

Leena van der Made
Abstraction

Horst Appel
Leena van der Made's
Black Square 2020

This is Leena van der Made's third solo exhibition here in the gallery. I have been following her work for many years. The luminosity of her use of colour has fascinated me, the unity of surface and space and above all light, the light generated by her paintings. And then there is this quietude, the self-confidence of each of her paintings – a unique "I am here."

Good painting is now rare, or anyway, so it seems to me. When I go to an art fair, hoping to discover something new and good, I return disappointed. And if I think I have found something, then it is a name that I have known for many years. Yet, I am sure fine painting does exist today, and fine art generally, maybe it is me who does not recognize it.

This exhibition is titled, *The Black Square 2020*. I was surprised when I read it and I found it difficult to link this title to Leena's painting, because her paintings, contrary to the title, have nothing to do with the zero point of painting. Why did she choose this title? The zero point in painting, goes back a hundred years. What is so fascinating about it today and why is it so important for Leena? Of course, I asked her these questions and this is her reply:

Malevich's *Black Square* was painted in 1915 and backdated to 1913, reflecting the reign of the illogical. The *Black Square* referred to the "zero point of painting." From the zero point, new creation could move into the future. Leena van der Made's *Black Square 2020*, was painted in 2017, suggesting the dawn of a new age. Yet, it is not the monochrome of the past, nor is it an abstraction that relates to the pure or formless. How does it relate to its time? What significance does the square have after the death of the pure, the non-utopian and in an age of refugees and a technological, data-driven globalised world? Is it a rhizomatic square that has arisen from Deleuze's chaos or catastrophe? It is not about "anything goes." If it were, it would be about nothing. What kind of *Black Square* is this? Why paint today – and why abstract? Today's black square is in motion, nothing in it stands still. Internet windows, cut-up worlds collide. Although no externally projected world-view necessarily entails a better world, I compose the pictures, with my mistakes. Here, the essential is distilled, composed into a statement, a position, seeking to move the viewer through looking and thinking. It is an attempt to create an image.

(Leena van der Made)

It would be too easy to simply want to find a connection between this and the exhibition. Leena van der Made has been painting for over 30 years, she studied and studies painting, living with and within painting. Why involve the black square now? I can and could understand her. But this understanding has something to do with my age. I can live with the streams of refugees, they are not the first that I have known. Data-driven globalization too, cannot be prevented. But the perceptibly progressive loss of culture, of faith and of humanity scares me. I would make a fool of myself, if I were to talk about morality. We live in a highly civilized world and apparently most are happy with it. But the world has become poorer.

In this sense, the return to the "black square" makes sense and Leena van der Made is not the only one who deals with it. Surprisingly, another artist from my gallery, Thomas Kaminsky, recently made a whole series of images that refer to the "black square". Do we need a fresh start? Leena can continue, she should continue – and she will continue.

Christoph Schütte
Suprematist Dance

Actually, one does not know what to think. Without question, Leena van der Made's new paintings are simply wonderful painting. And not only because she visibly, once again, breaks new ground. The path she has taken so far, from her early, still figurative painting through to the constructive-concrete surveys of pictorial space up to her current abstractions, is remarkable. Now, it seems that the painter, educated in Cape Town and Munich, set out into a new, largely uncertain terrain.

In the past two or three years, Van der Made preferred to use acrylic instead of oil paint, painting with bright colour, applied in a transparent and watery manner, as if it were watercolour. Even the former, increasingly branched grids no longer occur. These have developed into flexible-expanding areas alternating with areas of material density, creating a sense of inhaling and exhaling and of deeply penetrating pictorial spaces. And yet, there is a touch of melancholy over these pictures. Not least, because of the temptation to see a critical debate of the painter with her Munich professor, Jerry Zeniuk.

