

The back(side)of painting
Anna Gritz in conversation
with Jacqueline de Jong

The artist Michael Stevenson once told me an anecdote about the American painter Philip Guston. The story leads back to a brief stint of abstraction in Guston's oeuvre after he had withdrawn to his studio in upstate New York. According to Stevenson there must have been two parts to the studio, a lounge room and a room for painting. The lounge room had more of a living room set up with a TV that was constantly running, providing a steady stream of world events. Feeding topics like the race riots, the Vietnam War, the feminist movement right into the painting space as though allowing them to make their way back into the work, to feed Guston's personal lexicon of light bulbs, books, clocks, city-scapes, cigarettes, and shoes, like a transfer.

The paintings of Dutch artist Jacqueline de Jong also take from life, though in a more roundabout way, but also here one can speak about the conversion of two rooms. In the mid-sixties, when de Jong was working on her magazine 'The Situationist Times', she would spend the mornings on the magazine conflating art and politics into delirious collages and after a quick lunch across the street she would return to an afternoon of painting. One can only speculate what one may have fed to the other. Around this time de Jong was prompted by the befriended sculptor Pol Bury to watch television to allow the currency of the medium to infiltrate her work. However instead of going out to purchase a TV she made a series of ink drawings that read like visual white noise, all-over gestural scenes that merge what could be read as figures, writings and doodles. She went on to call them with a tongue in cheek nod to Bury 'TV Drawings' The fourth wall is crossed here solely through an imaginary creation thereof.

Jacqueline de Jong's paintings speak of a desire for the space behind the canvas where the physical support meets the illusory space or may be even more for the abolition of the division between the two.

Anna Gritz: Before we discuss your work and the exhibition in more depth, I would love to hear you speak on the title of the exhibition, 'Plankenkoorts'. It's the Dutch word for stage fright, referring literally to something like a wooden fever.

Jacqueline de Jong: Fever, well, it's a fun word. It is, because most of the works in the exhibition are on wooden plates and these are called 'planken'. The reference to fever has to do with what has been happening in the last year of the Covid19 pandemic. I think there's never been a time where so much fever control had to be managed on an almost daily basis. So it's a mixture of the situation at the moment and the sensibility of the work. I mean this feeling you have when you're feverish, which, you know, can be very nice. It has a very exciting aspect but also a very dangerous one, it promises a different state, a bit like a delirium. It has nothing to do with 'planken' apart from the practical thing that the works are made on wooden planks.

AG: So it has nothing to do with stage fright or the anxiety to perform?

JdJ: No, it has nothing to do with the stage. The word has of course to do with the stage, but in this case, it's much more metaphoric for the larger situation.

AG: How did you get the idea to paint on wood?

JdJ: The paintings are all on sailcloth that I put on wood. I mean, it's not like Middle Age painting on panel, but it's the sail that is adhered to panels and in part I paint over the sail on the panel.

AG: Is the sailcloth an invention of yours, or is it something that is more commonly used?

JdJ: No, it's not common at all. It started

with a very big work, a seven metre-long sail, which I made for a branch of the Nederlandse Bank in Drachten (in the province of Friesland) in 1992 entitled 'De achterkant van het bestaan' (The backside of existence). The work was suspended in the bank and painted on both sides, like a division between the counters and the public. I thought the counters should also have something to look at. It was supposed to shield the visitors from the people counting the money. In fact the architects instructed me to make something of a fence, and I thought, I have to make a sail. In Drachten they have lots of ships and sails, and I started to look out for sails. I found out that there's so many beautiful sails, old sails, and just began to gather quite a lot of material. From then on I made a lot of works on sail. It's not common at all, quite unusual in fact, but it's a fantastic material and for quite some years I worked only on sail, sparked by this one commission at the bank.

AG: One of the works on view is entitled 'Carbreak'. It shows a man and a woman, in a violent struggle, tangled up in a crash with a vehicle. There are actual ropes trimming the nautical sailcloth. But the canvas doesn't necessarily match up with the wooden board, they overlap, as if the materials are clashing with themselves like a hybrid.

JdJ: I set out to make an integration of the material into the work. The car crash was an anecdotic element that occurred at the time, but I made accidental paintings already in the past. However this car crash relates to an actual accident that I was involved in. We (my partner Tom Weyland and I) went up a mountain in the Alps by car without having snow tires and we got caught in a big snowstorm that arrived all of a sudden. The storm pushed the car off the road and we rolled off the mountain but luckily survived. It was very scary at the time. It was also very weird, because the car rolled on its side and next to the road was this very steep

mountain going down. So I mean, it was really extremely scary and dangerous, but also it ended up all fine, just the car was completely smashed. To protect me my husband threw himself on top of me, and that is a little bit what I'm showing in the painting. We were very lucky that there was a car standing there, witnessing all of what was happening and the guy in the car was a first aid person. He was Italian and he came from the district. He helped us very much this guy, he took us out of the car and said run because the car could catch fire. So it is a personal memory, but then I am also having some fun with it. I mean, because it was so terrifying it was also funny. Yeah, we could see it with humour because we were not really very hurt, a little bit, but not very badly. I mean we were saved. In the end I made several works about this event.

AG: Did you make the paintings shortly thereafter? Are they still kind of carrying the immediate impact?

