

Hans Theys

## ***Old Rivers and New Tracks***

### ***Some words about Joost Colpaert's paintings***

#### ***Survey***

Joost Colpaert's most recent works can be divided into three main groups. He used to paint mainly geometrically abstract works, in which intertwined oblong volumes could be recognised, squarish tunnel-like structures intricately knotted. This resulted in a first group of recent works, starting from a beautiful abstract background, which comes about in a very concrete and experimental way. On this background, winding forms are painted, in increasingly heavier tones, creating a kind of piled-up depth.

A second series of recent works starts from mainly self-composed ground plans, which are pencilled on polyester tracing paper. These works are finished by adding an elongated form, based on the course of a river and painted in dégradé to suggest relief. Circular traces can be seen in the layer of paint, resulting from the artist dripping water on the wet painting.

These drawings led to a series of paintings based on aerial photographs found on the internet. This involves fairly realistic landscapes (polders e.g.), which by their very composition, remind one of abstract paintings. A beautiful delicate light has crept in here, highlighting the most beautiful tones and suggesting little reliefs, which adds a kind of tenderness to the paintings and shows Colpaert's susceptibility for colours and tones to advantage.

Thirdly, there are these recent works in which the same composition keeps coming back, based on a video still, in which drops of water can be recognised. But each composition is executed in a different way, with different colours, different workmanship, different finish.

### **Visible and less visible similarities between these works**

Water is a common theme and it is a regular feature in Colpaert's technique. The theme can be found both in the techniques applied and in the texture of the works, but it can also be traced in the forms depicted. A drop texture can be discovered in the ground layers of the first series of works as well as in the facture of the wide river-worms appearing in the second group. The polder landscapes are criss-crossed with fanciful networks of water courses.

Another recurrent element in these works is formed by the twisting, intertwined, irregular or curved figures and lines. Time and again, a longing is felt for things fluid, supple, moving or living and in turn we experience this longing as a beautiful, visual impulse to make paintings that are only seemingly austere or geometrical. There is an almost invisible vibration, a kind of flowing, almost like dancing.

Perhaps less visible a resemblance is the piling up in the compositions. After the early geometrically abstract paintings, in which the forms depicted, though tumbling about one another, all seem to be in one plane or in one pictorial space, three groups of work appear, in which pictorial space is created by introducing shapes on top of other shapes, which is exceptional.

Painters generally try to force all parts of their paintings within the same pictorial space to prevent the painting from "falling apart" – even if the painting is organised perspectively, as in Rubens's *Adoration of the Magi*. A contemporary way of doing this is to abolish foreground and background, which is what Rothko and Pollock do, or to

intertwine them, as in the works of Walter Swennen or Joris Ghekiere, two examples from Belgium. Colpaert, however, has a different approach, in which the pictorial space is observed as a mainly centrally organised piling-up.

A last correspondence between the various works is the twisting line or shape, which can be both dramatic, as in the worm-like forms and the wide, relieved rivers, and minimal, as in the wriggling patterns of the map-like works.

## **Structure**

Paintings need a pattern, a visual rhythm, structure, composition. Such patterns may be derived from existing ones. This is the case when Colpaert paints from aerial photos or uses the course of a river or the shapes of existing or imagined ground plans. It is wonderful to see how these shapes reveal, in an inconspicuous way, the secret choices underlying any work of art. A polder landscape was shaped in an age-long struggle between man and the elements. Similarly, a river course is the result of an age-long search, directed, helped or hindered by conditions of soil and climate. Though they may have the look of necessity, those shapes breathe chance.

The same may be said about the maps of old towns, which came about in much the same, almost organic way. We may experience those maps as definite, or in any way static, but these final forms result likewise from age-long processes. It goes without saying that these shapes, when used as a visual element in a painting, become metaphors for the very essence of a painting, which, likewise, is the result of a process of trying and searching, of restricting possibilities, guided by necessity and chance.

But at the same time, maps imply the image of our urge to organise. A map or ground plan is made as part of the effort to gain a survey (which applies to aerial photos as well). In maps we witness a meeting between almost organic growth and various forms of human interference in an effort to keep the expanding shape of a town or

neighbourhood in check, to structure or at least to survey it. Can one get much closer to the image of the artist, who, with a penetrating gaze, bent forward, dances around his painting on the floor, trying to control the abstract landscape growing far beneath him, and set it free at the same time?

