

The Art of the Gallery by Bertus Pieters

What is good art? That is probably the most difficult question you can ask about art. Even more difficult than the question what art exactly is. There is no conclusive answer to the latter question either. For many, the two questions, and therefore the two answers, will be interrelated, especially if the answer is 'art is what I think is beautiful.' 'Beautiful' and 'good' are often closely related in art. 'Good' rarely has to do with the quality of the material. Certainly, Pieter Paul Pothoven's photo series *Laguard* has been excellently printed and very well framed, the quality of the work is 'good,' but is it also good art? Or take Paul Beumer's works. Beumer's qualitative starting points for his textile works are different from those used by the average textile user. And then there is 'beautiful.' Whoever wants a painting with a still life painted calmly and harmoniously, with muted colours, beautiful curving shapes and composed with brilliant but controlled strokes of paint, who finds that 'good' and 'beautiful', may have a problem with a still life by Wieske Wester. In her case, the paint is just fooling around with the subjects. If you are not curious about that, if you are not curious about what the textile of Beumer has to say, if you are not curious about the story of the tempting lapis lazuli of Pothoven, well, then you have indeed pretty little to do with Dürst Britt & Mayhew. In fact, over the past five years, Dürst Britt & Mayhew has shown that the question of what good art is, and therefore what is beautiful or ugly, becomes superfluous when you dare to surrender to what you see. The gallerists replace 'beautiful,' 'ugly' and 'good' by curiosity about the artist's dedication to what he or she makes and shows.

Dedication is in fact the basis of all aesthetics, both for the artist, for the viewer and for the buyer. In the visual arts, aesthetics is the tension between the material, that which you can actually see, and the spiritual or intellectual, that which you know or feel. All thirteen artists represented by Dürst Britt & Mayhew move with the greatest possible dedication into that area of tension, and the gallery ensures that the viewer can be included in it. The emphasis is on the material and the objects, whether they are Alex Farrar's fingernails or a video by Puck Verkade. The gallerists and artists have a fine sense of theatricality – that is part of exhibiting – but they always avoid the spectacle. The gallery consciously opts for reflection in art. Whether it's a gouache by Willem Hussem or a neon work by Sybren Renema, the viewers cannot just walk past it like in a museum, and they are given the space to contemplate the works in their entirety. Although the gallery is present in many international art fairs, its real treasury is the gallery space itself where the gallerists want to make intriguing exhibitions with dedicated artists, and it is impossible to give a list of highlights of the past five years – as it would be too long – which goes to show how much trust they have in the dedication of the artists. Some of the best shows have become real visual essays. If good art exists at all, this must be it!

The beauty of art is, amongst others, that it can open up more and less suspected aspects of the world for you in an intriguing way. A group of artists represented by a gallery can do this because of its diversity, but an artist

like Sybren Renema (1988) has such an extensive field of interest that you can safely count the whole world among his material. It therefore seemed a great opportunity for him to participate in the Antarctic Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017. The inexorable nature and the history of man's ambitious endeavours associated with it is a combination that passionately occupies him. He made a video of a piece of wood from the Discovery, the ship with which Robert Falcon Scott undertook his fatal Antarctic expedition. Renema attached that piece of wood on a kind of selfie stick that was attached to a weather balloon. The video takes 166 minutes and shows a broad view of the atmosphere and the changing earth. The organisation of the Antarctic Pavilion was a bit of a mess and it caused many logistical headaches, but with the combined forces of the artist and gallery owners, the work could eventually be installed. The video was later shown at Unseen Amsterdam where it was purchased by a couple who are trying to promote video art in public spaces through a foundation. An excellent opportunity for a work that already covers such a large part of the world. Various options were considered by the foundation, including railway stations. Eventually the video ended up in a secondary school in Hilversum where it gives both teachers and pupils a daily view of the earth, constantly showing the splinter of the Discovery as a reminder of the struggle that mankind fights every day to understand the world.

