

Jan Vanriet and the Beauty of Evil

Painting is War

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[ERIC RINCKHOUT]

The recent work of the Antwerp painter Jan Vanriet (b.1948) is embedded in the violent history of the twentieth century. His focus is especially on the development of powerful ideologies and their effect on the common man and the artist. The Second World War, the concentration camps, the pogroms, Stalinism and Nazism – in a word evil, the horror and its persistent memories: these are subjects that keep recurring.

In a conversation at the end of 2009 Vanriet said that in the past ideologies were communal projects that gave a line to be followed, though unfortunately it was usually a line of march. In the same interview he listed his themes as 'social problems, history, memory, reflection ... the human condition, in short, to use a loaded term'. Jan Vanriet calls these his storylines. Is he a literary painter? That is a title he is proud to bear. For Vanriet the story he wants to tell is just as important as the style of the painting.

That is not the only reason he is a literary painter. Vanriet prefers working in series, around a large subject, and he does research for it the way a writer does for a book. And in fact he loves books and regularly produces handsome publications with and about his work.

His work also contains quotations – both conscious and unconscious – from Art's mighty reservoir of images, the trash can of memory as he once called it.

On top of which Vanriet's work has a message, a concept that according to him has for too long been derided in art.

Still, it's not always immediately clear what a Vanriet painting is about. The images are unsettling, the signs ambiguous. Vanriet invites us to take a long, slow look. The painter mixes, transforms and assembles images until new meanings appear. Vanriet doesn't showcase his message, he does not yell out his displeasure or that he's right. There is a lot going on beneath the surface of the paint. In these paintings there is often a deafening silence, regardless of how many people are milling about. His work has a strange, poetic beauty. But it is the beauty of horror, the poetry of disaster.



Madonna, Closed Doors.

© Jan Vanriet.

A many-voiced choir

Take the beautiful, seemingly simple painting, *Madonna, Closed Doors* (Madonna, gesloten deuren) from 2004. With soft, light brush-strokes Vanriet has given form to a woman carrying a baby in her arms. We see the two figures from behind, they are warmly bundled up, it must be winter. The drabness of their clothes and the simple carrying bag of the woman make us suspect they are refugees, migrants from the East, people without papers. Contemporary, probably.

The woman is caught in a purely graphic representation of a corridor with many closed doors, which are only sketchily drawn. A simple repetitive motif, that rings in our ears like a succession of hammer blows. The doors are thinly painted, yet on the canvas they look to be carved in stone.

The doors are closed and will stay closed. The woman is looking at the child, perhaps trying to soothe it. Is the child crying? Is it throwing its head back? We can only guess. Woman and child stand motionless in a hateful poisonous green, in an oppressive space, the suffocating perspective of a narrowing corridor. There is no way out, no escape route, no future.

This story of refugees echoes the mythical story of a woman and her child, Mary and Jesus, a story about unwanted strangers that has happened thousands of times since then and is still happening every day.

Past and present are inextricably linked in Vanriet's work. History, large and small, is always on the move. An image or a newspaper photo will touch on other images from art, myths or Vanriet's personal history. Anecdotes transcend themselves, gain broader relevance and validity. Memories, more and more memories push their way in through the cracks of time. Unstoppably.



Portrait of an Uncle. © Jan Vanriet.



La Doctrine. © Jan Vanriet.

Madonna, Closed Doors is one of the paintings Vanriet made in the context of a commission for a new edition of the Bible. Jan Vanriet is an atheist. He has brought the Bible, which to him is no more than a literary text, into the twentieth century and has put his Mary in a cell block of Buchenwald concentration camp. 'That narrowing, threatening corridor in that cell block forced itself on me', Vanriet has said of it. 'But you don't have to know the background, the image has to be strong enough in itself.'

Consciously or unconsciously Vanriet has also used the dramatic perspective which the 16th century Venetian painter Tintoretto employed so brilliantly in *The Removal of St Mark's Body* [1562].

However contemporary Vanriet's work may be, it is always interwoven with tradition. The artist himself pointed this out in the ambitious exhibition *Closing Time*. In 2010 Vanriet was given the opportunity to take control of an entire museum. The Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp, which has closed its doors until 2017 for an expansion and major renovations, offered him the chance to work with its entire collection of old and modern masters, from Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden to Rik Wouters and James Ensor. Vanriet became both painter and curator, transformed the museum, turned the chronology on its head, drew paintings out of the stock rooms and told his own story as well.