## **Staging decisions**

In his work, Joost Colpaert deals with the issue of control in inescapable but varied ways. What else do artists do, if not structure, time and again, their sensory perceptions, their feelings and thoughts, the images arising in their minds, their experiences, the world around them? Last week [the artist Tinka Pittoors](#) told me about Capability Brown (1716-1783) and his landscape architecture. Brown had the course of English rivers changed and churches moved to force the landscape into a certain pattern. The artist himself had only just finished a ceramic landscape, which [she](#) had put in chains, conjuring up suggestions of sadomasochistic practice. In such cases, the urge to structure and organise becomes a show of strength. Sometimes images must be straitjacketed, as in the work of some theatre and film directors, photographers or painters. [The painter](#) Kati Heck for one likes [inviting](#) people [to adopt](#) certain postures and organising them into tableaux vivants.

Where does one draw the line between structures that set us free and systems of control that paralyse us or lead to chaos?

The very nature of any decision is that it may be wrong. There is no knowing beforehand which decision will prove to be the right one in a certain situation. Only later does the further course of events tell us whether the decision was right. That is why decision making requires a permanent openness, a willingness to reconsider. Any structure is [the result](#) of a decision. If the structure does not work, a new decision is made. The ultimate goal of all structures is to create freedom. But as a matter of fact, freedom is contained in the decision, which always carries its own negation. Whoever decides in a conscious way, knows that decisions may be wrong. At the other end of decision making, there is

control. Control is driven by fear. Control aims at preventing decisions and freedom. Control equals installing death in life.

All art is about organising, structure, control. Time and space are forced into patterns, either slowed down or accelerated, shortened, lengthened, distorted. [We witness the birth of](#) wrinkles, little shocks, holes, borders, contours, [shadows](#). [There](#) is the onset of doubt, thrill, [restlessness](#) or on the contrary, a sense of quiet. A sense of beauty must be about everything being momentarily shaken, while feeling that all has as yet found its proper place, [that](#) everything is all right again [and that](#), for the time being, chaos has been successfully fought. Death, which looms in each aesthetic experience, has been temporarily conquered, forgotten, veiled, or at least made bearable.

What is good about works of art is that they seek [structure instead](#) of control. Others are able to read them because they are open, because their meaning is not unambiguous. Works of art are experiments in ambiguity. But on the other hand, a work of art can only come into existence through making decisions. A work of art is a structure, a momentary structure evoking the transience of our existence, giving a temporary form to our mortality, but simultaneously hinting at eternity and immortality. When experiencing beauty, we think for just a moment that we will escape from our mortality.

The essence of art also arises from the search for new forms. A work of art is the result of some kind of derailment. Things gain a new kind of perceptibility, because the veil of habit is torn. Art is not based on existing knowledge, it eludes it. It is a fall from what is accepted and what is known into the new, a fall which makes it vulnerable and thus legible. It follows from craftsmanship, but surpasses it, it is made by one person but surpasses him. It is the result of the possibilities of an age, but sometimes it remains legible for people living much later.

Thus we look at art as if it came about in an arena or on a stage where decisions have to be made, giving life to a new kind of ambiguity somewhere on the ever shifting

borderline where word and image, matter and colour, rhythm and feeling, thought and atmosphere meet.

## Secret order

What I find most intriguing in the work of artists is the way in which images from their surroundings creep into their art imperceptibly, hiding so well that the artist does not even recognise them. In his booklet *Voyages à travers la peinture* (1946), [the](#) art dealer Pierre Loeb pointed out that Cézanne's well-known remark that nature could be rendered by means of geometrical forms such as cylinders, spheres and cones, must have been inspired by the geological structure of the scenery around Aix-en-Provence: 'From his early childhood his eyes must have been struck by the mountainous mass of Sainte-Victoire, falling like a Rock of Gibraltar at the South side, gently merging into the plain on the other side. It must have grown into an obsession day by day. It is part of him. It is between him and his subjects.' In another chapter, *Apprendre à voir*, Loeb describes the reaction of an art dealer, when he saw a painting of Cézanne's again, which had seemed to him rather unbalanced thirty years ago. All the objects in it, a table, vases, bottles, appeared to have taken up normal positions. Pierre Loeb concludes: 'La réalité cézannienne s'était enfin imposée à lui'.

Today I am sitting on the patio of the house where Joost Colpaert has lived since he was fifteen. From the patio we have a [beautiful](#) view on a meadow sloping up towards the crest of a hill, lined by woodland. While watching the cows grazing in that meadow, I realise that their joint movements draw secret patterns, which can be read from the different shades of grass. They remind me of the polder landscape paintings. What struck me most however, is the edge of the wood, where the cows have eaten all the leaves as far as they can reach, transforming the transition from meadow to wood into a well-delineated shadow tunnel and [reminding me of](#) the billowing rivers floating above the maps.

