

The Laboratory of Painting

TOON VERHOEF

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Meandering thoughts, experiments, ideas, but ones free of preconceived intent: that's what the sketches of Toon Verhoef are. Cautiously, hesitantly and, at the same time, in a direct and spontaneous manner - as only sketches allow - Verhoef builds a new image time and again. Always seeking a balance and then disrupting it. This is how he pushes himself to a limit, stretches the visual tension in order to create an unexpected image which, despite its friction, remains on the verge of falling apart. He produces these on a daily basis and keeps them in small sketchbooks. If the image stays intact, it ends up in his painting studio. There he gradually distances himself from these images by rendering them into monumental paintings. Those are executed according to an ingenious procedure in which he attempts, as far as possible, to rule out his own handwriting.

But this time Verhoef has used his sketches as the basis for larger works on paper. "Sketching is the laboratory of painting," says Verhoef. In drawings, you might say, that laboratory phase remains visible and the artist as creator is more present than ever.



Untitled, 2020, mixed techniques
on paper, 41 x 29.5 cm

Over the past months Verhoef has been posting his sketches on Instagram every day, alternating these with artworks, films, architecture and music. None of these are literal sources for his work, as is indeed the silhouette of the dancer on the 'Gitane' cigarette package that was used by him various times, but they represent a few of the countless influences that have shaped him as an artist. Think of the architecture in Buenos Aires, where he grew up, the films of Jean-Luc Godard which sometimes lack any narrative context whatsoever, the immense sculptures of Alexander Calder, or Meret Oppenheim's fur-clad teacup. These are often spatial experiences linked with time, like film and music; art forms that frequently affect us physically and for that reason tend to stay with us. Fascinating choices for an artist who deals with a two-dimensional surface and who, 'coming from' conceptual art, eliminates space and illusion from his work as much as possible.

How do you take a stance toward this as a painter? As Verhoef sees it, there are many arguments for objecting to painting - for objecting to a canvas worked on with paint and brushes. The painter can even wonder how long this should go on, raise the issue as to whether anything new can be added after so many centuries; or, whether the act of painting might actually still be relevant today, and not too limiting. Apt questions that Verhoef is constantly asking himself. And yet, at the same time, he can't think of anything that he wouldn't be able to express through painting. As long as he can keep on raising the tension, allowing himself to do what seems impossible, and can shift and arrange unexpected elements and clashing colors until spaces open up and bring the image to the brink of eruption. While the viewer anticipates this with every second, Verhoef expands time and gives rise to his own cliffhanger.

Esther Darley

translation: Beth O'Brien