Puck Verkade (1987) was already well known to Dürst Britt & Mayhew far before they opened the gallery, and it would have been obvious if she would have had a solo exhibition soon after the gallery's opening. However, Verkade went to study at Goldsmiths College in London and needed time to reflect on her artistic development. The gallerists fully respected that. She developed from a video artist into an installation artist showing videos. The frame of the video expanded physically in her work to an installation of metal frames. Her first solo presentation of the gallery at Sunday in London in 2017 was a video installation. That installation expanded and covered almost the entire gallery in her first solo exhibition at the end of 2017 / early 2018. In the meantime, her work had become a world of video collages in which the clichés of daily life play an important role, made almost tangible by the metal frames in which they are installed. It was her new video installation, *BAIT*, together with work by Wieske Wester, that opened the doors for LISTE in Basel for the gallery and which also led to the first sale by the gallery of a video work by her. A Dutch private collector, who had previously purchased a work by Sybren Renema, also bought *BAIT*, just the video, without the installation around it. In the meantime, her work had caught the eye of Anita Zabłudowicz, so that in the autumn of 2019 Verkade was able to present her new work, the video installation *Plague*, at the prestigious Zabłudowicz Collection in London. There she showed the latest developments in her video work, where she focuses more on analogue techniques such as stop-motion film. With that she also emphasizes that every new work is a new beginning for her.

Jaring Dürst Britt knew work by Willem Hussem (1900–1974) from his secondary school where there was a poster with a poem and a gouache by Hussem. Both gallerists had and have a great affinity with Hussem's work and they wanted

to do something with the work to make it more internationally known. At the time, the venerable gallery Nouvelles Images in The Hague managed Hussem's estate in agreement with his relatives. There was an idea by Dürst Britt & Mayhew to share a booth with Nouvelles Images at, for instance, Artissima in Turin, where Nouvelles Images could show Hussem to an international audience while it was combined with work by Joseph Montgomery by Dürst Britt & Mayhew. Unfortunately, these plans couldn't go ahead, as Nouvelles Images announced that it would close its doors in the summer of 2018. This gave Dürst Britt & Mayhew the opportunity, in consultation with the Hussem heirs, to take over the representation of his estate. Thus it happened. The gallery has enthusiastically set itself the task of making Hussem's work more internationally known. Hussem's work is an important and special link in the history of modern art in the Netherlands, which is often reduced both nationally and internationally to De Stijl, Mondrian and Cobra. The curator of the AkzoNobel Art Foundation was also interested in Hussem's work. Already at the end of the nineties she wanted to acquire a work for the collection. According to the rules, however, this was not possible, because AkzoNobel's policy was only to purchase work by living artists. In the meantime, her influence had grown and she deemed Hussem's work to be so crucial for the collection that she was able to purchase a gouache by Hussem dating from the 1960s from Dürst Britt & Mayhew, and later two paintings as well.

LISTE in Basel in 2018 was not only successful for Verkade's work, but also work by Wieske Wester (1985) found new buyers there. Wester's materials may be called classical: charcoal on paper, paint on canvas. With Wester, however, the paint tends to swirl and to be pasty. Foods such as fish, shellfish or bananas no longer fulfill their designated roles. The paint makes them move, full of sensuality, passion and aggression. The paint in *Shapes (Land) #4*, too, changes into a swirling mass that transforms into a lurking mask detaching itself from the chaos. With that, Wester's works seemed to exert a huge attraction on a Swiss collector who visited LISTE. That was salient because he actually only collected works by Swiss artists. In addition to *Shapes*, over time he bought nine more works by Wester. He also lent work by Wester for *Virtuoso!*, the group exhibition in 2019 at the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem of more than a hundred years of virtuoso painting from the Netherlands. That also gave him the opportunity to visit the Frans Hals Museum and to go on a studio visit to Wester. Even a Brazilian collector who is known for his huge collection of conceptual art and who only has ten paintings in his collection, was attracted to her work when coincidentally seeing it at LISTE 2019. The Brazilian was interested in works by Lavet and Lahuis and bought works by them. As he passed, he asked Alexander whose work that was, pointing at a Wester painting, and if painting was not just for visual pleasure. Alexander was taken aback and, in his own words, stuttered that perhaps this might sometimes be enough. The collector responded that this particular work by Wieske Wester gave him visual pleasure and that he would buy it.

Image Two Hundred Sixteen, a collage by Joseph Montgomery (1979), is the first work that hung on the wall in the gallery, but it has never been shown to the gallery public in an exhibition. You could call it a birth chart of the gallery.

However, it was on show at Art Rotterdam 2015, where Dürst Britt & Mayhew presented itself as a gallery for the first time, even before the opening of the space at the Van Limburg Stirumstraat. It was sold during Art Rotterdam to an architect, who had assisted the young gallerists in setting up the gallery. He would turn out to be an enthusiastic buyer afterwards. The work and the transport crate from which it emerged also featured, together with the brand-new gallery owners, in a photo series for an airline magazine. The photographer had been a flight attendant who now did a photo work for the magazine of her former employer. The two fresh gallerists were enthusiastic to be the willing victims of the photo shoot with the crate that had just arrived – it was the first crate they received for their gallery –. The pictures show how the crate is opened and how the gallery owners sit proudly on a bench under Montgomery's collage. This made it the first work to hang on the gallery wall. After Art Rotterdam, where they succeeded in selling two works to the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, the gallery presented Montgomery's works at various other fairs and in two solo exhibitions in the gallery itself. Montgomery calls himself a painter, but painting has taken him somewhere else than Wieske Wester. His works are the result of the awareness that there are no more innovations to be made in painting, but that the source of creativity doesn't stand still nevertheless.

