

Toon Verhoef

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onrust

Toon Verhoef is on Instagram, just like me. At the last count, on June 1, 2021, he had 969 followers. He himself followed 26 people. He does not engage in the custom of following his followers, nor does he dole out likes left and right. ‘You like me, I like you’, that’s not him.

Verhoef shares images at a brisk rate. Although he has been active on Instagram for only a little over a year, on the date mentioned earlier the counter stood at 896; an average of more than two posts a day. He started his account on March 21, 2020, a week after Dutch public life nearly came to a grinding halt because of the corona virus. Like millions of others, he worked from home for months rather than at his Amsterdam studio. Instagram proved to be an effective way to communicate, at least through pictures, with the outside world.

The first image he posted online can be viewed as symbolic: it is a detail of the imposing bronze doors of the cathedral in Hildesheim, created shortly after the year 1000, showing a relief in which God, acting as an artist, creates man according to the origin story of the Book of Genesis. On the same day, Verhoef posted an image of two of his recent paintings, followed a day later by a sketch on paper, no larger than a postcard, which had been created just a few hours earlier. This has been his routine up to the present. He posts on Instagram with clockwork regularity, alternating in roughly equal measure between photos of his own work and various pictures found on the internet after a search on a particular topic.

The posts of his own art depict by turns recent or older finished paintings, sometimes even dating back half a century to the start of his career, and small sketches he creates almost daily on loose leaf paper which he then affixes to an album in chronological order as a sort of visual diary. At his previous exhibition at Galerie Onrust some of these albums were displayed on a table, allowing them to be perused by visitors. Now, by posting the sketches on Instagram immediately following their creation, he involves his followers more directly in his day-to-day affairs as an artist. People can, as it were, look over his shoulder at the work in progress.

In between, Verhoef posts images of things that interest him or evoke strong memories; things he is passionate about or touched by, involving music and literature, art and architecture, or film and photography. The list is not

exhaustive; there is more to life than art. One day his Instagram followers are treated to a still from the black-and-white film *Stranger than Paradise* by Jim Jarmusch; the next day to an important structure from classical antiquity such as the Erechtheion in Athens, or from the last century, such as an expressionist-modernist office building from Erich Mendelsohn in Berlin. This might be followed by a few personal photos taken by a young Verhoef in a poor neighbourhood of Johannesburg, where he lived at the time. There are portraits of the blind writer Borges walking in Central Park, and of the pianist Elisabeth Leonskaja behind her piano playing Brahms. An intimate painting of two female musicians by the 17th-century painter Gerard Terborgh is juxtaposed with an album cover of the Four Tops; a surreal photo of mannequins by Eugene Atget or an Assyrian relief of a lion hunt may be superseded by a photo of a Grace Jones performance, her body painted by Keith Haring. And so on and so forth.

Some Instagram users literally only post selfies, but to some degree every picture we post to social media is a selfie of sorts. Even the most hackneyed image - a sunset, a toddler on a swing or a homemade apple pie - reveals something about us when it is shared with our followers. The steady stream of imagery on Toon Verhoef’s account, then, gives us an impression of him as a person. He strikes us as a citizen of the world; someone who grew up in far-flung locations and has therefore been shaped by a variety of cultures. Someone with broad expertise and wide-reaching interests, and above all a finely tuned radar for detecting striking visual phenomena in art and beyond.

It is difficult to pinpoint a direct correlation between the two groupings - Verhoef’s own work and the various images he has appropriated. Still, one gets the feeling that his artistry is strongly influenced by the wide-ranging sensory and intellectual experiences he shares with his Instagram followers. And sometimes these images bleed through and enter his art. It is hard to discern on a mobile screen but obvious when viewed in the flesh: many of the sketches he produces almost daily contain elements of collage. Underneath a semi-transparent foil, flashes of a scene appear: a building, an object, a rocky outcropping or a human figure; partially covered again with paint, only the merest suggestion of figuration remains.



no title, 2021 - acrylic and oil paint on linnen - 170 x 150 cm

Verhoef creates his sketches intuitively, but not impulsively or mindlessly. Whenever he uses collage it is done thoughtfully, and specific forms developed in his earlier work continuously re-appear in novel configurations, like set pieces. Altogether however, his creative process is primarily a journey of discovery; an investigation without a clear plan. Sometimes a sketch can serve as the basis for a painting. But creating a painting isn’t simply a matter of transcribing a sketch into paint. Rather, it is a new phase, in which the artist further explores the painterly possibilities and carefully calibrates the various elements of the work.

Verhoef’s work has loosened up considerably over the years. In his earlier work, the composition was often dominated by a single or at most a few abstract shapes: a fragment of a circle, a few diagonal bars or constellations of lines reminiscent of letters or numbers, which created a sort of surface tension with the often extremely elongated canvas to which they were applied. Nowadays the size and shape of his canvasses afford him

more space in all directions. Within this field of action numerous small elements float and tumble about, whose dimensions and substance are hard to pin down. Sometimes the forms appear almost as translucent volumes, with only their contours outlined; at other times the shapes have sharp edges or become an amorphous blob.

Verhoef has always devoted a lot of attention to his choice of paint and method of application. Even the formal shapes of his earlier works were not simply painted on, but were interwoven with the background by, for example, masking their outline first and then painting slightly outside the lines again. In his current work he uses an ingenious technique of his own invention. To start with, elements are painted directly onto the canvas. They are then covered by a homemade transparent film (created by pouring out an acrylic binder over a flat surface and letting it dry) that has also been partially painted on the reverse side. Finally, Verhoef sometimes applies another layer of paint on the obverse side, whose edges are relatively sharpest. In this way an immensely subtle layering is achieved: it is as if the shapes melt into the surface of the canvas. It all fits perfectly with Verhoef’s abstract visual language, which invites contemplative, associative viewing.

Carel Blotkamp

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Translation Jasper Blotkamp, New Orleans