

Capricious like growth  
On Willem Hussem's embrace of versatility  
by Mischa Andriessen

1.

The word poetic easily ranks among the top ten most commonly misunderstood and misused concepts in art critique. Repeatedly used as a euphemism, it is a kinder formulation of what the critic actually means: poetic often simply indicates that the work observed is diffuse and vague.

Such qualifications do not hold true for the work of Willem Hussem (1900-1974). His best works are remarkably clear. Nothing is withheld or obscured, although this does not mean that they are straightforward. The mystery endures, is not deciphered, no matter how often you look at work by Hussem. This is all the more wondrous, because everything that appears in the scene is usually discernible at the very first glance.

As mentioned, the concept poetic is often used incorrectly in reflections on art; regarding Willem Hussem's oeuvre, however, especially his work from the 1950s onward, this term is appropriate. Hussem was a poet not only *in addition* to his visual art work but also incorporated poems in his drawings and paintings. As manifested in his keen and practised eye for detail and attentive ear for silence, it is reflected in his ability to overcome a tough obstacle: fear of emptiness. Hussem does not shy away from white surfaces.

As becomes a poet, Hussem embraces contradiction. While his work is often subtle and austere, that single brush stroke with which he both pierces and highlights the white background tends to epitomize strength and courage, in a gesture that is anything but noiseless. And although the concentration underpinning his work is difficult to overlook, his strikingly direct brush strokes now and then even bring to mind *action painting*.

Even the manner in which Hussem applies his drawing and painting technique embodies such contradiction. That powerful gesture is seemingly at odds with the contemplation his work exudes. This is at odds with the compelling statements about the essence of his art that he has made repeatedly, in which he has consistently emphasized that his abstract work also derives from ongoing and intense viewing. Possibly, Hussem worked like a heron hunts: waiting motionless. At any rate, he is every bit as resolute, when he strikes. As a heron finds prey that has escaped others in dark water and very rapidly brings it to the surface, Hussem draws a line on canvas or paper just as incisively. A line in which the motion of drawing it, the force and speed of the attack, remain visible, as if the ink or paint continues vibrating.

Hussem's finest and best-known work is non-figurative, although the expressiveness of drawing or painting remains visible beneath the abstraction. The work of Hussem, who had few or no comparable kindred spirits within the Dutch art scene in his day, has rightly been associated with the more poetic painters in American Abstract Expressionism, especially with somebody such as Adolph Gottlieb. That comparison is not pointless but undeniably benefits Hussem. While Hussem may well combine being a painter with being a poet, unlike Gottlieb, he is not sickly sweet in all his softness.

Herein once again lies a contradiction. Without deliberately shifting his gaze abroad, Hussem kept drifting further away from convention in his own country and, seemingly unintentionally, identified more with international developments. In his younger years, during the interbellum, Hussem frequently stayed in French places such as Les Angles and Bougival. After returning to the Netherlands in 1936, Hussem became ever more embedded in the art scene of The Hague. He joined the most important associations and was such a regular at the café attached to exposition area De Posthoorn that he even had his mail delivered there. The duality appears once again. Hussem spent long evenings in the company of others there almost every day. In De Posthoorn he encountered a painter like Jaap Nanninga, with a comparable orientation but producing essentially different work and less advanced than Hussem. He met writers such as Simon Carmiggelt and, later, young artists from The Hague, such as Rinus van den Bosch and Peter Struycken. During Hussem's final years plagued by illness, Van den Bosch was a cooperative stronghold for him. Struycken became one of Hussem's last important influences. In the early 1970s Hussem continued to make his work more austere and added depth. Even Hussem's powerful brush strokes resembling calligraphy largely vanished. Until his death in 1974, Hussem conveyed what he still wanted to express in pure colour and form, unintentionally aligning with American minimalism. 'There is no form without colour and no colour without form. Colour without form is simply paint. Colour achieves form, when the two are related to one another.' Hussem made that statement back in the mid-1960s. A few years later, he managed to realize the consequence of that statement in paintings and drawings, thereby aligning with the contemporary belief that colour and form sufficed to convey the essence. Still, Hussem remains distinctive among all national and international abstract artists. After all, even though many influences and affiliations surface in his work, hardly any painter, let alone a group, is fully comparable. Perhaps the Spanish artist Joan Miró most closely approximates Hussem. He also produced work that was abstract and expressive. Like Miró, Hussem continued searching. He shied away from the matter-of-fact and had the courage to show that his most powerful brush strokes were tentative as well. He later wrote that his work revolved around 'the white of silence' and 'the omission of the superfluous [...] the perception

of the essence.' The core is unmistakable. Hussem knew what he sought but of course did not always find it.

## 2.

Many emphatic statements about Hussem's work – conceivably some by himself – may be contradicted or even refuted by another of Hussem's works. His oeuvre is continuously dynamic and under development. Following a logic of its own, it is cyclical rather than linear. Hussem readily retraces earlier steps and reworks them. Sometimes better, sometimes entirely differently. One insight that presumably remains valid is that Hussem continuously processes everything that influences and nurtures him at his own pace. Although his work is heavily abstracted, Hussem somehow also evades the dominance that abstract art embodied at the time. An empty painting is easily followed by a much fuller canvas. Form is not a dogma but a leitmotif. His ideas and methods certainly reflect consistent lines and patterns; those are his points of departure. The artist does not present the absolute truth but continuously struggles, hopefully each time more successfully than the time before, with the literally unwritten page that begins with each new work of art. Hussem: 'I have devoted my life to making my works as simple as possible. Each time I need to reconquer that simplicity within myself.'