With Alexandre Lavet (1988), Dürst Britt & Mayhew brought in emptiness and absence. Lazy as that may sound, his work precisely sharpened the viewers' attention. In his solo exhibition at the end of 2016 / early 2017 the gallery turned into an empty space where, for the observant viewer, all sorts of things and messes were left by, well, by whom? An On Kawara seemed to have been stored in the storage room. You may call Lavet's work conceptualist avant-la-lettre. In view of the so-called On Kawara you might even call it post-conceptual work. With Lavet, reality becomes trompe l'oeil and vice versa. Even Alexander Mayhew asked, just to be sure, if it was what he thought it was when he first saw Lavet's work in 2014 in Olivier Robert Galerie in Paris. The name of the artist was printed in small on the wall, with the title of the artwork, the dimensions and the owner. Yes, it was what Mayhew thought: a text piece, where each letter was printed separately on the wall and which only referred to itself. Mayhew immediately fell for it and Dürst Britt & Mayhew exhibited his work at Poppositions in Brussels in April 2015. Later, international buyers also presented themselves. A UK-based collector bought work by Lavet, but also the aforementioned Brazilian collector of conceptual art as well as a Portuguese art collector. He had noticed Lavet's replica of an On Kawara. The Portuguese himself had an On Kawara and he asked if Lavet would like to make a replica of it for him. The artist agreed and so the two gallerists were extensively measuring an original On Kawara in Lisbon on 18 May 2017, the day that Stanley Brown died, the man for whom measuring was such an important part of his art.

The work of Pieter Paul Pothoven (1981) has a conceptual base too. For him, objects, fabrics and places serve as witnesses of a history that needs supplementing or a different perspective. Apart from the historical details, Pothoven gives a metaphorical function to visible structures and materials on

which he focuses. In doing so he uses the most diverse media. The subjects he presents stem from materials and objects, but the reverse may also be the case. For example, lapis lazuli has been known in Western culture for centuries as a precious commodity, for the colour ultramarine was more expensive than gold, as it came from faraway Afghanistan. Pothoven travelled to Afghanistan and saw how lapis lazuli is still mined, sometimes in centuries-old mines, for a pittance and at the expense of the safety and health of the miners. At the Amsterdam Art Fair in 2015, Dürst Britt & Mayhew showed Pothoven's *Lapis Lazuli from Serr-i-Sang*, ultra-thin slices of lapis lazuli between glass, projected with a slide projector. This sparked enthusiasm with potential buyers. The gallery owners knew that Pothoven had also taken pictures of different types of lapis lazuli ore in 2010 for the *Laguard* series, but did Pothoven still have prints available? If not then it had to be there soon because the gallerists saw an opportunity to show these works at Unseen Amsterdam the same year. Pothoven no longer had the series available, so new, perfect prints had to be made, and also good framings. The gallery took the risk of paying for these production costs, and so the printed series of five was ready for Unseen just in time. It was a good estimate of the gallery, because the series was sold to two corporate collections and various individual pieces were sold to private collectors.

The relationship between David Roth (1985) and Dürst Britt & Mayhew is a long one, yet the gallery decided not so long ago to represent Roth. 'I first met David in 2014 at Parallel, an artist-run art fair in Vienna. I shared a booth together with Aurelia Nowak, whom I met during my participation in de Appel Gallerist Programme', Alexander tells. After getting acquainted with Roth a correspondence arose. His work was included in the group exhibition *Stretch Release* at the gallery in 2017. The following year, a reduced version of *Stretch Release* was repeated by the gallery at Parallel, where Roth's work was shown in combination with work by Paul Beumer and Kristan Kennedy. The initial hesitation of the gallery concerned a possible similarity with work by Paul Beumer, who was already represented by the gallery, but after a visit to Roth's studio it became definitely clear that these similarities are only superficial. This is how the solo exhibition *An introduction to painting* came about in the gallery in the autumn of 2019. Roth's work originates from performance and the physical element of painting. It is not about the artist who puts the paint on the canvas as expressively as possible, or makes himself the subject of his art. Roth takes the canvases outside with him, dragging them over the ground, using them as a night shelter, working on them with flowers and paint. In addition he shows his palettes and pieces of cloth on which he wipes his brushes. Roth makes no effort to show any personal expression. In his performances – and in their tangible remnants – he is present as a maker, no more. Precisely a collector who had decided not to buy any more art eventually could not resist buying two smaller works by Roth.

