

A Thousand Yesses by Kie Ellens

When I was looking at a Wieske Wester painting of a bunch of bananas my mind took me to an old memory: it recalled a painting by De Chirico. De Chirico and bananas? I have been looking for that painting for some time now. Could they somehow be connected? And why did this very thought irritate me so much? I started looking for answers in Wester's more recent work. Maybe I could find it in her series of oysters, oysters with lemons, her lobsters or mussels. Maybe they can even help me to forget De Chirico.

Wester's 'Oysters and Lemon #1' is not a large painting. On the contrary, I guess it measures some twelve by nine inches. We see two thirds of a lemon and three or four oysters. It is part of a larger series of mussels, oysters and lemons. Although it is quite small its sheer presence allows it to occupy a lot of space like only a very strong and condensed work can do. And yet, there is something tentative and palatable in the painting as well. It overwhelms me in a warm and pleasant way. It presents itself as if the painter could come back at any given moment. It is this special quality that defines Wester's painting. They are painted in Haute Pâte; Matter Painting. It looks very spontaneous but is very difficult to achieve. It shows Wester's great skills. It also makes her work quite European.

Now, triggered by the European connection, I remember the De Chirico painting again. It is his 'The Uncertainty of the Poet'. How appropriate! In this painting from 1913 he depicts a torso of Aphrodite with a bunch of bananas in front of her. We see a passing train on the horizon, the white plume visible and complemented by his signature architecture. I know what irritated me, there is no uncertainty with Wester.

Perhaps my conscious engagement was with the unconscious that reminded me of the surrealist painter De Chirico. His surrealism is embedded in imitation whereas Wester's work is firmly rooted in reality. Her work is capable of giving me an experience of reality. Somehow the difference between figuration and abstraction is not capable to place her art in a pictorial tradition. De Chirico's train only works when I start thinking and connecting the train to other thoughts in my mind: motion, modernity, flight? It only works with my brains. The uncertainty of De Chirico was embraced by, and is part of Surrealism. Painted, it is the illustration of a thought that already existed. Wester's paintings on the contrary are based on reality. They give me an experience of reality. The difference is essential and fundamental.

European versus American painters? Wester's paintings have a great abstract quality, when we put the subject aside for a brief moment. They combine openness and intimacy in a way you cannot easily find with the American abstract expressionists. Pollock for example always meant his large paintings to be seen in small rooms. In this way the audience would be unable to distance themselves from the painting. We would be overwhelmed by their size and spectacle, unable to escape. Mentally nor physically.

When Jean Fautrier was contemplating this American way of pictorial thought he criticized Franz Kline for it. Kline in turn lashed back and called Fautrier appropriately a 'French Cook!!'. There are different reasons to award Wester with this nickname. Her way of painting relates her to Fautrier who painted haute pâte as well. Wester's painting though is unmistakably from a different era and a contemporary arena. It illustrates a different approach to painting and life. The sublime is traded in for the earthly.

Wester's paintings act out the opposite of Pollock as described above and maybe even more than that. Wester's small paintings can thrive with a lot of white surrounding wall and I can see them functioning in a tiny room. Maybe because the paintings themselves can hardly accommodate the subjects. I too am blown away by them. The bigger the space the more I feel blown away and yet very close to them as if Wester wants to draw me into these paintings. I feel embraced by her work, they become part of me. Their immediacy is contagious.

Her work feeds my senses and awakes memories shared within the work: with the oysters, with the lemons, with the occasional lobster. Is this because we live by metaphors? We use metaphors to understand our life, our world. It makes meaning and description transferable and figurative. The banana, a penis, the mussel a vulva? Is it because of this that the oyster is an aphrodisiac? [De Chirico's torso is Aphrodite!]. Wester's work has a sexual connotation that can hardly be missed. That her work is always more than this, always has more subtleties and additional layers makes her a chronicler of true life. It is her never ending and ambitious quest for identity. Who am I and what do these paintings have to say? What is it they want me to know?

The work is presenting itself in a very generous way. Her pleasure now is my pleasure. She stops painting at the right moment. Again, not easy. Wester has to allow the painting to tell her when it is done, when it is finished. Sometimes you have to stop even before you know everything the painting wants you to know. It takes a great artist to understand this. You have to be able to recognize an apex, a mountain's zenith. To be able to do this you have to understand life or be willing to face it without restraint.

The American painter Agnes Martin would drive her truck for hours through New Mexico and be silent for a long time and then, without warning she would shout out ‘YES’, a loud yes! Only to mark that rare moment in time where everything falls in place. The light, the landscape, the ambition and the expectation. I recognize that shout in Wester’s painting. Her pleasure is our pleasure. Her work is grounded and is never afraid of celebrating itself. And we as spectators are invited into the works’ moment and shout ‘Yes!’. How many times? A thousand times!

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Kie Ellens is an independent curator and writer. For many years he was affiliated to the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden where among many other things he curated the inaugural show of the new building in 2013. Other curatorial projects include the extension of Park Vijversburg, a 200 year old romantic park commissioning Junya Ishigami, Tobias Rehberger, Lola Landscape Architects and Piet Oudolf. In different positions Ellens realised new bodies of work with Erwin Wurm, Olaf Nicolai, Katharina Grosse, Richard Tuttle, Sam Durant, Lily van der Stokker, Spencer Finch, John Bock and many others.