

1- Despite having earned international renown, he has had only two solo exhibitions in French institutions: at the Musée de Rochechouart in 2004, and at the FRAC Auvergne in 2008, in addition to several group exhibitions at the Magasin de Grenoble (1999) and at the FRAC Auvergne (ten exhibitions between 2006 and 2016).

The FRAC Auvergne is the sole French public collection to have acquired and to regularly exhibit three paintings by this influential artist.

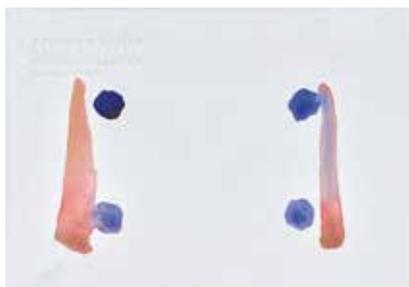
The timespan of Ilse D'Hollander's oeuvre was exceptionally brief, barely a decade, the last two years – 1995 and 1996 – being the most prolific right up to the premature death of this artist who ended her life in 1997 at the age of twenty-nine. Viewing these paintings nearly twenty years later is a singular experience, for Ilse D'Hollander's precocious maturity and incandescent lifespan create a sense of bewilderment. In addition to her so-called "early" works for want of a better term, roughly four hundred paintings on canvas and some one thousand seven hundred paintings on paper ensued in just over three years. The initial years (1988-1991), while the artist was pursuing her studies in Antwerp and Ghent, laid the groundwork for her emerging painting style, conspicuously rooted in a historical heritage: still lifes with apples painted à la Cézanne, depictions of bottles and bowls assembled on tables drawing inspiration from works by Giorgio Morandi, open-air landscape paintings in line with the Belgian symbolist tradition revolving around the figurehead of Léon Spilliaert, etc. Once these studia humanitatis were achieved, Ilse D'Hollander logically ventured onto pathways taken by painters among whom Nicolas de Staël, René Daniëls and, especially, Raoul de Keyser would become landmarks for the young artist. However, it is already interesting to note the somewhat anachronistic nature of this practice, which from the onset sought to delve into works by artists of the past, regardless of their contemporaneity. Ilse D'Hollander's decision to turn towards these painters conveys a personality determined to carry out her pictorial goal by mingling with the most unclassifiable artists of contemporary and modern painting. One need merely recall the ostracism undergone by Nicolas de Staël's paintings over decades, or the near total invisibility of Raoul de Keyser's oeuvre in France and its striking absence from national public collections<sup>1</sup> to realize that we are dealing with a marginal family, and that this family eludes classification due to its apparent non-topicality, thus demonstrating ad absurdum the importance of these painters.



Sans titre (G 280)  
1996, gouache sur papier, 34x24 cm  
Courtesy The Estate of Ilse D'Hollander

During her lifetime, Ilse D'Hollander rarely exhibited her works, and her biography only mentions a single solo show in 1992 and two group shows, one of which, organized by the Urmel Gallery in Ghent, would become pivotal for the future dissemination of her artwork. At the time, Ric Urmel was both gallery owner and founder of a contemporary music label, and it was during a visit to the composer Patrick De Clerck that he happened to discover Ilse D'Hollander's paintings on the walls of her then-partner. Despite his unsuccessful attempts to purchase a painting from the young artist, Ric Urmel struck up a friendship with her, and got her to agree to having her works displayed on his label's CD covers. Ilse D'Hollander's paintings thus ended up illustrating around forty CDs featuring music by György Ligeti, John Cage, Alexandre Rabinovitch, etc. before she finally accepted to participate in an exhibition organized by the Urmel Gallery in 1994, which also included works by Berlinde De Bruyckere, Leo Copers, Peter Bonde and Pedro Cabrita Reis. Although she was granted six walls for the show, she submitted only five paintings, and ultimately displayed three of them, deeming the others not up to par. Following her death three years later, Ric Urmel set out to amass and conserve the entire output of this artist who was incessantly doubting, hesitating, and thwarting any display of her

2- Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps*, Paris, Les éditions de Minuit, 2000, p.9.