Paul Beumer (1982) is one of the artists associated with the gallery from the very beginning. The gallerists knew him from his graduation exhibition at the Royal Academy in The Hague in 2009. His work was therefore represented in the opening exhibition *Urbi et Orbi* in 2015. He soon had a solo exhibition in the same year, where he painted all the gallery's walls green as a background

to his works on paper, that showed a kind of solidified growth processes. The materials carry the content of the works. In 2016, Dürst Britt & Mayhew presented Beumer's work at the Amsterdam Art Fair. In the meantime, Beumer had made a number of works with textile. For the Amsterdam fair, choices had to be made about the presentation of these works. Artist and gallerists experimented with framing and with a rough presentation with the works pinned straight on a purple painted wall. It was precisely a framed work by Beumer that appealed to a couple that was relatively new to the world of art buying. They bought two works by Beumer. The larger of the two could only be purchased on condition that it fit through the stairwell leading to their apartment. A cardboard dummy was used to see if the work would fit through the stairwell. Much to the disappointment of buyers and gallery owners, it did not fit. The only option the gallerists saw, was to hire an art handling company that was also specialised in transporting large musical instruments for the Concertgebouw Orchestra. However, that cost a considerable amount and the gallery owners did not want to put this through these novice but enthusiastic buyers. They then took care of those costs themselves. With a lift it was transported to the rear of the apartment and that way it fitted in the house.

Later, the same couple who had purchased the two works by Paul Beumer also bought a sculpture by Alex Farrar (1986) from Dürst Britt & Mayhew, just to be suspended in another difficult stairwell. However, in the current exhibition another work, *Bubblestill*, is shown. It is one of Farrar's so-called *Sweat Paintings*. It was purchased by a former assistant of the gallery. She bought the work at the end of the *Body Building* exhibition in the spring of 2018, where it was exhibited, just when it became clear to the gallerists that she would leave the gallery and switch to Atelier Van Lieshout. Though good for Joep van Lieshout, Jaring and Alexander were sad to see her go. She had energetically assisted the gallerists from the very beginning onward, in the gallery as well as at various art fairs. She had become very much part of the fabric of the gallery. *Bubblestill* may therefore have become a good souvenir of a great period of collaboration for both. Farrar's *Sweat Paintings*, based on sweat stains on clothing, are typical of his work which is often based on the human body and how it manifests itself. This can vary from dropped eyelashes to leather seats of chairs or discarded bicycles. The work can be small or subtle; for instance he used the profile of Alexander Mayhew for a cornice on the occasion of his solo exhibition at the beginning of 2019 in the gallery (parts of which are still visible). However, Farrar can also give monumentality to something like a bitten nail by enlarging it and casting it in lead. Last year he even gave some of them ostentatious nail polish colours. Farrar's work will often lead the viewer to reconsider his or her physicality.

Buyers sometimes live closer by than you would expect. That certainly applies to the Van Limburg Stirumstraat, which is not known as a street where an eager art crowd lives. But still: a neighbour from the other side of the street dropped in for a chat during the installation of Raúl Ortega Ayala's (1973) solo exhibition in early 2017 and noticed that one enigmatic work by him. What exactly appealed to him in that wonderful image of flowers and two wrestlers mixed together? Was it precisely that special combination in that painting,

roughly put on its side, of two men practising an aggressive sport, with these precious flowers painted over it? One might even think of Saint Veronica's veil with the impression of Christ. The Ortega exhibition showed much more. He is constantly looking for things that are in danger of escaping memory and sometimes – such as the Van Gogh painting with flowers painted over two wrestlers – have already slipped away. He also showed an impressive film about Chernobyl, how decay and nature took over power over the area, and he also recalled people who once lived and worked there. In this way, Ortega blows the dust of past events that not only show how the past lives on in the present, but also produce intriguing images that have the power to let the viewer wonder about his / her own position in the world. The neighbour bought the work that obviously intrigued him so much fifteen minutes before the opening of the show, and the great thing is: it was the first work that he and his wife bought at Dürst Britt & Mayhew and it has proven not be the last. 'Who could have fathomed that by now four neighbours have acquired works from the gallery,' the gallerists are still marvelling.