## **Literary meandering**

The ground plans spark off beautiful and vibrating compositions with a hidden logic, while remaining ground plans, evoking images of other worlds. Each work has a different theme, shantytown, borderland, utopia. Each ground plan consists of ground plans of various places, smoothly linked to one another. Political, artistic, urban development and other motives are interwoven invisibly to form ground plans of non-existent places, functioning unobtrusively as a literary labyrinth in the background of a pictorial [event](#). The work presents itself as a flat book, its pages spread out next to one another, inviting the reader to musing walks. Almost imperceptibly a few words have crept in. Sometimes there is the title to hint at the meaning of the labyrinth. The image of the labyrinth, a forced kind of transfer excluding all survey, evokes the image of music. A piece of music happens in time and cannot be perceived in one single moment. The listener is forced to undergo the flow of time, in an unchangeable sequence of tones, atmospheres, rhythms, silence. In this case, however, we are not confronted with a labyrinth, but with a ground plan. The spectator and the artist are high above what is forced to happen. The artist distances himself from the forced course of the music. He is beyond time.

## **Perfection**

Joost Colpaert: My origin as an artist lies in the world of music. In that world one must aspire to perfection. This also applies to plastic arts, with the rider that one lays down for oneself a standard for that perfection. This does not happen in music, where that standard is laid down by others, especially when one is a performing musician. A [visual](#) artist decides for himself what is important. I myself for instance, have stopped making purely geometrically abstract work, because I felt something was missing. Schubert is my favourite music. Take Haydn, for instance, whose work always remains abstract, whereas with Schubert, slowly one begins to feel things. I was looking for that kind of poetic feeling. If someone had told me that one day I would be painting landscapes, I

would not have believed him. But I think I have found a solid line of work now, a new kind of road, leading me towards new work. I do not want to make the same work all the time. I really want to find something new, I want to go on exploring what I am doing now and deepen it, try other contexts. Recently, I have made a video of drops of water dancing slowly. I followed it up in a series of small paintings, based on one still. Each painting is executed in a different way, in a different material, there is another approach as to colour and light, the varnish is different.

*- At the same time all aspects of your recent series of works are incorporated: landscape, ground plan, even the piled-up spaces.*

Colpaert: [Yes](#), it has become a hybrid series of images... You can see the shape of the drops cut out in cardboard

*- They are potato-shaped.*

Colpaert: They have become islets, you can look at them in both a positive and a negative way: either as holes or as small territories. Utopia nowhere and everywhere!

*- They are on top of a drawing in the making.*

Colpaert: Yes, the drawing is based on Thomas More's *Utopia*. Several plans are being amalgamated here, one from the Renaissance (the Sforzinda of Filarete), the famous artificial Palm Islands in Dubai, constructed by rainbowing sand onto the required spot, the plan of a salt factory in Arc-en-Senans, [France](#), [Brasilia](#), Constant's New Babylon and Simpson's Victory City: a futuristic city, the design of which reminds one of an engine block. Another drawing has ground plans of the Warsaw Ghetto, Auschwitz 1 and 2, Gaza, [Germania](#), a golf club and a gated community. There's a drawing called Dogville, with ground plans of slums and calling to mind the image of a jolly little dog. Pictures of slums are hard to find on the internet. You can find them in India and Brazil, the Brazilian ones having draught-board structures. I have also used a map of a district

in Bagdad. Arab towns still have souqs, which have an intricate pattern of really narrow alleys and passage ways, much like the ground plan of an Indian slum. In a ground plan this really looks like a collection of small curlicues. It looks like a charming drawing, but its theme is rather dark.

*- At present, you seem to be building up your paintings from beautiful backgrounds, with small craquelures and small round stains or rings. The same uncontrolled facture can be seen in the wide river forms, floating over the ground plans.*

Colpaert: I really like starting from a coloured background. I keep combining oil paint, water, thinner and other liquids, it is a ceaseless experiment for me. I am looking for the unpredictable, which is more prominent in my recent abstract work than it was in the landscapes and the drawings based on maps. It was Nietzsche who said: "All things straight are lies. Truth is always crooked." But even in the landscapes a kind of second structure can be discovered, spot-like, which can be seen in landscapes when one is looking down from a plane, in limestone or wet regions for example. In my paintings these spots appear as part of a second, more hidden image...

*- What are you working on at present?*

Colpaert: in my latest project I return to my roots, my training as a musician. I am thinking of an animation, in which I want to link the water-drop paintings to music, by having the spheres move and light up in certain serial relations, like the Fibonacci sequence. Music necessarily happens in space. Perhaps this appeared clearly for the first time, when Varèse composed music for the Philips Pavilion. This can be applied to the two-dimensional space of a drawing or a painting. The height of a sheet of paper can correspond with pitch, its width can be linked to interval. I wonder where this new road will take me...

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