With her *Black Square 2020*, a title that points to Malevich's *Black Square*, this modest key painting, a watercolour on paper, Van der Made sums up the loss of certainties and the end of utopia, in one word: the failure of the artistic avant-garde, with nothing but painterly means. This neither implies chaos for art, nor even the end of all painting which is always eagerly proclaimed, more than anything else, it is fresh air. It is the exploration of new, unimagined spaces.

At first glance, everything seems light and carefree, filled with astonishment we gaze at glowing red, yellow and blue spaces, woven out of nothing but colour. Yet, the black square, the icon of the modern age, finds itself dispersed in a few dozen floating and almost breathtaking forms. And nobody, reassembles it. Malevich and the zero point of all painting, however, shows itself here as bright, almost radiant and in constant motion, as if Leena van der Made were leading the so strict, self-assured avant-garde onto ice and instilling dance into Suprematism, even if only for a night.

Michaela Ott
Time-Picture Composition –
About Leena van der Made’s
Painting Montage

For many years, the painter Leena van der Made has addressed the questions: Why abstraction today? And what does composition mean in an abstract painting? In this regard, she seeks to explore the mystery of painterly abstraction and its fascination, and the fact that it is by no means clear what abstract painting really is. Both Ellsworth Kelly and Mark Rothko, often associated with abstract expressionism, denied that they were abstract painters. Ellsworth Kelly referred to the black sections of his geometric black and white paintings as the “shadow” of things he had observed in reality, that he sought to transfer to canvas. Similarly, Mark Rothko claimed that he painted only from reality and that he did not make abstract paintings.

In a strict sense, these painters may be right; if abstraction literally means reducing and subtracting something from that which is real, that is, distancing something from its concrete appearance by highlighting structure, formal reduction, or micrological investigation, which then differentiates, transforms or alienates the pictorial object, even making it disappear completely into the painterly plane. In this sense, Mark Rothko is said to have increasingly reduced figurative representation, mostly mythical figures or scenes, and to have approximated the figurative via their dissolution into geometric figures, an approach which the art historian Clement Greenberg claimed was specific to modern painting. Jackson Pollock is said to have been inspired by painting from other cultures, in this case by Mexican murals on the walls of New York houses, which he translated into action-related colour flows and all-over paintings and produced a 1943 “mural” covering an entire wall, which is now on display at the University of Iowa Museum of Art, a gift presented by Peggy Guggenheim.

As the required emptiness of the image was often offset by strong colour values, it raised the question of whether a concretion and composition are perhaps not perceived because of the appropriate application of colour and contrast and the tension between colour surfaces, which tend to reduce the non-figurative appearance desired.

In view of the profusion of abstract-expressionist paintings (especially those of American provenance), whose production was promoted by the political-aesthetic assertion of Western modernism, it does not seem fit-

ting to think of painting as merely abstract composition and to place this within post-postmodern logic. In her painting *Montage*, comprised of three sections, Leena van der Made seeks to merge surface and colour with minimal-figurative movements of bands and to inscribe temporality into her triptych, in which one may immediately identify an inspiration from Pollock.

The primary colour-dynamics of the picture seem to recall the German expressionism of August Macke or Franz Mark and the radiant light of the journey to Tunisia. Against an intense yellow background, bright bands intertwine into multilevel braids and begin to form spatial curves, sometimes running beyond the single panel of the triptych into the next panel, sometimes breaking off at the edge of the frame, somehow continuing beyond it. In each of the three panels, they return in variation, creating a sort of foregrounded image, that releases repetitive effects between the three panels, and opens up stimulating glances into the recesses of the entanglements. At certain points, however, the bands then become narrow stripes that fill the surface in their entirety and function to flatten the space, rendering the foreground and background indistinguishable. Elsewhere they push forward again, giving the triptych a certain spatial density and the painting its iridescent appeal.

