

**An email correspondence between
Paul Beumer and Adelheid Smit.**

[Sent by Adelheid Smit, January 21, 2019]

Dear Paul,

Thank you for joining me in a correspondence about your work and methods. I'm happy you're willing to spend your precious time on this during your residency at 16by16 in Lagos, Nigeria.

I'd like to start our conversation by sharing my first encounter with your work, and some of the questions this raised. The first time I saw your work was at gallery Dürst Britt & Mayhew in The Hague, in your solo exhibition *The message of the flower is the flower* in 2017. The show featured a series of painted cloths, some of them framed and others hanging directly on the wall in assemblages. I experienced them as a spectacle of contrasts: the works contain both abstract and (vaguely) figurative elements, they appear to be ancient yet contemporary, and refer to both culture and nature. For me your works seem to point out that these so-called opposites are intertwined and interdependent, or maybe the distinction is just irrelevant. Is this something you recognize?

Another contrast that stood out is that the works seem to dwell between different art histories, that is to say they connect to both 'classical' Western and Asian (textile) painting. The patterns on the cloth and the way they seemed drenched with colour remind me of the Indonesian batik technique, the misty, balanced strokes can be associated with calligraphy. Yet the compositions and ways of presenting place the works in a Western based art tradition. Could you tell me where you see your work within these art historic lines? How does

this play a part in the work you are currently creating at 16by16?

All the best, Adelheid

[Sent by Paul Beumer, January 23, 2019]

Dear Adelheid,

I also feel my works are dwelling between spaces of time and associations. I also like the word: to dwell, dwelling.

My work relates to painting in general, from classical to contemporary. But on the other hand I rarely look at painting anymore. That is because I do not wish to make paintings that only refer to painting itself. But I do like the medium and history of painting. I don't see myself using a different medium anytime soon. I like the directness and the physical act of painting and how a carefully composed composition is able to transfer you to another world.

I consider myself a neo-romantic, travelling without preconception to worlds of objects and ideas. This leads me from an obsession for heavily glazed Japanese teacups, to abstract cave paintings found all over Europe, to the teachings of Buddhism and now, making the colour blue from indigo plants in Nigeria. There are no logical relations between these fascinations. It may seem that I am out of harmony sometimes with the world around me. All these different places, energies and ideas. But I can't be, for I am alive now, exist now.

I never copy-paste patterns or symbols that already have a particular meaning in order to give meaning to my own work. I want my works to be as free as possible. This is why I started making works on fabric; it's a method to move

away from stretched canvas but also to step out of the history of oil painting. I like that when you pass the textiles they greet you by movement. They are not caged on the wall.

All the best, Paul

[Sent by Adelheid Smit, January 28, 2019]

Dear Paul,

It's interesting to think about stepping out of the history of oil painting, as you phrase it. Although as said there are visual links to different artistic traditions (one can never fully stand on one's own for that matter), the fact that the work can't be pinpointed to a particular one opens them up to multiple interpretations and "dwellings" of the mind (to come back to dwelling). The freedom you refer to is thus created by moving within a multitude of possible associations and material forms.

I especially like how you relate to the notion of painting and textile as physical entities. I think the directness of painting that you describe is also the great potential of textile as a medium. When seeing textile we often imagine the tactile experience of feeling the texture of the fabric between our fingers. I guess, because our most known use of textile is wearing it as clothes or for bed linens, textile triggers this strong bodily association. I wonder how many people secretly (or not so secretly) try to "feel up" your work, even when presented in a white cube where touching is usually prohibited.

Your current residency in Lagos I understand to be a research about different (histories of) dying and painting, could you tell me what your aim was for this residency and how it's been developing so far? Has it led to any new directions for your work?

All the best, Adelheid

[Sent by Paul Beumer, January 28, 2019]

Dear Adelheid,

My creative process is divided into a series of stages. The first stage is naturally responding to a visual stimulus and excitement of encountering patterns, designs and a combination of colours for the first time. This can be from books or another artist's work. I certainly had this feeling coming across African textiles. In the next stage I want to find out how the patterns and decorations are made. I'm also interested in the meaning and history of the decorations. I visited the indigo pits in Kano and met various weavers and contemporary Nigerian fashion designers. I became interested in the indigo pits because the outcome of the dying technique looks very similar to 'shibori' fabrics made in Japan, which I researched in Tokyo. I'm wondering why this is the case, but I don't have an answer yet. It might just be that a similar technique appeared around the same time on different continents. The stories behind the used patterns in Kano are indeed different than the Japanese. And some patterns already exist for hundreds of years. The same applies to some Japanese patterns. I recently read a book about abstract symbols used in caves thousands of years ago. The most interesting part about this book is that the same patterns are found in Europe, as well as in Africa and Asia. And most of them are also dated around the same time. This is very intriguing to me. I guess human beings and different cultures aren't that alien to each other.