Quite a few artists represented by Dürst Britt & Mayhew are still at the beginning of their careers. Representing Jacqueline de Jong (1939), an artist who has been active for some six decades, who is familiar with all the ups and downs in an artist's life, who is part of European art history herself and who is still full of energy, was a new challenge for the young gallery. With the solo exhibition *Imagination à rebours* in 2017 the gallery immediately showed a lot of ambition. The show gave considerable insight into the development of De Jong's work over the decades. In the accompanying handout for the exhibition was an interview with De Jong by Margriet Schavemaker, then Manager of Education, Interpretation and Publications at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the museum where De Jong herself came to work as a 19-year-old, thus, in a way, coming full circle. Shortly after, the Stedelijk Museum decided to present De Jong with a solo exhibition in 2019. At the same time the gallery took her work to Unseen Amsterdam. From the side of a corporate collection there was interest in the work *Potato Flower walking away* presented there, but a young and eager private buyer had shown her interest before and had put an option on the work. She was very enthusiastic but hard to reach when the representatives of the company collection showed serious interest. Every effort was made to reach the buyer and in the meantime the representatives of the corporate collection were informed that there was another potential buyer with a 'long-term option.' Thanks to the action of the gallery, the young enthusiast bought the work and she was very happy with her purchase. De Jong was also happy that her work went to such a young buyer. Two months later the corporate collection added a great painting by Wieske Wester to their collection.

Conceptual art is more or less notorious for being exciting to see and exhibit, but difficult to sell. The greater is the challenge for a gallerist to sell conceptual art. As a gallerist you have to be truly enthusiastic about the artist's work, you have to let the audience share in your enthusiasm and you have to sense who is so enthusiastic that a sale may follow. At LISTE 2019 in Basel, Dürst Britt & Mayhew showed conceptual work by two artists, Alexandre Lavet and

Lennart Lahuis (1986). The earlier mentioned Brazilian collector has one of the largest collections of conceptual art in South America, supplemented by a rich archive of additional material such as magazines, invitations, announcements, conceptual poetry and text works. He also has a collection of gramophone records that come from the field of conceptual art. Big names such as Hans Haacke, Stanley Brouwn and Ian Wilson are represented in his collection. However, he is not concerned with the big names, but with the challenge that the works offer him time and again. The collector wanted to obtain a water artwork by Lahuis (the one that was shown in Lahuis' solo exhibition in 2015), but there was more that attracted him. In addition to a text work by Lavet, he also bought six jesmonite bracelets by Lahuis. They temporarily imprint the words *Deeply Held Beliefs* in the wearer's arm. Apart from the fact that it is an honour that these works are now part of such an important collection, they are also historically a good addition to it. Lahuis' conceptualism is permeated with time and history, and with the material itself, but it is also very much connected to the present. As such, the Brazilian collector has added work to his collection from the current, post-postmodern era.

It is impossible to celebrate the first five years anniversary of Dürst Britt & Mayhew without paying attention to the invaluable contributions of Chantal Hendriksen of studio Hendriksen. She is responsible for the graphic design of the handouts for the exhibitions in the gallery and for the presentations at fairs, and not only that: she has been doing that from the beginning! For this anniversary exhibition she made a selection of her designs. The first collaboration with Chantal was for the magazine *You Are Cordially Invited*, which she made with her former partner Marijke Cobbenhagen and with Jaring and Alexander. Together they also designed the gallery's logo. Over the years Chantal has made designs for the Amsterdam Art Weekend, the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam and for the Hallen in Haarlem amongst others. Jaring and Alexander give her complete freedom in her designs for the gallery. They have confidence in her just as they have confidence in the artists they represent. Of course Dürst Britt & Mayhew is digitally omnipresent, on Facebook, via Instagram etc. Photos of exhibitions and fairs can be seen everywhere in the world that way, but you can hold the paper handout in your fingers while reading where ever you are. Both the texts and the designs – which are always unique – turn the handouts into real collector's items. With these designs you take part in the history of the gallery, you have a part of the exhibition in your pocket, you actually have a work of art in your pocket.

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Bertus Pieters (Amsterdam, 1958) publishes about art, amongst others reviews in the Villa La Repubblica blog and photo reports in the Villa Next Door blog. He studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in The Hague (Drawing and Painting division, 1982) and he was active as an artist until the beginning of this century. He worked in the refugee branch for two decades, and studied Art History (BA 2014) and Art and Culture (MA 2018) at Leiden University.