

**To capture the spirit of
that what you want to depict**
A conversation between
Paul Beumer and Noor Mertens

Noor Mertens: **Would you call yourself a painter?**

Paul Beumer: **My work relates to the art of painting and to painting in general, from ‘amateur’ to ‘professional’ and from ‘classical’ to ‘contemporary’. So the answer is yes. I see myself as a painter but I don’t think too much about myself as being a painter in all the various aspects of my life.**

NM: **How would you describe the evolution that has occurred in your work in recent years?**

PB: **Quite soon after graduating from the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, I started to feel uncomfortable with the work that I had made up to then. There was a clear concept and form, but at a certain moment it felt like a trick that could only result in repetition.**

NM: **Why didn’t it work anymore after some time?**

PB: **The themes of the works that I created at the art academy were solid and the story was clear. But it wasn’t a story I wanted to get stuck to for the rest of my life. Actually, there is no one theme or story that I want to remain attached to for the rest of my life. The idea of repetition and the creation of a consistent product stifled and bored me.**

This was the main reason for me to apply for the Rijksakademie. I was looking for a new beginning. During my residency I read and discussed many topics and deepened my interest in biology and autopoiesis. Autopoiesis is a term introduced by biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in 1974. According to their theory cognition can be characterized as an effective action that allows a living system to exist in a particular environment, thereby creating an own world.

NM: **What does this concept encompass for you as an artist? What was the impact on your work?**

PB: **Their concept helped me to locate my work in this world including the universe beyond the classical limitation of the belief in a single creator. And it allows me not to seek for a kind of origin but to create from various cycles. I became interested in classical Chinese painting, which is based**

on a close relationship between the inner state of the mind and the act of painting. Eventually this led to a series of 'romantic' oil paintings of landscapes. I consider this work as the starting point of my current artistic practice.

NM: What connects autopoiesis with classical Chinese painting? And what led you first to autopoiesis and then to China?

PB: An autopoietic system is organised by a specific network of production processes. There are many rules and details within classical Chinese painting that you should master as a painter in order to make a good painting. These rules and details serve to catch the 'spirit' of the chosen object you want to paint. Just as data disappear after they are realized within the autopoietic system, there don't seem to be any rules when you look at a completed classical Chinese painting. Bamboo seems fleeting and painted without effort. Mountains seem to flow across the paper.

NM: What is the position of abstract painting in the present time? And what does this 'legacy' mean for your work? Would you call your own work abstract or is that term not satisfactory anymore?

PB: Frankly, I'm not sure what to think of the position of abstraction in the present time, although I find it difficult to relate myself to the often 'toxic' ways of today's painting. The coatings and epoxy...

I am particularly interested in the ideas of certain abstract painters. How Agnes Martin for example wrote about inspiration or the way Cy Twombly or Tomma Abts work. But I also gain a lot from painters that didn't make abstract work. How Georgia O'Keeffe related to the landscape of New Mexico or the shock that I feel when I look at a work of Paul Klee. I think I prefer to call my work abstract since a clear theme or narrative is missing. Yet I also see my work not merely as paint on canvas.

NM: What do you take from these artists/painters?

PB: I would like to answer this question with a few of my favourite quotes: 'The main thing in making art often is letting go of your expectations and your ideas'. Agnes Martin.

'The Mediterranean is always just white, white, white'. Cy Twombly.

'I had to create an equivalent for what I felt about what I was looking at – not copy it'. Georgia O'Keeffe.

'Everything vanishes around me, and works are born as if out of the void. Ripe, graphic fruits fall off. My hand has become the obedient instrument of a remote will'. Paul Klee.

NM: What does freedom mean in the work process and in the finished work itself? Can you speak of a 'free' image?

BP: For me freedom has to do with confidence in the process. This means that the work doesn't need to be consistent and that it is always on the move to a next phase. This is an important reason why I work in series. Each series begins with something new that is usually a discovery from the series I made before.

I don't know whether to call my work 'free'. Personally, I rather think that the work emanates a kind of confidence despite being averse to a hierarchy of materials or certain trends in the art world.

NM: In some recent shows and during Amsterdam Art Fair, you paint the walls on which you show your works. What is the function of these murals that you make?

PB: By placing my work on the floor or by painting the walls I somewhat try to negate the white cube and to provoke a rather unconventional way of looking at a painting. The green walls in the exhibition 'I won't have the luxury of seeing scenes like this much longer' at Dürst Britt & Mayhew slightly referred to the place where the paintings on view were created. I painted them in a cabin on the Veluwe when winter gradually turned into spring. I also chose this colour because it contrasted strongly with certain works in the exhibition while it also seemed to take over some other works, to the point that they were almost sucked into the wall. Thus a game was born where works were encapsulated by the coloured walls or were lying on a field of colour.

NM: Have the objects that you use to make prints on the canvas any significance? Or are they purely functional? What is the significance of the technique that you currently apply?

PB: The materials that I use have no meaning and were already present in my studio before I started these series. For me, the technique never has a symbolical meaning or is in any way narrative. The objects are chosen purely because of their form and materiality.

NM: What made you decide to go to China? And what has the residency brought you?

PB: During my residency at the Rijksakademie the book 'Early Chinese texts on painting', written by Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, made a deep impression. On the internet I came across a quote from the Chinese art historian Zhang Yanyuan (ca. 815 – ca. 877 BC) that appealed to me.

Since I wanted to know more about him I searched for books written by Yanyuan. Together with Mariette Dirken, who manages the library of the Rijksakademie, I found this book about early Chinese texts on painting. Mariette bought eventually bought it for the Rijksakademie's library. Different texts in the book describe how important it is not to paint a copy of reality but to capture the spirit of that what you want to depict. Very early on in ancient China painting became more than just a physical activity. People would judge a painting on the painter's ability to look further than just the surface.

I'm aware that Chinese painting nowadays is increasingly Western-oriented, but I was wondering if the classical ideas about painting still exist in today's China. At first this seemed not to be the case. But when I oriented myself more independently I discovered a wealth of information and a certain preference of Chinese people for their own cultural heritage. Eventually I made an exhibition that consisted of a work on the floor made from ink on textiles and paper that was held together with stones. This work can be read as a three-dimensional classical Chinese landscape painting.

NM: Why do you work on loose cloth and not on canvas stretched on a stretcher? Has it to do with your desire to let go of the conventional canvas?

PB: The choice to work with loose cloths has indeed to do with the desire to let go of the conventional canvas. It also helps me to move away from the idea of a conventional presentation. Preparing for my presentation at the Amsterdam Art Fair it wasn't clear whether the works would hang on the walls, lie on the floor or even float through the space. This open-ended approach appeals to me, as every space calls for its own treatment, which you can only experience through being there. Every space has its own voice, as long as you are willing to listen to it.

Noor Mertens is curator Modern & Contemporary Art and City Collection at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. She curated solo exhibitions by Beni Bischof, Elad Lassry and Alexandra Bircken and group exhibitions like *The Extended View* and *Setting the Scene*. Since 2015, she is co-responsible for the Kunstvlaai, a platform for experimental art spaces. Mertens studied musicology and art history and took a Master's course in museum curatorship at the University of Amsterdam.