However, what makes the painting especially different from the usual is the complete “montage” of three panels of equal size, between and over which the repetitive and differentiating play of the composition is carried out. The *Montage* awakens associations with the cinematic through its serial use of similar motifs and their time-related modification; but it also recalls painted triptychs that adorn ecclesiastical altars and contemporary three-channel video artworks. For example, the Afro-British artist John Akomfrah showed an oversized three-channel video installation at the 2015 Venice Biennale in which mounted film clips and photographs, accompanied by a pathetic soundtrack, evoked the history of English slavery and the relevance of refugee migration.

By comparison, van der Made’s painting is contained, exhibiting more a movement of epistemological enquiry, which positions itself in contrast to the constituents of the abstract image, its flatness or spatial dynamics, its relationship between center and edges, colour and form. Above all, one can say with certainty that the proposed

solution, despite all its allusions, is not traditional: the image abandons Greenberg’s flatness, to some extent it becomes figurative, blurs the foreground and background and operates as crossover. Moreover, the embedded, embodied dynamics of the triptych approximate the temporal image.

Sandro Steudler
Yellow and Black or the Possibility
of Painting as a Transdisciplinary work
within a postmedia context

Leena van der Made does not give titles to most of her paintings. This can be understood as an emphasis on autonomy, or as self-referencing, as in: "Painting X". The missing title of the specific work in question here – for simplicity's sake, let us refer to it as "Yellow and Black" – seems more to ask the question: how can something that is still in the making, be named? We are not dealing here with a closed, fully composed image, even though "Yellow and Black" creates constellations of visual equilibriums. However, it no longer pursues a concern that distinguishes (classical) modernism from the period up to the analytical painting of the 1970s: the accentuation of the purely painterly means investigating our perception of these. Moreover, references to abstract expressionism (as in earlier Van der Made paintings) no longer take centre stage, as do the large format and "all-over" work (Clement Greenberg). Her current painting explores these already exhausted strategies.

The first issue explored refers to something external to painting, even external to art explanation. Does this "pure" painting or kind of neural network, a (bio) chemical "primordial soup" precede every solid structure? Closely linked to this geological, biological reference is the second issue explored which is an emphasis on the temporal, a move away from the static to the dynamic and the process. We witness a genesis that is more than mere chaos, but less than a consolidation in the sense of a closed structure. A chaos that the painter has to go through, which remains connected to her. According to Gilles Deleuze, this confrontation with chaos – or more precisely: the catastrophe of pre-configuration – is indeed one of the main criteria of painting.

He describes this in detail in Francis Bacon's figures, even if these are to be attributed to figuration. These figures are outlines, which do however, retain a membranous openness. Van der Made's image also retains an openness that eludes figuration and even precedes the figure. It tends more to the diagrammatic – using Deleuze's designation of all the notations on the (pictorial) surface, similar to the scribbles and notations of the painter, draftsman and poet Henry Michaux, who Deleuze admired.

Despite these two forms of openness, van der Made achieves an abstract painting: the painterly methods remain largely 'pure' and are not bound by either the illus-

trative or the imitative. This claim is to be considered in the broader context of the essay "The Postmedia Condition" (2005) by Peter Weibel. Photography took on the area of representation and mimesis in (classical) modernism, and painting was able to turn to new, abstract realities. Since the 1950s, photography has been characterized by photography as photorealism or pop art, and more recently by computer generated digital images as "computer-derived abstraction." After the equivalency of the media was established in a first phase, Weibel mentions their blending as the second phase.

With the emphasis on genesis, Van der Made's painting shows an integration and strong emphasis on the temporal. A closeness to the cinematic seems suggested, especially to recordings of scientific microscopy. This does not imply a (chronological) temporality of the cinematic, as was already considered in Futurism. Rather, it is the description of a becoming that is solved as painting and not illustrated. With "Yellow and Black" van der Made successfully legitimises painting through the painterly process, which does not become exhausted with the associative possibilities of its interpretation. Penetration of other media remains rather peripheral, so that her painting can be cited in opposition to Weibel's second thesis – the intermingling of the individual media.

