

Penetrations

The 'Art Needlework' of Michael Raedecker

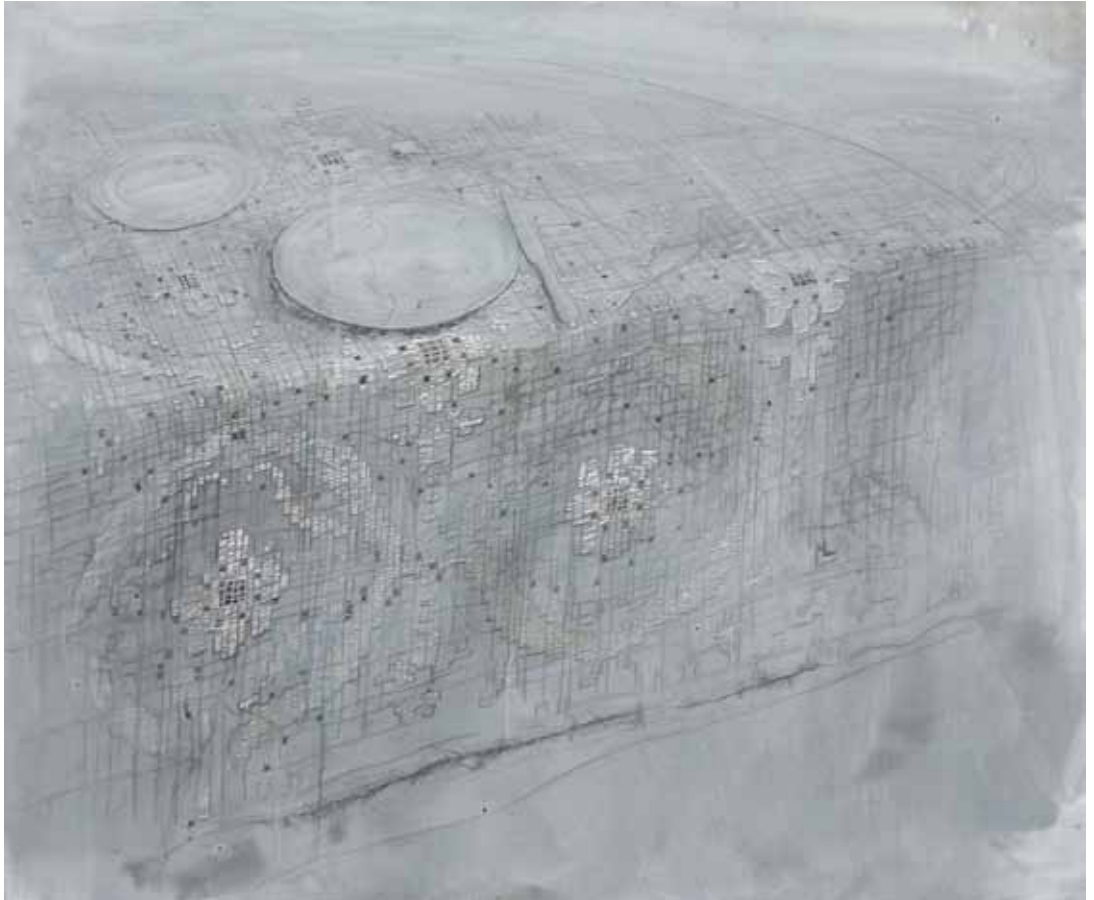
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[FRANK VAN DER PLOEG]

For years, visual artist Michael Raedecker (Amsterdam, 1963) was more popular outside the Netherlands than 'at home'. Art critics in the Netherlands often emphasise this. The fact is that Raedecker is barely represented in public collections in his home country. His work has been purchased by private individuals and for corporate collections but, in terms of museums, only the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Scheringa Museum of Realist Art (until the collection was dismantled in 2009) and the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag own works by him. His exhibition *line-up* in 2009 was an opportunity to show what the Netherlands has been missing.

