



A LINGERING ABSENCE

Timotheus Vermeulen on Ilse D'Hollander, Konrad Fischer, Düsseldorf

By the time I started writing this review, I had seen Ilse D'Hollander's posthumous solo exhibition – the artist tragically committed suicide in 1997 at the age of 29 – at Konrad Fischer in Düsseldorf at least four times. I saw it with artist friends during the opening, with some of my students a few weeks later, with an experienced art historian in late December, and with a professor in cultural theory on the day of closing in January. I don't normally see shows this often – it was due more to coincidence than anything else. There is some-

thing about these paintings, however, slight and fragile, easy on the eye without being spectacular, vested in art history yet in a world of their own, that requires repeated viewings.

It speaks to the slightness of these works that neither myself nor most of my companions were instantly impressed by them. Not that we didn't care for them. But rather that we were not able to immediately form impressions; see these paintings in terms of appeal and attraction, dislike and disagreement. After the first viewing, these paintings lingered on not as a presence but an absence: A lack, a feeling that something was missing. With each return, however, the works

affected me more. Had they initially appeared to me like the painterly equivalent of coffee shop indie or elevator jazz, they gradually came to remind me more of the creative imbalances of Charles Mingus and Ornette Coleman. Slowly but surely these works began to fill the lack; not as a coherent body, but in fits and spasms: Less Renoir than Cezanne, less Mondrian than Kandinsky, less Rothko than Bacon. Part of this changing experience was undoubtedly due to a reorganization the gallery executed midway through the exhibition. Initially, the first floor of Konrad Fischer's spacious two-story gallery was crowded with small paintings and gouaches while the top floor accommodated only a few pieces. By so emphatically echoing the imbalance only subtly present in D'Hollander paintings – I will come to this later – the show negated their effect: Minus times minus equals plus, after all. After the reorganization, however, the two floors featured an equal number of paintings, hung at similar distances. Now the nuances were allowed to be experienced in their own right, and on their own terms.

Yet for the most part my changing attitude towards D'Hollander's paintings was due to a quality of the works themselves. Indeed, if it spoke to the delicacy of these paintings that they left little impression upon first viewing, it was a testament to their careful complexity and multiplicity that each of my companions was drawn – or annoyed – by another aspect: The flat, tame grays, greens, pastel blues, and beige-yellows; the deceptively uneven compositions; the inconsistency of lines; the layering of paint; the hesitation between figuration and abstraction. The more I visited the exhibition, the more the relations between these elements began to appear. Quiet as these paintings may have seemed, there

was something very disturbing about them – an almost imperceptible imbalance.

After her death, D'Hollander's paintings were stored away for years. The Flemish collector in possession of her oeuvre, a close friend of the artist deeply saddened by her passing, could for some time not bear the idea of sharing the collection with the world. Writing on the artist is therefore sparse. Of the critics who have written on D'Hollander, many have compared her paintings to the work of her compatriot Raoul de Keyser.¹ Certainly, De Keyser unmistakably had an influence on D'Hollander. Like him, D'Hollander uses abstraction to evoke a sensation of invisible figuration. Her work does not represent anything or anyone in particular; but it often, through elongated brushstrokes or fields of color, intimates forms, gestures, and movements we may very well associate with a multiplicity of situations – what Deleuze, writing about Bacon, calls the diagram.² What sets D'Hollander's paintings apart, however, what puts them into a universe of their own, is their cautiousness. These paintings give the impression that every line drawn, every color used, was followed by hours if not days of contemplation, of doubting and internally discussing their position, application and function, not merely in terms of materiality, but in terms of the world they create. The artist sets out to create a harmony that she understands she cannot create.

Take the composition, for instance. Almost all of D'Hollander's paintings are composites of seemingly straight lines and outwardly uniformly colored blocks. Following the lines with your eyes, it gradually becomes apparent that straight and stable as they may seem, they are in fact never without digressions. In "Untitled" (1996), for instance, lines fade away near the edges; in



Ilse D'Hollander, "Untitled #025", 1996

another work from the same year, some suddenly jump up or down a notch, while others stop midway. In most of D'Hollander's compositions, lines appear to demarcate fields of color or shades. In "Untitled" (1996), this division creates an illusion of order. Yet because very few of the lines are consistent, the order never holds up. Fields of light blue, applied in vertical strokes; dark yellow, applied horizontally; and cream run into each other, exchanging the patterns of brushstrokes and hues of color. One should not be mistaken to think they merge, to assume that these parts fuse into one new whole. There is no synthesis. Rather these fields meet each other as a poorly kept football pitch grows over the edges of a tennis court. They may overlap, but they are

still made of different materials and belong to different games.

In "Spheres", Peter Sloterdijk describes modern society in terms of bubbling, frothy foam.³ Our society is like foam, he argues, to the extent that it is a unity consisting of a multiplicity of co-isolated bubbles, of related yet isolated milieus, spheres whose limits touch each other but cannot be dissolved since that would dissolve the structure of the foam itself, leaving nothing but oily water. It is this understanding and ensuing anxiety that marks all of D'Hollander's paintings: A desire for unity, for closeness to others matched with a premonition of and fear for what happens when such unity is achieved. Lines are initiated but never finished, fields of color are sown but left to wither. Slight as these paintings may appear, their effect, given time, is anything but.

"The Estate of Ilse D'Hollander: Untitled", Konrad Fischer, Düsseldorf, November 8, 2013–January 11, 2014.

Notes

- 1 Tanguy Eeckhout, "A Painterly Exercise", in: Ilse D'Hollander: Untitled, Veurne 2013, pp. 35–39.
- 2 Gilles Deleuze, Francis Bacon. The Logic of Sensation, London 2010, pp. 70–77.
- 3 Peter Sloterdijk, Sphären III – Schäume, Frankfurt 2004.