By starting a dialogue, harmonizing but also confronting and contrasting his work with that of old and not-so-old masters, he showed their work in a different light. And the old masters in turn brought out different meanings in Vanriet's paintings. Both dialogue and dialectic, then, in a kaleidoscopic exhibition, resulting in a many-voiced choir. And the proof that the meaning of a work is never set in stone. The viewer experiences the eternal now of the art of painting.

However aesthetic Vanriet's work may be, the one constant factor is his ethical position. Call it humanism - Vanriet stands up for human dignity. He is sensitive to the vulnerability of the individual in the face of the big constructs that surround him. All too often he has seen the common man, and the artist too, being crushed between the jaws of merciless ideologies.

Apart from the contrast between ethics and aesthetics, there are other areas of tension. Jan Vanriet is a loner, he lives and paints in solitude and yet the world is very present in his paintings. He is often described as an enlightened

misanthrope, a relativist melancholic, but at the same time he has a passionate love of humankind.

And there are other paradoxes. His work is emotional and cerebral, he is an involved and a detached observer. His paintings are sombre and often depict horrors and catastrophes, the power of the crowd over the individual. But at the same time his work has an unmistakable lightness.

Vanriet weaves all these seeming or real contradictions into works that are highly charged and, in the words of art critic Marc Ruyters, display a cool synthesis. That applies at least to his work from the mid-1980s on. The year 1986 brought a significant change. Vanriet himself refers to it as a rupture.

Samizdat

But let's start at the beginning.

Vanriet has always been politically and artistically committed. But for a long time he kept this commitment out of his work. He preferred to express it in writing. As he himself says: 'My roots are in literature.'

Jan Vanriet grew up in a left-wing environment in Antwerp. His father, a former Communist, joined the then Belgian Socialist Party (BSP) and was one of the founders of the magazine *Links* (Left), of which Jan was an editor.

Later he would write for various other magazines, but eventually it dawned on him that his journalistic work was a joke that had got out of hand.

In his youth Vanriet hung out with writers and he has continued to cherish such friendships. Hugo Claus was an extremely close friend, Cees Nootboom still is. Vanriet has spent the biggest part of his life in literary rather than artistic circles.

Vanriet has collaborated on projects with both Claus and Nootboom, and also with Benno Barnard and Stefan Hermans. In 1979 he illustrated *The Sign of the Hamster* (Het Teken van de Hamster), a book of poems by Claus, and in 2007 *Red Rain* (Rode Regen), a collection of short stories by Nootboom. An example of Vanriet's youthful commitment is the Anti-Censorship Evening that he helped organize in Antwerp in 1968, at which Hugo Claus, Ivo Michiels, Jef Geeraerts, Paul de Wispelaere and Remco Campert all spoke out against the then rampant government censorship.

Although Vanriet still occasionally expresses himself in poetry – in 2008, for the first time in 20 years, a book of his poetry, *Storm Light* (Stormlicht), appeared – he is a painter through and through. As he has been since the age of ten.

His first painting was a copy after Van Gogh, a landscape in Provence. *Parcours*, an overview of his work by Marc Ruyters, features an oil painting from 1966, when Jan Vanriet was only 18. It is a view of hills in Bohemia, painted with a deft virtuosity. And in fact Vanriet was never to lose his love of landscape.

After completing his studies at the Antwerp art academy in 1972, his work is especially influenced by English Pop Art. There is quite a lot of David Hockney and Peter Blake in Vanriet's figurative paintings and water colours from that period. A little later he starts introducing strange elements into his work. He makes assemblages and collages, embellishes an image or a story line with odd forms and objects, like a sphinx or a billiard table, that give the whole a surrealist look. But his work always remains transparent and extremely aes-



*Kiel (Antwerp),
Evening.*
© Jan Vanriet.

thetic. It is also just a bit naïve, revealing the optimism of the 1960s. Vanriet himself has said of this: 'Flower power was still in the air. European Pop Art was more playful than the American kind and David Hockney really spoke to me. You can sense that in my work. In Hockney I found the same pure line as in Picasso and Ingres: simple and direct.'

Soon history enters his work. From childhood Vanriet had been acquainted with left-wing culture: the songs of Bertold Brecht and Kurt Weill, interpreted by the singer-actor Ernst Busch, the songs of the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and the work of the artist Vladimir Tatlin.

Vanriet himself refers to his romantic-leftist sympathies, but adds that he was fascinated by the dynamic in the Soviet Union shortly after the revolution of 1917: the enormous creativity, the boundless exploration of the possibilities in art, the avant-garde in theatre, typography and photography with someone like Alexander Rodchenko.

The Tatlin he paints in 1979 still fits perfectly with the colourful and lyrical pop art-like portraits. In 1986 this approach changes radically. Vanriet changes the paper on which he paints for canvas, which already makes the work less delicate, but he also starts to paint his portraits, like the one of Mayakovsky, in a heavier, harder, less aesthetic style.