Raoul De Keyser, Sans titre, 2007  
Aquarelle sur papier monogrammé, 10,5x15 cm  
Collection privée, France



Sans titre (G 152)  
1996, gouache sur papier, 13,5x18 cm  
Courtesy The Estate of Ilse D'Hollander

work. She subjected herself to a strict discipline and a frenetically intense workload during the last two years of her life, following her breakup with Ghent, when she moved to the small rural town of Paulatém and began dividing her time between painting and long walks and bike rides through the countryside of the Flemish Ardennes. These months gave rise to the vast bulk of an oeuvre that fully embraces its own anachronism, fleshing out the historical extension of past masters by regularly revisiting them while simultaneously exploring abstract paths with staggering freedom, much like that which occurs, for instance, in the paintings on paper by Kimber Smith, Shirley Jaffe and Richard Tuttle, or in the small watercolors by Raoul de Keyser.

“Whenever we are before the image, we are before time”, asserted Georges Didi-Huberman at the start of his book *Devant le temps*.<sup>2</sup> Raising the question of anachronism means underscoring the blend of time differentials that are “at work” in each image, each painting, each photograph, each photogram relayed by History right down to our current viewpoints. Every work of art results from a temporal concoction that is impure, hybrid, heterochronic and polychronic. Every relationship to works and images entails an element of anachronism, and if art history is an anachronistic discipline, this inevitably applies to painting. Such is especially true of Ilse D’Hollander’s work, which is crisscrossed by streams of tradition, of modernity, and of possible pathways available to painting within the context of contemporaneity, which for decades now has been seeking to diminish its own pertinence and relevance. The gouache on paper depicting the branch of a tree (p.49) provides a symbolic gauge of what has just been expressed: propped against a wall in the atelier, it projects a double shadow, thus revealing the object as if balanced between a dual temporality, between past and future projection. This is the crux of Ilse D’Hollander’s artwork: painting utterly bound up with its historical sources and ostensibly vibrating towards a state of becoming that is infused with a sharp awareness of gesture, color and surface.

It would be a mistake to regard Ilse D’Hollander’s oeuvre as split into two distinct practices, with a cleavage between figuration and abstraction. Another mistake would be to assume that Ilse D’Hollander had opted for a dual practice, going back and forth between figuration and abstraction according to the stylistic angles she happened to be exploring. The reality is more subtle, and the notion of passing from one register to another is rendered meaningless in Ilse D’Hollander’s artwork, which is uniquely about painting, about the problems painting raises and the solutions that turn up when experimenting with various pathways, so that the border between figuration and abstraction becomes porous and ultimately nonexistent. The near-total absence of titles suggests that the paintings were primarily elaborated as part of a thought process specifically linked to the act of painting, and to the possibility of transmuting the visual experience of objects into a becoming-painting that ultimately provides the subject with a secondary importance so as to highlight the very modalities of gesture, of color, of surface, of the swiftness or slowness of execution. A few rare exceptions should nevertheless be mentioned concerning the omnipresent “Untitled”. *Bron* («Source», p.13), *Ramp* («Disaster», p.138), *Ontsapping* («Escapade», p.151), *Uitrafeling* («Fray», p. 163), *Mist* and *Barst* («Crack») are titled paintings that trigger a brutal irruption of reality into this predominantly undifferentiated oeuvre, refusing attachment to any register whatsoever. These sporadic examples (there are hardly any others) seem bent on emphasizing the importance of the sensation experienced

3- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Farbenlehre*, most of which was published from 1808 to 1810.

4- Michel-Eugène Chevreul, *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs*, 1839.

5- The second series being the *Cahiers*, dated 1993-1994, and comprising seven 55x45cm paintings on canvas.



Sans titre (G 043)  
1996, gouache sur papier, 18x13,5 cm  
Courtesy The Estate of Ilse D'Hollander

in face of the seen thing – atmospheric impression of mist, acoustic and visual perception of water flowing from a source, etc. Nevertheless, the ubiquitous “Untitled” undermines the hypothesis that these are open-air paintings. The small landscapes, their drifting towards the non-figurative, or the blatantly abstract oils and gouaches on paper do not seem to be the outcome of a progressive abstraction process applied to reality, but rather the expression of a desire to transpose an ensemble of sensations, of memories of expanses, of interlinked spaces traversed by lines and planes, of chromatic layouts, etc.

