

Paul Beumer

‘I won’t have the luxury of seeing  
scenes like this much longer’

By Merel van Tilburg

The rise of oil painting in the fifteenth century stands as one of the epochal breakthroughs of western art. It has been argued that this technical invention contributed significantly to the ever-greater emphasis on realism and verisimilitude in painting, casting a naturalist spell over western art for nearly five centuries. One of the most influential writers reporting right after the birth of oil painting, Giorgio Vasari, explained that Italian painters had been searching for new methods to bring greater ‘softness’ and ‘liveliness’ to their paintings. The answer, according to a tenacious but utterly false myth originating with Vasari, came from the studio of Jan van Eyck, who experimented with paint ‘as one who took delight in alchemy.’ The myth of an artisanal or technical breakthrough at the basis of a renovation of art has been contested by later art historians, who would rather emphasize the role of the creative will or the imagination. But the myth was revived now and again by painters and especially by the Romantics, who enthusiastically experimented with unusual materials and procedures. The metaphor of the painter as alchemist has been equally persistent. It calls up a vision of the artist as an experimental researcher, but it also suggests mysterious esoteric creative actions, practiced in the seclusion of the painter’s studio.

If an artist paints with oil colors, as Paul Beumer does, his work is inscribed not just in the history of modern and contemporary art. The medium carries with it this longer history of naturalism and, more importantly in the case of Paul Beumer, of experimentation. For, having shed off the burden of naturalism in art, what remains are the possibilities of the medium – originally praised for its effects of softness, liveliness, brilliance and luster. But although Beumer’s works cannot be said to be figurative, neither are they entirely abstract. On the level of representation, the entire history of painting is available to the contemporary artist, who can oscillate freely between figuration and abstraction. To Paul Beumer, these categories simply do not matter. His seemingly abstract paintings can evoke a landscape or a natural shape, like that of a plant. Similarly, the burden of the debate between hand and mind is entirely cast off. This debate had occupied painters since the invention of oil paint, which brought about a social change regarding the status of the artist. A lot of effort was needed to shift this status from ‘mere’ artisan to ‘intellectual’ artist, or to shift painting from being an *ars mechanica* (mechanical art) to become an *ars liberalis* (free art). But once this status was fully attained, painting was again attacked in the early twentieth century, and now from within its own ranks. Artists like Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia rejected painting as a mechanical art rather than

an art of invention. Duchamp never tired of ridiculing the *patte*, the ‘paw’ of the painter-as-bête: a mere beast, and dumb at the same time (a pun on the double signification of *bête* in French). After the invention of oil painting, Duchamp’s introduction of the readymade stands as the next significant breakthrough of modern western art. It contributed in no small way to the multiple declarations of the ‘end’ and the ‘death’ of painting, several decades later.

It seems that with Beumer’s generation of painters, we arrive at a point in history where painting is again ‘free’, but more free than it was before. I’m not talking about the difficulty – for of course it exists – of doing something that has not yet been done. But the expectations towards the medium have subsided. Once the battlefield for artistic debates, then proclaimed the ‘greatest’ of all art forms, and subsequently brought to the grave by critics and artists alike, painting today is no longer the arena for masculine egos. What is more, it has become a marginal medium, or, at least, one option among many available to artists. This in part explains Beumer’s modest positioning of himself as a painter: the artist tries to free himself from all ambition and expectation, starting from ‘nothing’ rather than from an idea, and choosing canvases of modest size. Beumer has recently become interested in age-old Asian theories of painting, which emphasize the ‘liveliness’ of brushstrokes, and discuss very different ideas of what constitutes an ‘image’ and what the ‘ground’: for example, empty space around a line is not at all part of the work.

For Paul Beumer, painting is simply the medium that suits him best. There is some biographical influence at work – his grandfather was a painter of traditional vistas and in his youth, the artist followed suit – but this is not the entire story. Beumer is right to think that painting is not at all finished, and that it is possible to make a difference, even a small one. Or, in his own words: so many new images are still possible. And this brings us back to the question of invention in painting. In Beumer’s pictorial practice, this question is connected in no small means to the creative process. While historically, the use of technical procedures would have been proclaimed the instrument rather than the source of invention (so as to elevate painting from the mechanical to the intellectual arts), with Beumer it can be both. The artist describes painting as a process that allows him – and us – to discover an image previously unknown. This surprise, the discovery of something exciting and never seen before, is the result of months of work. Using only oil paint, the artist operates like an ‘inverted’ archeologist. Thick layers of oil paint applied with brushes create a dense and ‘rocky’ picture surface. Each layer is a reaction to the one beneath it – and this we can only see on the painting’s edges, looking from the side. The artist searches and searches in the material until he ‘finds’ something. This something he compares to the archeologist’s finding a fragment of an object. This ‘discovery’ is then integrated into the image, and subsequently co-directs the painting process. Dots on the surfaces, for example, are actually little heaps of paint resulting from the layered painting process, but are then highlighted with color. Or, a conspicuous line on the picture surface, upon closer inspection, turns out to be a scratch in the paint made with the rear of a brush and then painted with a different color. Because the artist works in a rather messy way, every now and then a small object sticking to one of his brushes

is integrated into the pictorial surface, like a nail or a piece of a can of soda. Inadvertently, Beumer's works thus become *tableaux-pièges* or 'trap' paintings, to use a term invented by Daniel Spoerri. The dense layering and intensive making process result in complex, dynamic and unpredictable surfaces, which invite us to look both from afar and from close up, where we may observe the remains of the creative process and conclude that nothing actually is random.