One of the main explanations for the fact that Raedecker is more famous outside the Netherlands is purely logistical. He has lived and worked in London since 1997, and that is where he has made a name for himself. He is also someone who seeks out boundaries in everything. After studying fashion at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie (1985-1990) in Amsterdam, he was briefly apprenticed to the Belgian fashion designer Martin Margiela. After this he changed direction and began working as an independent visual artist. He spent two years (1993/1994) at the increasingly internationally orientated Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. For the majority of artists, a period spent at the Rijksakademie studios is the springboard to an independent career. Participants from abroad usually keep Amsterdam as a base. But not Michael Raedecker. He studied to become a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) at Goldsmiths College in London and settled there in more than one respect. His name became firmly established when the famous gallery owner Charles Saatchi noticed his needlework. He showed Raedecker's work in a group exhibition entitled 'The New Neurotic Realism' (a 'movement' he branded in May 1998 with a publication by Dick Price). Michael Raedecker was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2000 and for more than a decade now he has been an internationally acclaimed artist who exhibits worldwide.

The difference between the acclaim at home and that abroad is also partly based on his choice of subject. The international character of his work manifests itself in his subjects. Raedecker often takes photographs of almost empty American landscapes and suburbs as source material and his visual memory takes him into equally American televisual worlds. At the same time, his work is rooted in the art history of the Netherlands. He chooses 'classic' genres such



as still life and landscape, and quotes major figures such as Mondrian. As a result, it is the American influence in his work that was and is referred to in the Netherlands (even during his time at the Rijksakademie), whereas outside the Netherlands it is the Dutch derivations that are emphasised.

Michael Raedecker,
superficial, 2009. Acrylic and
thread on canvas, 48 × 40
cm. ©The artist and Hauser
& Wirth.

'On the bias'

In terms of technique, Raedecker strikes a balance between art and design, between Painting with a capital 'P' and handicraft with a small 'h'. He embroiders. Embroidery is not something that one associates with serious art. Yet the Netherlands has a couple of artists who have 'woven' this expression of popular culture into their work in such a way that it has become a visual medium with added value. In the flat plane, Berend Strik's stitching comes

closest to Raedecker's. However, whereas Strik partially effaces and actually emphasises important visual elements by swamping them with machine stitching, Raedecker uses his thread as impasto and to sketch contours, sometimes very subtly and sometimes in large 'clusters'. Designer Hella Jongerius has embroidered the contours of images into vases, which means they can only be used for dried flowers, and in others she uses coloured silicone rubber to seal the holes that have been punched into the vases – and to suggest embroidery thread! – thereby making them waterproof anyway. A couple of years after that, she embroidered plates onto a tablecloth. Jongerius treats the functionality of her 'utensils' in the same way that Raedecker treats high art in his 'paintings'.

Raedecker once said in an interview: 'I've sort of entered [the art world] through the back door. I feel as if I am an intruder. Perhaps that's why I had to do something stupid, something deliberately wrong – marrying the rich and intense history of painting with accessible, clumsy, unfashionable handicraft.' For Raedecker, the handicraft and the time he devotes to it are the *raison d'être* for his position in the art world. His paintings may be – no, they *must* be – time-consuming. He also sees it as a reaction to the more conceptual approach to art that preceded his period.

Raedecker's work method is fairly traditional. The starting point is usually a photograph he has found. Using a projector and a pencil, he transfers the outlines onto canvas, which he then places flat on the ground. He glues thread over the contours and paints parts of the image in acrylics. In earlier paintings he poured his paint over the canvas, often in different layers, which resulted in a rather impersonal skin of paint that contrasts strongly with the needlework. In his more recent work, paint plays a less prominent role. The acrylic paint is applied so thinly that the structure of the linen is just visible through it. If the paint plays a figurative role at all, then it is like an outline in a cartoon strip, just to provide a hint of shadow. Occasionally drips are visible, but the tactile structure comes from the appliqué and stitched wool threads – this is the work that takes most time.