JdJ: I made them quite sometime after, but, of course they carry the impact of the whole thing. In general though it is a subject that is very near to me because what I like to paint is violence and erotics and humour. These are three themes that are very present in the works. So here things came together very well. And danger, of course, has something erotic in it. That is something that fascinates me. I'm fascinated not simply by destructive things but there is a sort of modification of objects and things and people within accidents, of course, and within the material that changes upon impact. I think this stems from 'The Situationist Times', my magazine and its focus on the changing of life and movement and objects.

AG: It's a change of a state. It's a transformation. Were you purposefully looking back at the accidental paintings when you were making these Car crash paintings? Do you see a succession between the two?

JdJ: No, there is not really a connection. Well, let's put it this way, the same person made them with an interval of 30 years or something, but no, I didn't consciously make a connection. I don't usually fall back to the old, the former part of my work.

AG: I think it's always interesting to see where subjects come from and how they then become material. I like how you speak about the piece as an object opposed to a painting, because they do feel very three-dimensional. There is a sculptural component to them that suggests a form of building the object, of physically merging the subject matter into the material. This becomes even more apparent in one of the paintings where a woman is holding on to the three-dimensional sail rope almost as if she's attempting to swing herself out of the car. The meeting of the car and the bodies mimics the way the sailcloth and the wood come together. There's something very bodily, like a physical fusion or conflation of two subjects and materials.

JdJ: That was the idea. It is not meant to be symbolic. I don't use just the flattened sail, it is sort of placed in waves and I painted it while it was on the board, so it prompts the way of painting.

AG: It also seems to be a play with reality. Obviously we hear the works are based on a real story, but then, this appears to merge with fantasy giving way into the delirious nature of the experience. To me the materials become part of the story; they join the figures as fellow protagonists. It is as if you're looking behind the painting to reveal what it's made of and to reveal both its real and its illusionary potential.

JdJ: Yes, exactly. And that's in a way very funny because what you're saying, looking behind the painting, is very much what I was also doing with the big cloth for the bank. It's hard to say where is the front because it's two sided. The behind

is something, which I consider very important in a way. Sometimes it's more important than the front, or at least it's complementary. Let's put it that way.

AG: I feel like the back or behind is so illuminating because it not only reveals the way something is made, but also its history, its provenance but also beyond it is an illusionary space, the fourth wall that contains everything that goes into a work and its opposite. It is almost like a backstage.

JdJ: And there you have the Plankenkoorts again.

AG: Exactly, it's theatrical.

JdJ: That's a very good word for it.

AG: And you are trained as an actress, you had some flirtation with the theatre, right?

JdJ: Yes. Once upon a time when I was very young, I thought I was going to be an actress. But that's, you know, when I was 17, 18 and then I failed. Well, but that has nothing to do with this. Nevertheless backstage is indeed quite an apt word in this context.

AG: Maybe it's simply the act of considering both, not just considering one side. What was the situation like for you in the mid 1990s.

JdJ: I don't remember. I really don't. Well, my personal situation went through quite a change in 1989. I got divorced and I changed my place and this is the sort of change that also impacted on my work. I got freer in a way. Personally, it was a very happy period, but also very difficult. But that's the very personal part. I don't really remember what was going on in the nineties. I mean, to me, the decades don't mean that much as for other people. Well, the first things I made in the 90s were related to the Gulf War, because that was on television. It was the first war on television. And I took the images from television and translated them into megaliths.

AG: This might be a good moment to switch to another piece that will be in the show, 'Hanging Women', from 1992. Again, you were painting on sailcloth that is draped like a curtain hanging and covering the wall. So it's at the same time covering something up and revealing. Painting is also here more an object than a purely illusionary space. You are playing again with what's depicted on the painting and the material it is painted on. Could you tell me a little bit more about this particular work.

JdJ: The work came from something very practical. I was asked to make the poster and also the program book for a performance of 'Madame Butterfly' by Puccini. The protagonist Cio-Cio-San commits harakiri at the end of the opera. I made several works on Japanese paper and in three dimensions at the end of the 1980s. They also refer back to an earlier series of 'Suicidal' paintings from the 1960s. These suicidal works ended up on the sailcloth, the huge sailcloth, but also smaller ones, one of which will be in the exhibition. I am hanging the women in these, instead of letting them commit the real harakiri. They are very dramatic, like theater.

AG: Did you make it for a particular space?

JdJ: No, I just made it because there was space. My former husband Hans Brinkman had a gallery and it was a very big gallery. And when he left me, I suddenly had this space where I could make things, which were huge. Like 10 metres and more. My personal situation at that moment was very bad, and this whole Cio-Cio-San fixation became something very personal and so my interpretation was also a way to deal with my personal sorrow. Well, that's why I made them, sort of to get rid of my personal problems.

AG: It's interesting that it's a harakiri depiction, because harakiri is the act of opening up the body or indeed slashing something open. Here we are faced with a violent way of revealing the inside or backside of something, not unlike Lucio Fontana slitting open the canvas.

JdJ: Yes, I like you putting it like that. Blood is indeed coming out.

—

Anna Gritz is a writer and curator at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin. There she has curated exhibitions by Lucy Skaer, Judith Hopf, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Steve Bishop, Anna Daučíková, the group exhibition 'The Making of Husbands, Christina Ramberg in Dialogue', Amelie von Wulffen and forthcoming a comprehensive solo exhibition by Michael Stevenson.