The last stage is how to get the new information in a series of works without simply copying them. I strip them from specific meanings and work mostly from the intentions of the newly found information. In Lagos I don't have much time to experiment

though. A month is short and I want to do and see a lot. I choose to make works from hand-dyed textiles I bought in Kano. The fabrics will be cut into pieces and later on sewn together, resulting in a distortion of the pattern. This does sound a bit iconoclastic, but that's not my intention. I have no interest in mocking culture or craftsmanship. I'm more interested in images escaping in every direction. I think it doesn't take much for an emotion or idea to escape from an 'abstract' image and be experienced by the viewer.

All the best, Paul

[Sent by Adelheid Smit, February 4, 2019]

Dear Paul,

As you describe the different stages of your artistic process, it becomes clear that each work or series of works becomes a collection of impressions, research and insights that forms the basis of a multi-layered work. I feel like we've not yet reached the depths of what all these different fascinations and researches mean to your work. Perhaps the textiles from Kano you now use can be an example. You mention Iconoclasm, and I agree this is not at stake here.

I am very curious what makes you so intrigued with these indigo techniques, how they influence your work and what insights they have brought you. What issues are at stake in your current work? I do realise though that these are not the easiest questions to answer while you're still in the middle of the process.

All the best, Adelheid

[Sent by Paul Beumer, February 6, 2019]

Dear Adelheid,

I am always looking for new ways to incorporate nature into my work. I don't paint nature, but my work is about nature because of its organic and fluid forms. It is not that you would expect such forms in nature exactly, but they amount to a visual code that is instinctively connected to the natural world. Indigo is one of the oldest natural dyes, the pits of Kofar Mata in Kano are around 700 years old and still in use today. Indigo is extracted from a plant. In Africa they crush the whole plant and then dry it in order to get enough pigment from the leaves. The indigo and the bacteria living inside the indigo must be kept alive to maintain the colour. Usually the well dies after a year and the colour disappears. I became interested in natural ways of making dyes because I like to add an extra layer to my work that might subtly create more environmental awareness. Issues such as pollution, overproduction and climate change are personal concerns, but these should never be too self-evident in my works. During a workshop at 16/16 I also made a brilliant pink from dried hibiscus flowers.

Regarding the multiple fascinations, researches etc: I like to think about painting in terms of reflection and slow evolution, not in stylistic shenanigans. Painting should not arise as the consequence of any strict formal concept, but it should weave a dense tissue of memories, experiences and ideas without making the work a literal illustration of any specific fascination or idea.

Best, Paul

[Sent by Adelheid Smit, 16 February, 2019]

Dear Paul,

I think we'll soon arrive at a point that artistic practice can't be separated from the source of its materials. Textile design and art are often ahead in this development because the textile industry has such a huge environmental and societal global impact. This is often dealt with by recycling or returning to nature and reintroducing traditional methods for dyeing, weaving and binding fibers, like you've been exploring in Kano. The fact that this is incorporated in your work but is not its main focus, is to me exemplary for a near future in which artists and designers will come to see this as the basic starting point for creating a work.

I wonder how getting back in the Netherlands and working with the textiles you collected in Lagos has changed your perspective on the material and how the works have further developed. How do you plan on presenting them?

All the best, Adelheid

[Sent by Paul Beumer, February 18, 2019]

Dear Adelheid,

As indicated the indigo dyed cloth from Kano has been cut and sewn back together again, creating a new composition that is used to express a poetic content. This is the result of my fascination and open research towards materials and culture, without the works actually representing any culture or object. To clarify these poetic intentions I gave the four pieces names of stars like Azelfafage, which means tortoise, or Keid, which means broken eggshell. Although the pieces resemble a bright starry night in

some way, the viewer is not forced by the title, but rather encouraged to use his own imagination.

Back in the Netherlands I decided to add two different pieces for my presentation at ARCO. Because indigo dye in the West is mainly known for its use on jeans I decided to use denim for those pieces. I kept the same method of cutting and sewing. Even the size is similar to the indigo pieces. In some parts of the denim I bleached out the blue. I decided not to give any titles to these works. Although they belong to the series started in Nigeria I feel it is also a step in a different direction. Now, shown together on the wall, their dialogue can begin.

All the best, Paul

Adelheid Smit is an independent curator and writer and has recently joined the Textielmuseum in Tilburg (NL) as junior curator. Next to this she is director of The Hague Contemporary, an independent collaborative platform supporting art institutes and galleries in The Hague. Her curatorial practice is strongly concerned with contemporary societal and identity issues. Questions around cultural diversity, religion, gender and LGBT equality and culture, and the impact of neo-liberalism on both a global and personal scale connect, and have continued to inform her curatorial work thus far. She has realised exhibitions and educational projects at amongst others TENT Rotterdam, Museum Het Valkhof (Nijmegen), Museum Hilversum and Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. In 2018 she did a curatorial residency at Schloss Ringenberg (DE). She has published multiple books and articles with magazines like Metropolis M and Puntkomma. She holds a bachelor in Art History from the University of Utrecht and a Master in Museum Curating at the VU in Amsterdam.