

Born from the flow of colour feeling

meandering through the artistic practice of Paul Beumer

by Guus van Engelshoven

“Painting is made from the inside out. I think of painting as possessed by a structure – i.e., shape and size, support and edge – a structure born from the flow of colour feeling. Colour in colour is felt at any and every place of the pictorial organization; in its immediacy – its particularity. Colour must be felt throughout. What I would like in my painting is simply a spray of colour that hangs like a cloud, but does not lose its shape.” – Jules Olitski

When Jules Olitski (1922–2007), born as Jevl Demikovskiy in Snovsk, in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (present-day Ukraine), spoke about the relationship between form and process as a product of the painterly gaze, he spoke of an appreciation of colour in the artistic process that we nowadays usually associate with so-called ‘colour field painting’. This style of abstract painting emerged in New York City during the 1940s and 1950s. Inspired by European Modernism, it is closely related to abstract expressionism. Colour field painting is characterised by large fields of flat, solid colour panes, spread across the canvas, creating areas of unbroken surface and a flat picture plane. The movement places less emphasis on gesture, brushstrokes and action, in favour of an overall consistency of form and process.

In the latest series of works by artist Paul Beumer this tension between the immediacy and the particularity of colour, so beautifully described by Olitski, takes centre stage. Indeed, the bright colour accents in the various works, in different hues of blue, green, yellow, orange and red, are amongst the primary visual features within the exhibition. To me, they simultaneously present themselves as a slap in the face, a waking up of sorts, as well as a point on the horizon that draws you into the presentation, and invites you to take a step forward and come up close and personal with the works.

It is in this instance, with your nose almost touching the surface of the canvas, when you start to experience the particularities of the colours

and materials that make up these enchanting abstract vistas. You notice a cut. Sewing lines become visible. Colour panes that from a distance seemed to seamlessly flow into each other, suddenly appear to have edges and a presence of their own. They enter into specific relationships with their neighbouring patches. Slowly but surely, the abstract panoramas of colour turn into something else, something new, without losing their original shape.

It is only upon hearing the title of this new body of art – the so-called ‘kimono pieces’ – that the initial abstract visual experience takes on a clearer picture, and you can somewhat reverse-engineer the painterly process that has eventually resulted in the various works now hanging in the gallery space. To those familiar with the practice of Paul Beumer, this will not come as a big surprise. In the past few years, his painterly practice has gained a specific focus on the research into the history and usage of fabrics and fibres within non-western cultures. He thereto has travelled to places like China, Japan, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Over the past couple of weeks, Beumer has been settling down in India, where he will be working with textile makers and exploring local cultures, which have already proven a new source of inspiration, and hopefully a new body of works to be produced over the next couple of months.

In his practice, Beumer has always been interested in the painterly attributes of textiles and artisan rituals in relation to the painterly gaze. The starting point of the series of works now presented at Dürst Britt & Mayhew was the purchase of a single kimono in a thrift store. Beumer: “Looking at the inside of the garment, I saw a monochrome strip running along the edges, which surprised and fascinated me. After sourcing more kimonos which had this attribute, I started to pick them apart. Disentangling the different coloured bands, I started making compositions with them on the floor, and creating new meanings based on the colour of the found material I was working with. As a painter, I am primarily interested in colour and texture, lines and patterns, rather than the cultural meaning and historical weight attributed to the kimono. In that sense, I always work on the fault line between the fascination for new imagery and an open, receptive mind of what other cultures might bring in a transparent, reciprocal way.”

Paul Beumer received his BFA from the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, after which he completed a two-year residency at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam. Beumer: “I’ve always found my time at the Rijksakademie a bit troublesome, in the sense that I think a fixed studio practice is stifling. I would rather think about the question whether an atelier space could be a hotel room, a forest, or a mountain? This is what initially also sparked my interest in textile. Textile is mobile. You can fold it, transport it, and take it with you. Still, I always relate textile to my more formal background as a painter. This especially holds true in connection with the kimono works that are now on show at the gallery. They have a painterly quality, but simultaneously relate to skin and wearability. As such, they can be seen as an extension of a cultural identity, but also as a form of abstract painting.”

Indeed, the past decade of Paul Beumer’s artistic output shows evidence of the tension between what is seen and what can be felt, or in his own words: “My painterly practice has always oscillated freely between figuration and abstraction, but in the past few years gained a specific focus on the relationship and dichotomies between Western and Asian approaches to landscape painting and nature. The understanding of nature through lived and poetic experiences has taken precedence over any overtly scientific or logic approach or explanation. Steering away from the conventions of the brush and canvas, my works are made on a variation of loose cloths. They engage ink or chlorine and manual resist-dyeing techniques, in order to produce abstract patterns that feel like faint memories of Western High Modernism in that they allow for doubt, failure and chance.”

Looking at the various bodies of work that Paul Beumer has produced over the last couple of years – often, if not always coinciding with different travels and residencies abroad – roughly three stages can be discerned in his artistic process. The first is what he himself has sometimes referred to as a state of ‘ecstasy’; a highly pure and visual experience, which can be as easily experienced by simply crossing a bustling street in a foreign country, as during new encounters with weaving or dyeing techniques. Ecstasy, according to Beumer, is often expressed through humble, simple forms and experiences. In the next

stage, this initial wonder with, for instance, new sewing techniques, is further delved into, for example by researching ways in which specific patterns are produced, or the way they relate to crafts from other corners of the world. In short, the stories behind the techniques. Beumer: “ There is always a historical context, and this context is always embedded in the material I am working with. As often with my research subjects, a kimono is first and foremost a practical garment. The textiles I work with are made to wear, or to sit on, or to use in some sense. I try to make an abstraction of what something is ‘used’ for, concentrating on material, aesthetics, colours, etcetera.” In the last stage, all this information is incorporated into a new work, without directly referring or ‘copying’ the historical or cultural research. Through this sequence, Beumer is able to maintain a distance to the subjects he is working with, “neither too close nor too aloof.”

As such, Beumer’s kimono works represent this perfect meandering between East and West, between abstraction and specificity, between the immediate and the particular. But above all, they convey an emotion that cannot be grasped by any of the above. In his own words: “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.” The works presented at Dürst Britt & Mayhew seem to evade a linear art historical narrative and indeed seem to be born from the flow of colour feeling, which is experienced on an immediate level when entering the gallery space in The Hague. And in that sense, they perfectly reverberate with the proverb that Olitski became famous with: “Expect nothing. Look at the paintings. Celebrate.”

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