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Robert Zandvliet

In the Face

Paintings and works on paper

September 9 through October 7, 2006

Over the past year Robert Zandvliet has undertaken a confrontation with a genre that is new to him. While the exhibition *Beyond the Horizon*, held in the second half of 2005 at the Kunstmuseum Bonn and De Pont museum in Tilburg, mainly dealt with the theme of landscape, the five large paintings and the series of works on paper now being shown in the presentation *In the Face* are based on the portrait.

The works on paper are spontaneous, brightly colored studies in which Zandvliet explores the possibilities of his subject. The human face has been portrayed frontally and close to the image surface. Reduced to its absolute minimum, only the eyes, nose and mouth recur as the most essential elements of the face. Due to the quickness with which Zandvliet works here, he comes across unexpected solutions that are used resolutely and combined with each other in the paintings. In comparison to the works on paper, the human face is less obviously manifest in the paintings, which hover between figuration and abstraction.

About his new work, Zandvliet says, "The big question is: to what extent can you paint away the portrait without losing its character?" In one of the paintings, that way of working has been used almost literally; the portrait is submerged in the deep-blue of the background. With his characteristically broad and open brushstroke, Zandvliet has painted around the forms of the portrait, while a quick, curved line brings to mind the contours of the face.

In order to give shape to his theme, Robert Zandvliet takes various approaches. Some works show a dense structure. Other images are created by a single circumscribing movement of the brush or the open triangular form in the center, which could be seen as the designation of a nose. The rhythm of the short, curved brushstrokes evokes a certain modelled quality. At times these can be interpreted as eyes, nostrils or a mouth, but at the same time they are so embedded in the whole of the painted surface that there is never a dominance of a portrait-like quality.

Just as in masks, caricatures or pictograms, the portrait has been reduced to its most characteristic elements in these paintings. But with Zandvliet, the main concern is not the expression or the typology of the human face. Similar to the way in which the horizon, trees or the reflection of water have formed the basis of his paintings from recent years, the portrait now constitutes the 'skeleton' of the image which aims, above all, to be convincing as painting. This is an autonomous pictorial reality in which the eye can venture and explore the transparent layers of color, the movement of the brush or the character of the painted surface.

Even though the motif can sometimes scarcely be recognized as such, the role that it plays in

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generating the ultimate image is no less significant for this reason. As an underlying theme, it motivates the choice from a range of painterly options that Zandvliet has developed over the past years. While the paintings based on landscape evoke an atmospheric spatialness, their lines extending in horizontal and vertical directions, the recent paintings show an inwardly directed movement and an emphasis on round forms that stay close to the surface. That gives the paintings their own dynamics and energy.

In the use of the contour, Zandvliet reverts to painterly discoveries and devices from the nineties, when he was painting simple utilitarian objects against a plain background. The continuous line by which a face is boldly portrayed brings to mind the outline of the rear view mirror that he painted in 1994.

In the broadening and deepening of his body of work, not only do paint and technique play an important role, but the theme does as well. On that level, too, the portrait introduces a new element to his work.

It is human nature to recognize faces in all sorts of things and to interpret these, consciously or unconsciously, in a psychological way. This psychological connotation, which is intrinsic to the portrait genre, also surfaces in Zandvliet's recent paintings. Despite the high degree of abstraction, the images have a character that can best be described in terms such as dreamy and introvert, cheerful, or raw and aggressive.

Since the beginning, Robert Zandvliet has built his art on the foundations of three genres that have dominated painting for centuries: the still life, the landscape and now the portrait. And yet he paints with the realization that the subject basically remains irrelevant. In his work Zandvliet investigates the turning point at which figuration and abstraction merge. As he once explained, referring to a statement made by Willem De Kooning, he seeks a form that can tolerate any content.



Untitled, 2006, egg tempera on canvas, 232 x 203 cm.



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