

## Different Eyes by Joke de Wolf

Let me start with a footnote. This exhibition's announcement states that Willem Hussem is the archetypal 'old white male artist'. And that showing Hussem's work alongside that of Esther Tielemans, Alejandra Venegas and Jongsuk Yoon will illustrate that this description is irrelevant: the work of these four artists is in the same league, irrespective of their age, gender and cultural origin.

Of course, the maker's gender should be irrelevant when viewing and understanding art. This is something women have asserted for centuries; unfortunately the men in charge in art schools, the guilds, politics and at home held a different view. Women could not be taught by men who were not related to them, for all too soon they would be up to more than just painting. For the same reason they could not attend art school, and in the few highly exceptional cases where they were accepted, they could not paint or draw nude models, for all this nudity might confuse them. As if they had different eyes.

Next, in the nineteenth century, it was the art historians - also predominantly men - who removed the rare women who had succeeded in building a body of work and a reputation, from the art historical canon. Surely they set the wrong example, their art was inferior or had to have been made by their brother, husband or father. The impact of these actions reverberated for a long time. In the first editions of their *Story of Art* (1961) and *History of Art* (1962) E.H. Gombrich and W.H. Janson did not mention one female artist. Not one. And these were to become set books for countless generations of art historians. In 2019 only 13 percent of the art shown in eight Dutch museums was made by female artists.

The art market has never had much faith in female artists, no matter how many artworks they made in the past century that were of the same quality as that of male artists. Tests in which the artist's name was hidden have shown that even connoisseurs cannot tell any difference in quality. The description 'old white male artist' is therefore not a judgement based on the quality of the work, it merely highlights the fact that art made by white men was given greater regard in the previous centuries. To such an extent that there was very little room left for others.

Even in 2019 people consistently paid more money for work made by male artists. According to a survey by Artsy, in Europe 72 percent of the post-1999 artworks available in galleries, is made by men. I do not know how many works Dürst Britt & Mayhew sell, nor their sales figures, but with a representation of eleven male and four female artists, the gallery ranks just above the European average: 74 percent. Except in this exhibition.

The four participating artists were born in different decades, on three different continents. As a result not only their personal lives differ, but also their cultural

influences, examples and education. Yet their work has one major thing in common: their desire to capture the landscape in their art. For each of the artists it is not about directly depicting the view, the panorama or the single mountaintop, but about the experience of the recurring elements, the space around them. And about the possibility of capturing this experience in images. 'For the artist, drawing is discovery', claims art critic and storyteller John Berger at the beginning of his essay 'The Basis of All Painting and Sculpture is Drawing' (1960). By drawing the artist forces himself to look around him, to really observe. The technique of drawing, be it with crayon, pencil or pen, is less cumbersome than painting or sculpting.

Jongsuk Yoon (Onyang, South Korea, 1965) moved to Europe in 1995. She studied art in Münster, Düsseldorf and London and at present she lives in Düsseldorf. By now she is an established name in the art world. She has had solo-exhibitions in Germany, Korea and Switzerland. As of 2012 she exclusively makes drawings and paintings, in which she combines figurative elements with abstract and geometrical shapes. She describes her way of working as walking on an unfamiliar mountain. 'You don't know the mountain, you don't know what's waiting for you'. She spends a lot of time looking at a painting and thinking about what it needs. Her paintings are getting bigger and bigger, she likes to lose herself in size. She repeats images: clouds, rivers, mountains. 'Mind landscapes' is what she calls her paintings: her inner world merges with that on the canvas. The moon is a recurring image as well: a small circle, on the horizon, sometimes high, sometimes low. 'The moon is a gift from heaven,' says Yoon. 'For me, it represents a mirror reflecting my image. A small gesture makes the image come alive, which it wouldn't have been without the moon'.

Esther Tielemans (Helmond, 1976) found her dream studio a mere 20 minutes' drive from Amsterdam. Here she can look out over the fields and the only sound around is birdsong. Looking out, knowing from which position you look at a view, is part of Tielemans' work. Originally she painted landscapes, but in the past ten years she has been making spatial objects. Reflections are important, big shiny surfaces, sometimes partly in three dimensions. Black plays an important role in her work. It provides a constant presence of reality, she says.

Tielemans placed her latest painting, which could be described as a realistic landscape in the water, in the middle of a park. Of course the water is a huge black, continuously moving mirror. Opposite she situated a monochrome green panel, which reflects the painting in the water. This Summer she took it one step further: she covered the facade of her Amsterdam home in reflective green foil. The segments she had to cut out for her windows were used to make a new work. The window, the painting's frame and its position on the wall is an important theme in her other recent work as well. She shows a painting within a painting. Its colours must partly have come from the same brush, but they went their separate ways. You might call it a sign of unprecedented transparency: the artist shows the effect of the choices she makes.