Deepening

In 2009, Raedecker created *simplicity* and *superficial*, both depicting an embroidered cloth on a table set for breakfast. The titles are only a superficial 'cover' (!). On closer inspection, deeper layers are visible. The works portray a table set for a meal. Using very few materials (various shades of grey) Raedecker suggests the folds of the cloths. The focal point of the painting is in the lower right-hand section, where the cloths are most detailed. At the edges, only the outline is visible. The cloth has a grid like the embroidery patterns in women's magazines. Over this we see a larger squared grid of slightly untidy thread. The grid is interesting. It features in other recent works, such as the floral piece *corrupt* (2008), which contains an allusion to an early Mondrian. Many of the squares in the tablecloths are embroidered in black, giving the appearance of a crossword puzzle.

Michael Raedecker claims not to want to 'steer' viewers too much, but his well-considered titles certainly point them in the right direction. Take *penetration* (2005), a painting of an umbelliferous plant with a noticeably phallic form. The erotic connotations of flowers have infiltrated art since Georgia O'Keeffe



Michael Raedecker, *corrupt*,
2009. Acrylic and thread on
canvas, 162 x 130 cm.
© The artist and Hauser &
Wirth.

(1887-1986). Raedecker emphasises that every plant needs penetration in order to emerge from the earth. He looks to himself, too: he constantly penetrates his canvases with his embroidery techniques, of course. It would be interesting to know whether he gives his works their titles once they are finished, or whether he has an idea for a title in mind when he begins. That seems to me to be a possibility. Raedecker himself explains that the title of his recent exhibition, *line-up* – a survey of the past five years of his career – refers to the ‘line-up’ of a music band and – with a little prompting from the interviewer – an identity parade at a police station.

His paintings have, almost without exception, a dark side. The use of colour, the choice of subject and titles all contribute to the sense of doom. Many of his landscapes and interiors have the appearance of deserted crime scenes. Raedecker isolates a limited number of visual elements – sometimes some walls, or one or two objects that would be too ordinary in a ‘normal’ still life. He uses colour sparingly. The use of many grey tints lends something sinister to his work. This is actually reinforced by sometimes subtle and sometimes vividly

coloured elements that he adds with his needlework. It is an ambience that evokes – but much more subtly – the paintings of the Dutch artist Gé-Karel van der Sterren. Van der Sterren also plays with the skin of things, but in a slightly more direct way. His exuberant and candy-coloured paintings depict people or animals that have been skinned. Van der Sterren paints in acrylics, too, and uses oils for certain accents in the same way that Raedecker uses thread. Here we come to a singularity that evokes Raedecker's work – making comparisons with other artists. The emptiness and the focus are something he has in common with Luc Tuymans, and there are other examples of kindred spirits, nevertheless Raedecker's representations stand by themselves.

Raedecker's work seems remarkably easy to divide into historical genres: landscape, still life, interior and even portraiture. Apart from historical figures such as Hitler, Raedecker also presented a series of stereotypical heads: 'tronies', a genre often practised by Rembrandt. Raedecker has ignored the highest attainable genre of the Renaissance, historical painting. The ideal of incorporating as many figures as possible in complicated poses simply isn't his cup of tea. Raedecker's works are empty, deserted, devoid of human activity.

Development

Raedecker summarises his personal development as follows. In his first paintings his subjects are based on himself, as a child of his time. His youth was filled with images dominated by pop culture: television. There is something awkward about his paintings from 1993 and 1994 compared to works created a couple of years later. The lines and the stitching are deliberately clumsy, as Raedecker himself asserts. A good example of applying poured paint is an *untitled* painting from 1995. It represents a figure whose head is little more than a daub of paint. Five years later he painted the tronies, which are considerably more sophisticated.