The title of the exhibition, 'I won't have the luxury of seeing scenes like this much longer', is taken from a book by Banana Yoshimoto. For the artist, this phrase is about painting. But besides the poetic sensibility it evokes (as do Beumer's works), there is also a connection to the particular circumstances in which the series of watercolors in the exhibition was made. For some time now, the artist has been working very close to nature, in what is best described as an idyllic scenery in the Dutch countryside. And although Beumer 'needs' nature in order to counterbalance the risk of 'pure' abstraction (which, he claims, would result in an art that is too much about art), the effect of working in nature has also been that nature, in turn, 'slowly creeps out of the work.'

Certainly not a naturalist painter, Beumer's work nonetheless has a strong relation to nature. This is again situated in the painting process. The new series of watercolors incorporates found elements from nature: leaves, for example, are tossed onto a piece of paper, and are then (spray) painted over so as to leave their imprint in the image. Or, water plants are drenched in paint and dragged over the surfaces. Next, the artist continues the process. These remnants of nature are in the work, in part, because of their emotional connotations. But more importantly, for Paul Beumer, nature's 'random' beauty is situated in its liveliness, or rather, in it being a 'living' process. The 'random' creative process of nature is what the artist is interested in, and he tries to model his pictorial practice on it. Nature, literally, is process: freezing, crystallization, life itself. An example of this randomness in Beumer's recent work is the integration of folds accidentally created in the paper by plastic foil on the floor – for the works are made on the floor. Another example is the 'random' making of things without a preconceived idea (it has been said that the 'unconscious' is nature within us). But these random elements are always but one part of the process, for next, the artist reacts to them in order to make what will at some point become a 'good' work. This both connects Beumer to and distinguishes him from the postminimalist 'process aesthetics'. Lynda Benglis, for example, gave greater precedence to the process and nature of the materials she used, by simply pouring them over the ground and intervening only minimally, which follows a distinct twentieth-century aesthetics of staying true to the materials. Moreover, Beumer experiments less with new materials than with the possibilities of existing ones: his randomness comes from 'outside', from the context in which the work is made (which is why he constantly changes this context).

Closer to nature, the watercolors are somewhat reminiscent of the structure of marble. As one of nature's most clear examples of 'ornament', marble has played a significant role in modernist architecture since Adolf Loos – although this purist architecture was supposedly free from ornament. The allusion to the random – and, within purist modernism, subversive – self-creative beauty of nature was

also picked up by Donald Judd, in his choice of heavily patterned wood for some of his works. Beumer's modeling of his work on nature's self-creative processes opens up the question of chance in art (it also reintroduces the topic of alchemy, but this we will leave aside). The process of images spontaneously 'appearing' in nature is referred to as *autopoiesis*, or self-creation. The philosopher Immanuel Kant, in his Critique of Judgment, already stated that the artist should create *like* nature. However, the mark of the true genius would be not to let the imagination reign entirely freely, for this would reduce man to an automaton or mere 'craftsman' of natural impulses (and with that, throw art back into the realm of mechanics). Chance, therefore, has remained a theme exemplifying the 'razor's edge' of the creative act. Marcel Duchamp, in the notes of his Green Box, mocked the bureaucratic attempts to curb it by referring to the possible creation of a 'Ministry of Coincidences.' Beumer's interest in chance is perhaps closest to that of Leonardo da Vinci, who, in his Treatise On Painting, encouraged artists to look for inspiration in the flames of a fire, in the shapes of the clouds, or in the random patterns of a stucco wall. Another comparison can be made, with August Strindberg, a playwright, photographer and painter working on the art historical tipping point between figuration and abstraction (around 1900). In his article 'On Chance in Artistic creation' (1894), Strindberg identified 'natural' art as 'where the artist works in the same capricious way as nature, without a set goal.' His description of the 'art of the future' seems almost to have been written especially for the work of Paul Beumer:

At first you see nothing but a chaos of colors; then it begins to look like something, it resembles—no, it does not look like anything. All of a sudden, a point detaches itself; like the nucleus of a cell, it grows, the colors are clustered around it, heaped; rays develop, shooting forth branches and twigs like ice crystals on the window panes...and the picture reveals itself to the viewer, who has assisted at the birth of the painting. And, what is more: the painting is ever new, it changes with the light, never growing tired, springing to life anew, endowed with the gift of life.

But then, Paul Beumer always moves on as soon as he has mastered a certain 'trick' in painting. So he would probably agree with the conclusion of Strindberg's essay, which states that the 'art of the future' will disappear, like everything else.

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