

GALERIE ONRUST AMSTERDAM



Eli Content

To begin at the beginning

24. October through 21. November 2015

De hemel volgens Van Gogh, O'Henry Red Alan, Have you ever been in Heaven, you never go to Heaven, I am failing (Satch), Pathology of the skin, 2014-15
oil and acrylic on canvas, 60 x 100 cm

Eli Content's new paintings are direct, unavoidable and anything but flirtatious. They force us to observe and to keep our eyes glued to the canvas. In *To begin at the beginning*, on view at Galerie Onrust from 24 October through 21 November, Content is showing diptychs that give rise to various associations and thereby seem to keep on assuming different meaning.

Take, for instance, the work *De hemel volgens Van Gogh (...)* [Heaven according to Van Gogh(...)]. Sizzling in the sky is a black sunflower-sun, while an upside-down, jet-black leg juts up from the ground at an angle. There are breasts, a penis, a hand reaching upward: a confrontational image that reeks of death, desire and powerlessness. But glimmering in the background is light in all its hues. The hand might well be a tree, growing against all odds; we see fertility, hope, solidity. With these opposites Content keeps his image in balance and returns to a theme that fascinates him to no end – the Old Testament narrative of the Creation.

Written along the edge of the canvas is the title, or what could better be described as an entire range of associations that came to mind as he was working: *'De hemel volgens Van Gogh, O'Henry Red Alan, Have you ever been in Heaven, you never go to heaven, I am failing (Satch), Pathology of the skin.'* These range from music that he listens to (mostly jazz) or a quote that preoccupies him, to the title of a book such as *Pathology of the Skin*, which shows merciless, clinical images of skin diseases that we'd rather not contemplate. At the

same time the arms and legs refer to Max Beckmann's mythical figures with stiff limbs, thus prompting an instinctive association with lines from the artist's letters: *'Evidently I have to live. I'm condemned to live by an unknown force which finds this necessary.'*

For Eli Content (Switzerland, 1943) being Jewish is an integral aspect of his work. He is driven by an almost irrational desire which, as he sees it, also accounts for the plainness and ruggedness of his style. He calls it an indictment of *schöner wonen*, of the completely balanced environment and of geometric painting that can be fully designated. 'If it can be rationalized,' says Content, 'you should think about its degree of truth. And if it has truth, you should paint something else right away.'

This is perhaps why he keeps on going back to the Creation narrative, those endlessly fascinating, poetic and hopeful lines of text – just as he does in the title of exhibition (*To begin at the beginning*) where he quotes the first line of a radio play by Dylan Thomas. The same holds true for *Unsaid*, a reference to the title of a work by Bas Jan Ader. In a dream-like vision the entire story comes together, while much remains implicit as well. This, too, is a diptych, an image with a counter-image; it's as though the work aims to cancel itself out. Positive and negative, day and night, sun and moon, man and woman: a dream that can also become a nightmare, though it remains, perhaps precisely because of this, completely in balance.

translation: Beth O'Brien