This was followed by a longer period with work that has a surrealist undertone. A frightening example is *the reflex* (2003). We see a swan that has fallen forward in an eerie jet-black pool. We cannot escape the conclusion that the bird is a victim of an oil spill. This work shows Raedecker at his most proficient. The difference in rendering between this and the earlier works could hardly be greater. It is not only the plumage, foot, eye and beak that are realistically rendered in fleecy thread; he also paints the swan's reflection in the pool of oil with great panache. Obviously this was a subject that was waiting to be painted. A year earlier, the aforementioned Gé-Karel van der Sterren painted the swansong of a goose. The bird – most of its body already plucked – is running over a dark pond. Van der Sterren is not a man of small gestures.

Back to Raedecker. *Brilliant gloom* (2004) is a complex work. It depicts the type of solitary rural house we very often see in different forms in his paintings. It is night, and the viewer has the impression that there has been a party. Above the house hangs an enormous frame with cheerful lighting in every conceivable colour. The lighted spheres give out a misty glow. The frame – which has the appearance of overblown stage lighting – is in fact suspended in mid-air. The black 'drips' applied above it are not the essential structure from which the lights hang, but appear to be musical notes. In the foreground we see some floating lumps of stone and small bushes. It is a painting to lose oneself in.



In *therapy* (2005), Raedecker takes on all his painting predecessors, from the classical painters – whose highest ambition was emulation, i.e. to improve on the work of the teacher – up to and including the magical realist Carel Willink, whose contemporaneous critics often complained that he knitted rather than painted the sweaters worn by his models. And what does Raedecker do in this painting? He 'knits' a coffee cup – literally. The rendering, the reflections in a fragment of mirror, the ability to make an embroidered glass look transparent; these are all examples of extraordinary skill.

In recent years, Raedecker has been inspired by the everyday. In 2007 and 2008 he painted grimy towels, washing hanging on a line, a table and chairs, a cake, the tables with embroidered cloths, but also, 'just like that', a section of an embroidery pattern – which he has already stitched. Even more than in the past, he reduces his visual information until only the absolutely essential remains. The tendency is to use less and less colour and a more outline-based approach. *On*, (2008), acquired by the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, is an echo of *brilliant gloom*. A number of poles with electricity cables and illuminated spheres stand against a misty background. A fairy ring? A modern variant of megaliths? Latent surrealism.

Michael Raedecker,
therapy, 2005. Acrylic and
thread on canvas, 63 × 75
cm. ©The artist and Hauser
& Wirth.



Translated by Yvette Mead

Probably without realising it, Raedeker has an early soulmate in terms of material and also of ambience: Christine van Zeegen (1890-1973). Between 1915 and 1925, Van Zeegen mainly embroidered designs created by her brother – even then embroidery was for women. The result was anything but prim. She set her translations of nature (cockerels, fighting mantises, polyps), rendered in extravagances of thread, against almost monochrome backgrounds; to which the name ‘art needlework’ was given. Her *Opengespleten knotwilgstem* (Pollarded willow with split trunk) from 1914 is an explosion of woollen thread that, today, would certainly be regarded as erotic. It shares the unstoppable vigour depicted in Raedeker’s *penetration*, but decay is inevitable: as the willow grows, the plant will eventually flower itself to death.

As a description, ‘art needlework’ perfectly expresses Raedeker’s wish to fuse the ‘high’ with the ‘low’ – a fusion that is also reflected in the word picture. As Raedeker himself might put it, the vernacular ‘penetrates’ that which is higher – by first punching holes in the defences then lovingly binding the wounds. ■

FURTHER READING

MAXINE HODSON & ANNE-MARIE WATSON (ed.), *Michael Raedecker line-up*, Camden (Camden Arts Centre) / Harderwijk (d'jonge Hond), 2009, 87 p. Publication to accompany the exhibition in Camden Arts Centre; GEM, museum voor actuele kunst, The Hague; Carré d'Art - Musée d'art contemporain de Nîmes.

Michael Raedecker,
brilliant gloom, 2004. Acrylic
and thread on canvas, 190
x 310 cm. © The artist and
Hauser & Wirth.

Michael Raedecker, *reflex*,
2003. Acrylic and thread on
canvas, 190 x 300 cm.
Collection Gemeentemuseum
Den Haag.