By recording processes of becoming, Van der Made's painting opens other, explicitly epistemic fields, and becomes a transdisciplinary entity. Together with the emphasis on a temporal process as genesis, "Yellow-Black" overcomes the disciplinary centring of painting as painting as well as of art. Does its openness and largely pictorial "purity" awaken alternative possibilities of knowledge?

“Ohne Titel”, *Untitled* is the title of this painting. It is shown without a title that tells us what to think or see, without a text that directs our gaze. As in life, when we are confronted with the simple emergence of a reality that was not expected, it surprises and confuses us. The emergence of a single thing before it is possible to distinguish something that we can name from a reality that reveals only itself, which, in the abruptness of its appearance, reminds us of a reality that we do not know how to name: we have no words for it.

What is it? We don't know exactly. The words are missing at the very moment we lose interest, when our powers, for the time of a meaningful encounter fail. It is through this that it breaks the illusion that is much too muted, much too sly, which would make us believe that reality is nothing more than the reality demarcated by acquired language. The scope of this reality would be reduced. Neither painting nor poetry could be justified. Everything would be said or spoken in the conventional, usual way. Language itself would lose the meaning of its existence.

Every painting is a manifesto. With or without a theme, when going back to the pure work – to the colours and lines – what does it proclaim?

Nothing but painting.

And what does the painting show?

Nothing but the manifestation.

It shows an unexpected emergence. If by any chance words would want to lend themselves to an adventure of renewal, they would have a difficult task getting the measure of it. How could they avoid it, though? Painting speaks, in its own way, and if it looks at us, it is because it silently questions our linguistic being.

The enigma of the painting is that, each time it is the inaugural manifestation of the manifestation, it reveals alike to a luminous presence whose rays, however indecipherable, are turned towards us.

Painting reveals the indecipherable to us.

Let us look at this web, whose rays reach us. Here one meets the superficial in suspension, similar to an emulsion varying in transparency.

The superficial leads without haste into the density of the depth, in a layering that plays the outline drawing creating and removing perspective. This spatial movement conducts the eye towards a concentration of yellow light.

This focuses the coming of day that leads only to day itself. Geometric form is at once transformed, even revoked and evoked. Some lines seem to take the external frame and rearrange it inside the frame, modulating it. They give it a flexibility to the point of liquefaction. The frame, the fixed geometric limit, is subverted; the lines that evoke it with scattered red rectangles, contest its function. Between painting and what it is no longer, there is no continuity. The work concerns us beyond the 210 × 140 cm of its objective measurements. It is not an ephemeral surface for passing glances. It looks us in the eye. The eyes may end up going elsewhere; yet they feel that they are leaving behind a question that will continue to follow them.

The inside of the canvas is mobile. It is inhabited by paths, but fragmented, yet multiple, like a commotion raised from the background. A plot with no story brings the characters looming out of the night: a variety of colours call to each other as nuances of the same palette; lines are splats and drips. The plot of the movement leads us towards the centre, an area of radiating light, so saturated with yellow as to be impenetrable. It supports the background of the canvas as if it were the background of our existence. Everything leads to it, nothing defines it.

The riddles that matter to us are our centres.

Our centres are our crypts.

We inter ourselves there through research. Painting, by its very existence, tells us that we cannot avoid it. Perhaps we sense that behind the wall of light or in its molten core something survives that we would call intensity. The warmth that we feel there comes from the proximity with our intimate and troublesome questions.

Toon Verhoef
Can we see ...

Can we see the intentions of the artist? What are the intentions of the artist and how do we see them? What do we see and what are we looking at?

Painting allows for countless ways of considering these questions.

In Leena van der Made's recent work I imagine myself looking from the inside out. I am behind the paint — not in front. There is no surface or wall but space — an engulfing expanse.

The colours, shapes, marks, directions, textures have become unhinged, cut loose from their material aspect and envelop us with wondrous elasticity.