One of the most interesting and also most appealing aspects of Hussem's work is its inclusive quality: its vast embrace and its contradictions may be restrained and expressive at the same time. Sometimes excessively austere, filling a frame with a single stroke. Often openly searching while at the same time bursting with confidence. Hussem once wrote that he sought the 'convergence of things ... their mutual cohesion.' His approach to contrasts exudes a similar disposition. Hussem does not resolve them but connects them, just as his best poetry does. Many of these poems comprise one or more neutrally presented observations, followed by a far more emphatic statement. Is that a conclusion arising from the above, or do the observation and the statement coexist amicably? Hussem is sparsely equipped in his quest for opulence. Though deeply devoted to his pursuit of simplicity, he is also voracious at some points. Much of his work abounds with zeal and – another misused concept – amazement. Consider this poem:

for victor e. van vriesland  
you write  
ever more frail  
life becomes  
but it fulfils me  
more and more  
like the flight  
of seagulls  
poetry that I only  
understand as an older man

voor victor e. van vriesland  
je schrijft  
al schrieler  
wordt het bestaan  
maar mij vervult  
het steeds meer  
zoals de vlucht  
van meeuwen  
poëzie die ik eerst  
als ouder man versta

Herein lies yet another contradiction, this one literal, regarding a befriended poet. In addition, the poem reveals how calmly Hussem takes the time needed for acquiescence and – probably most essential of all – how the source is in each case the observation, the hope of being able to visualize one day what was seen, in some cases long ago. Here, Hussem describes the flight of seagulls. As a youth he took notes of what he encountered on his walks, for example: ‘[...] two beautiful blue herons fishing.’

Hussem was long regarded as a painter’s painter. Usually the artists admired by colleagues are those with courage that others lack. With Hussem, this may be his uninhibited display of his humanity. His weaknesses remain clearly visible in his oeuvre. He has neither concealed nor obscured his shortcomings, which, after all, are common to all of us. Some paintings turn out better than others. This truth stares straight at us, but in the display of that fallibility lies irrefutable evidence of courage. Who wants to be remembered for his weaknesses? Probably no one. In any case, we all have them.

Perhaps this emphasis of what is human has made the following poem cherished and among the most renowned of Hussem.

all that wood  
by the hearth  
for one fire

al dat hout  
bij de haard  
voor één vuur

warmth requires  
years of growth

warmte vergt  
jaren groei

Without stating it explicitly, in the last two lines – altogether only five words – Hussem portrays an analogy between wood and people. Not to be aggrieved but understanding and to show affection, is a skill not to be taken for granted and which will hopefully be acquired at some point in life.

What grows freely is not rectilinear. The capriciousness of Hussem’s work, his unpredictability, has at times been identified as a weakness in his oeuvre. I am increasingly convinced that even more than a charm it is actually one of the great merits of his work. It has made him difficult to pinpoint. Not rigid enough for the abstracts, too poetic for hard edge. Moreover, Hussem turned against the spirit of his day, reverting repeatedly to a previously explored stylistic idiom. In doing so, Hussem unintentionally revealed the contrived nature of every categorization, demonstrating in the process that artists are far too unpredictable, too vibrant in essence for art history. He also shows that there are always hybrids, and that within an oeuvre, even within a single work, there may be room for conflicting ideas and emotions, for mutually contradictory intentions and movements. Hussem

reveals that an artist need not be a unitary individual, sticking to a course once chosen. Gustave Flaubert wrote that dogma is the last resort of those lacking imagination. Hussem had a great ability to fantasize, a very broad imagination, automatically putting him at odds with every type of dogma. This attitude probably meets with greater understanding nowadays. It is the attitude of an improviser who gives his all for the best possible result but knows that no single result ever guarantees success. This is the attitude of somebody who does not cling rigidly to fleeting truths but embraces doubt, the renowned wisdom of Socrates that the only thing you know for certain is that you know nothing for certain. Such doubt offers freedom and does not immobilize. This attitude is not one of pretence but of frankly conceding. Sincerely saying what you sought and admitting just as sincerely that in some cases you did not find it.

Basically, all the drawings, paintings, sculptures, poems, and prints of Hussem belong together. Our current image of humanity is fluid. Each individual embodies multiple identities, combines seemingly incompatible behaviours, interests, perceptions and loves. Each individual is an amalgamation of desires, longing, passions, and fears, of strengths and weaknesses, talents and shortcomings. This entire concoction of contradictions and inconsistencies figures in the idiosyncratic oeuvre of Willem Hussem. Whether that was an astute insight or a coincidental outcome of his character and nature remains unclear, but it most certainly makes him an artist of our time.

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Mischa Andriessen has been writing about art and music for many years. He wrote monographs about Morgan Betz, Hugo Tieleman, Betsabe Romero and Theo Eissens. His essays and reviews have been published in various catalogues, magazines and newspapers such as Financieel Dagblad and Trouw. Andriessen also works as a poet. Recently his fourth poetry volume Winterlaken was published.

Translation: Lee Mitzman