; and on the fact that through weakness, fear, appetite for power, or the simple desire for isolation in which to carry out an intellectual pursuit, one can end up supporting or tolerating a regime with blood on its hands.

In 1993, Jo Heijnen moved to live in Madrid. There, he embarked upon *Las Chicas*, a series of works on paper, intimate in tone, that explore the 'private' aspects of woman – her relationship with her own body, her eroticism, her feelings, how she remembers her life. He does this using collages composed of photographs, notes written by anonymous women, even organic traces (locks of hair...), pulled together by drawing and, sometimes, varnish, which heightens their organic nature.

In 2001-2002, his liking for collage and his structural approach to building up composition in his oil paintings became intertwined, resulting in a series of works made up of images which, as well as sharing common themes, are structurally very finely-tuned. One result is that connections between images emerge to ironic, and often straightforwardly humorous, effect, as if reflecting the period of enhanced vitality that the artist experienced in 2001-2002, just before falling ill.

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(Translation: Hawys Pritchard)