

In the context of the faded scientific reliability, institutionalised in the former prestigious premises of the Flemish Veterinary School (University of Ghent, 1934), I visit the studio of Guy Slabbinck. The studio is part of the Nucleo initiative, which aims at using vacant buildings for artistic purposes. Guy has placed some paintings in the inner courtyard and immediately sets the tone. I'm not visiting a stickler here, but a pictorial savage who transformed his body into a yearning painting machine in order to create a painted world around him, criss-crossing brush strokes from one place to the next.

'Savage' has been used repeatedly to describe periods of modern art, e.g. in 'fauvism' (1905), with Matisse as its principal protagonist (fauve: wild animal). Partially inspired by the vitalistic theories of Henri Bergson, the colour use of the impressionists was being pushed further towards the use of pure colours. Slabbinck's work has little to do with this sort of savageness. His paintings surely are colourful, but subdued. They do however share a life-affirming attitude: bring it on!

Later, in the early 1980's, a group of German artists, with Baselitz up front, were described as the 'Neue Wilden'. The movement was characterised by instinctively painted and powerful figurations. But then who were the 'old savages'? The first generation of expressionists at the start of the twentieth century of course. 'Neue', in this context, should also be considered as the revival of pictorial painting, after the predominant emphasis on the cerebral concept of the 70's. Moreover, it should be regarded as the reaction on painting which approached the realism-issue of painting in the hyper-realistic copy-of-a-copy, the painted photography. Too picky, those new savages must have thought. Artists are indeed rarely friendly to currents against which they resist. Paint must fly, clod, jam, splash, leave traces, make itself visible. This was the art of the time, the 80's. In essence, it was a post-modernist phenomenon in its 'neo'-aspect of the expressionist brush stroking. 'Brush ecstasy' would be more appropriate here. Although, less post-modernist than their Italian contemporaries who, with their 'Transavantguardia', were eclectically puzzling different styles together, depending on whether it suited them or not.

Guy Slabbinck's generation even goes one step further. Modernism as an avant-garde was a liberation of the academism, a breach with the established canon. Post-modernism in its turn was a liberation of modernism because the avant-garde mechanism got jammed. The 'everything-is-allowed-principle' proved to be a strategy of exclusions. The old was not allowed and its medium, the art of painting, became equally suspicious. Furthermore, the one avant-garde movement, didn't want to have anything to do with the other. Each had their own way of being newly liberated, and of defining it with a word ending with '-ism'. Today, '-isms' are nowhere to be found, which is a good thing! One cannot keep on freeing oneself. At some point, freedom must be achieved. There is, of course, also the counterpart, reflected in the social-cultural trend of today's times: new prudishness, politically correct, ethical revival,... Contemporary artists don't give a damn about this trend. Art has seized liberty and will not let her go. Today's hypocrites hardly dare to react. The art world is still being tolerated as a 'game reserve', but artists continue to break free. Strolling through the studio of Guy Slabbinck, I felt like being in such haven of freedom. Liberating the liberation and thus achieving freedom is also recognisable in the attitude of today's painters towards the old masters. They are no longer objects of humiliation, which had to be tolerated — admittedly true posthumously — due to the destructive creatives. The dadaists are on top of this list: the Mona Lisa, highlight of Western art, adorned with a goatee and a moustache...: 'L.H.O.O.Q.!' It's not a tribute, but had to be allowed within free thinking. This revolution has rotated. Artists now like to be in the company of their historical examples. They also like to subscribe to their visual language with respect, admiration and contribution to their immortal status through re-contextualisation. For Guy Slabbinck, these examples include Titian, Hals, Rubens, Delacroix, Monet, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Ensor. The 'destruction' of the modernists is countered by the 'deconstruction' of the postmodernists, the curiosity to find out how the art of old masters was composed. What are they trying to show and what are they trying to hide? How did the power of their contracting authorities seep into the works? Which dazzling sets of tricks did they apply? How bound were they to the currents of that era? How subversive? There are much more questions to ask regarding the composition of their imagery.

According to the structuralists, everything is based on text, different fabrics which, through their interaction, create different meanings. These are not 'pure' objects, created from nothingness, only reactions to what exists, complemented with both conscious and unconscious additions and distortions. Inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva defined this as 'Intertextuality' in the 1960's. A term which is still used today. There are texts in texts, in texts, in texts, in... Before this definition, the deeper layers would be hidden from the viewer, everyone likes to play god in his deepest thoughts. Later on making this chain of influence visible became a trend. Even in the field of visual arts, people started talking of 'citations'. Traditionally, an exception to this source-hiding was of course the parody, the pastiche and other forms of ironic imitation. This game of confirmation and undermining resulted in ambiguity, which is to this day the most important characteristic of modern art.

With this theoretic framework in mind, looking at the art of Guy Slabbinck is witnessing the bizarre universe of a searching human who, passionately, paints his way through different worlds where composition itself is of importance. I will summarise a few examples:

- A movie scène becomes a peepshow by adding colourful plastic strips, normally used as a screen door. This is an ironic reference to the history of abstract art but also to the censorship which often occurs in visual culture.
  - His version of Rubens' 'Samson and Delilah', a story where everything that can go wrong goes wrong.
  - A casting scène from a Bollywood movie.
  - In pursuit of his father, a travel journalist, Guy travels a lot and is inspired by immeasurable landscapes, not without some practice of ecological reflection.
  - Female dancers from Bali.
  - The wild life of Gustav Klimt and his models.
  - A horseback rider in a Polish historical scenery.
- Just to name a few...

Apart from this conscious plethora of visual interpretations, there is also a constant theoretical concern in his work. As a 'silver thread' running through his work the question is asked: what is in essence the art of painting? Not that he is interested in finding the answer. He plays with the phenomenon of the image which evokes a reality which is present or half present or even non-existent. To what extent are images authentic, stolen or tacitly appropriated? 'The painter also paints with the hand of someone else' is a striking statement with which he positions this originality issue. After all, the relationship between copy and original is often ambiguous in art. Is art not always *trompe-l'oeil*?

From the feral art of painting by Guy Slabbinck, it looks as if the aesthetics of Nietzsche are no longer correct. For Nietzsche, painting belonged to the Apollonian, deliberately delineated. Music was Dionysian, passion, leaving the limits. It is clear that the work of Guy Slabbinck belongs to the Dionysian. There is music in these from paint splattered wildernesses.

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