Another series groups together four paintings under the title Goethe (p.122-125). The reference to the *Theory of Colors* that Goethe<sup>3</sup> wrote between 1790 and 1823 is explicit, and indicates both the obvious importance of color for Ilse D'Hollander and a certain romantic vision that is underscored by the incandescent light of the four paintings in the series. It is worth recalling how Goethe's text of over two-thousand pages met with very little enthusiasm among French intellectuals and painters, who preferred the more scientific and technical approach proposed by Chevreul<sup>4</sup> to the romantic and mystical aspects of the *Theory of Colors*, while in Germany and England it was heralded as a new way of painting. The existence of the Goethe series is significant, for it is one of the only two identified series made by Ilse D'Hollander,<sup>5</sup> and because it offers stark evidence of the emotional, poetic and romantic thrust in her artwork, which is firmly rooted in subjectivity and sensation. This experience of color as a vehicle for a memory of sensation should be correlated with other paintings that exclusively consist of shades of grey, stripped of color, in a much drier mode of representation. The grey paintings mainly represent motifs that have strong connotations in the history of painting – small romantic landscapes, arrangements of various flasks upon a table, still lifes – as if these specific cases involved distilling the pictorial act into a form of objective authenticity by avoiding any spillover into the expression of a more personal grasp of painting. Conversely, the hundreds of small colored gouaches on paper made in 1996 broaden the field towards a freedom and intuitiveness, which enabled Ilse D'Hollander to test out and develop a personal pictorial language. The two methodologies are not inconsistent, and the grey paintings should by no means be relegated to a minor practice, for they fuel an intimate knowledge of painting so essential to the artist. The grey paintings can, to a certain degree, be perceived as necessary spectrums that Ilse D'Hollander tackled, and even if their subjects arise from a form of academism, they adamantly place painting within the register of deliberate abstraction.

The prolixity of Ilse D'Hollander's production, quite astounding during the last months of her life, offers a glimpse into the dynamics she implemented; one can easily imagine long work sessions churning out small paintings on paper and canvas. Such deliberate repetition brought about a differentiation, a steady shift of intention, and unleashed new uncharted pathways. Her painting style took shape within the same compulsiveness she had displayed during her student years, when past masters kept reappearing in her projects. Ilse D'Hollander wanted to understand what painting was about, its underlying gesture, touch, and color; how the memory of walking through stretches of countryside might spark off a language straddling the polarities of memory and sensation at one end, and the gestural unfolding of autonomous and abstract motifs at the other end. Painting from memory of a landscape, of lighting, of atmospheric sensation supplied the nuts and bolts of her practice that, far from seeking to represent an image or concept, was entirely geared towards an idea of painting, towards a cluster



Sans titre (G 098)  
1996, gouache sur papier, 13,5x18 cm  
Collection privée, Belgique

of questions intrinsic to the medium, and the answers could solely arise during the pictorial act. An oil on canvas or a gouache on paper does not result from premeditation, but from a thought that materializes the very moment the surface is being composed. Superimposition, pentimento, line tension, overpainting, smearing, contrasted materiality – creamy versus dry, opaque versus transparent etc. – divulge this thought process in action, on its way to becoming a work of art. The concurrence of the small gouaches on paper and the oils on canvas enabled the artist to deliberately and masterfully paint with differing velocities. Gouache dries quickly, leaving little leeway for touch-ups, and thus prompting intuitive experiments due to the lesser nobility of the medium. Oil paintings, even when they seem to result from great spontaneity, have a totally different painting rhythm. The numerous pentimenti and overpaintings in the oils visually demonstrate this temporal layering: the paint embodies a retrieved sensation, a conjured memory, its fragments reassembled through the filter of pictorial language, then allowed to slowly percolate. The gouaches comprise more solid colors and motifs that are adjusted and interlinked to meet the requirements of the composition, whereas the painted-over sections yield stains and murky colors. The abundance of gouaches on paper also indicates the varying speeds of execution – roughly one thousand seven hundred as opposed to four hundred oil paintings – and this differential comes across in the gestural swiftness of the gouaches – rapid and brisk gestures on tiny surfaces – demonstrating how freely Ilse D’Hollander would paint on paper. The formal discoveries quickly followed suit, with one experiment after another, all guided by intuition as can be seen by the more daringly arranged colors. A language develops through stammering, warbling, stuttering, sharp precision, contradictory tones and cadences; its diction is successively clear, blurry, muffled, chiseled, its terminology lyric, romantic, minimal, expressionistic, its elocution jumbled, multilingual, uninhibited, etc. The oil paintings are perhaps the implementation of experiments carried out on paper (unverifiable due to the uncertain dating of the works) and involve a longer work period. This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that Ilse D’Hollander’s last oil painting (p.71) was found, perhaps unfinished, upon her easel after her suicide, on 30 January 1997.



Sans titre (G 312)  
1996, gouache sur papier, 34x24 cm  
Courtesy The Estate of Ilse D’Hollander