Alejandra Venegas (Mexico City, 1986) also responds to her surroundings. Her father was a well-known artist, her French mother painted landscapes outdoors. Mountains, canals, clouds and planets are the main focus of her work; in this she resembles Jongsuk Yoon. Venegas' parents owned a large collection of books on Asian art, African wood carving and Egyptian hieroglyphs. Their influence on Venegas' work is unmistakable, though Mexican folk art features in it as well. From her house on the outskirts of town, in the country, she often works according to a set of drawing and painting rules, only to then break them. For example, she started depicting the landscape in a code language of calligraphy. In 2019 she explained her way of working thus: 'When working on paper for example you cannot erase or correct your strokes well, so I would either become very careful or stop trying to control the result. I now incorporate controlled, energetic, safe, insecure, slow or fast lines and strokes, all to achieve freedom.'

In spite of the rules Venegas searches for a way to deal with her subjects freely and intuitively and tries to find a balance between the intuitive and the conscious. She almost always uses a portrait image orientation: Mexico City is surrounded by mountains, she experiences the landscape as vertical. Recently Venegas has been making large ink drawings on rice paper. A chain of triangles, circles and lines unmistakably form a landscape. Her smaller water colours are dominated by colour, a horror vacui often seen in mountain landscapes.

Willem Hussem (Rotterdam, 1900) started his career as a landscape and still life painter and poet. From 1919 until 1929 he lived in Les Angles near Avignon, France. After a brief period in the Netherlands he returned to France in 1933, now with a wife and child, where he stayed until 1936. Then he returned to the Netherlands for good. Until his death in 1974 he lived and worked in The Hague, the only major city in the Netherlands that has a beach. Hussem loved it and took walks on the beach almost every day. One of his most beautiful poems is about painting the sea:

put the blue  
of the sea  
against the  
blue of the  
sky brush  
in the white  
of a sail  
and the  
wind will rise

During the occupation Hussem taught himself calligraphy. Since there was a shortage of painting materials he started working in black ink on paper. He practiced his skills and was able to pursue his interest in Zen Buddhism further. After the liberation in 1945 he abandoned realistic painting and poetry altogether. There is no essential difference between realistic and abstract art, he wrote in newspaper Het Parool in 1953. It is not about the what, but about the how: the way in which

he makes his artwork. In one loosely hand-drawn circle he sees the entire cosmos reflected. 'This sensitivity of the line is the purest emotion my eyes can give me, the tension of the white canvas, evoked by the inimitable placement of the circle.'

This does not only apply to contemporary art: in the horizon line in one of Hercules Seghers' landscapes he sees a completely 'abstract' effect in the so-called 'concrete' landscape. Landscapes are a unique experience for the artist. '[An abstract artist] does not venture into nature to summarize a landscape on canvas, but to expose himself to the forces of sun, wind, earth, water etc. and to translate everything he experiences within himself into imagery, colour, line and form.'

Hussem lived in a man's world. The 'nieuwe stromingen' exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1950) incorporated works by two women and about forty men. Photos of the foundation of the artists' group Fugare in 1960 show it was comprised solely of male artists. It was the time in which Janson and Gombrich completed their now classic books on art history. Women in art were invisible.

Much has changed since then. It is tempting to say that the landscape is like a still life, something which every artist, irrespective of gender or cultural background, can look at and interpret in their own way. As a space in which everybody can wander around without being disturbed, be it physically or mentally. In her book *Wanderlust* Rebecca Solnit shows that public space is often still an unsafe place for women, people of colour and lhgts. Whether this a dark alley in Manhattan or a narrow mountain path in Mexico makes no difference.

Jongsuk Yoon, Esther Tielemans and Alejandra Venegas use the mirror, the frame or the moon in their work to show their own presence, to be able to move through the landscape. Venegas uses rules she has made up herself to give herself the freedom she wants. Hussem went outside and felt the force of the elements.

Juxtaposing the work of these four artists is illuminating. Not only does it highlight differences and similarities in form, colour and composition, it also exposes the different experiences of landscape. To trace back the thickly applied oil paint and the circle to the confident step of a person taking his daily walk on the beach might be taking things a bit too far, but the large-sized gestures of female artists illustrate that there is no ignoring them in the art world anymore.

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