The painting *Portrait of an Uncle* (Portret van een oom, 1986) is a key work. The twin brother of Vanriet's mother had barely survived Dachau concentration camp and died of exhaustion soon after. He used to play the accordion. Jan Vanriet lays the instrument down flat and depicts it as a factory.

The painting *La Doctrine* (1986) represents an even more fundamental break. Vladimir Tatlin is portrayed in black and white, looking anguished, but it is a domestic iron that, like some foreign body, takes the lead role. Moreover, the painting is dominated by drab, blue-and-white vertical stripes that refer to the garb of concentration camp inmates and are at the same time a favourite pattern of the French artist Daniel Buren. The iron is a symbol of doctrinarism: everything is ironed flat. The painting combines figurative with emblematic and symbolic elements. It is a powerful rebus.



Decision-Making. © Jan Vanriet.

There are a number of explanations for the change in Vanriet's work. Up till then the artist had mostly kept his personal history out of his work. In 1986 he realized he could exorcise the World War II events in which his parents had been involved not only through his writing but also through his painting. Ultimately, what happened in the concentration camps had a marked effect on him. His father was a Communist and a member of the Antwerp Resistance. He was betrayed and ended up in the German camps. His mother's parents were couriers in the Resistance. His mother was also betrayed and transported to the east. It is no coincidence that *Transport* is the title of a later series of thematic paintings by Vanriet. His mother and father met in Mauthausen concentration camp; before that his mother had already been a slave labourer in Silesia.

But why did this change only come about in 1986? Jan Vanriet had at that time a studio in New York. But that city had nothing to do with the change. Vanriet gives the following explanation: 'Perhaps it was only then that I had acquired enough history.' He was 38 in 1986. What certainly also played a role was the dismal state of painting at the time. In that period, when conceptual art was on the rise, painting was no longer seen as a natural artistic occupation. On the contrary. A painter was stupid and paint stank. Painting was regarded as a bourgeois activity. In the 1970s and 80s painters were sneered at.

'You had to go underground,' according to Vanriet. 'It was just like samizdat. The people who were always going on about freedom called what we did old-fashioned nonsense. They banned us from the profession.'

It was precisely through his resistance to this that Vanriet found the strength and the fervour to continue and to create, from that time on, his most powerful works.

Who is using whom?

After that Vanriet's work goes in different directions: sometimes more symbolic, at other times pure storytelling. He makes collages, uses icons, patterns and stencils, experiments with Korean Hanji-paper, watercolour and



Contre Jour. © Jan Vanriet.



March. © Jan Vanriet.

lino-cut, puts in references to old masters like Jean Fouquet, to contemporary artists like Daniel Buren, René Daniels, Sol Lewitt and Luc Tuymans, and to history. He explores the boundaries between the figurative and the abstract in a series like *Last Snow* (Laatste Sneeuw, 1999).

Symptomatic of the early 1990s are two large series. On the one hand Vanriet works on monumental projects like the ceiling paintings for Antwerp's Bourla Theatre, the decoration of the De Brouckère Metro station in Brussels and a 110-metre-long mural at the KBC headquarters, also in Brussels. On the other hand he produces 35 paintings based on the Gospel of St. John. That series grows into a book project for which Benno Barnard writes the epic poem *The Castaway* (De schipbreukeling, 1995).

One question continues to fascinate Vanriet: the relationship between the artist and the powers-that-be. Who is using whom?

This fascination too has its roots in his personal history. Jan Vanriet's father had been in the same camp as Antonin Novotny, the later president of Czechoslovakia. They knew each other well. Later, during the 1960s, the Vanriet family regularly visited Czechoslovakia.

'We moved in circles that were normally closed to people from the West', Vanriet relates. 'In Marienbad there was a separate Kurhaus for the Communist nomenklatura, that's where top officials were received in luxurious surroundings, officials from Italy as well. While the common man in Marienbad lived in humble circumstances. Celebrated state artists enjoyed a posh lifestyle and kept their money in dollars, while younger critical artists had trouble making ends meet. I found this strange for what was, after all, a Communist system.'

The complex situation of artists under regimes like the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany has been the subject of several major series and exhibitions by Vanriet.

The elaborate suite of paintings, *Poet's Death* (Dichterdood, 2006), is about the Soviet Union. 'I am no longer able to make paintings as independent artworks', says Vanriet. 'I need something to guide me, a theme, however cryptic it may be.'

For a series of paintings about the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vanriet was inspired by a silent film in which the poet is murdered as the result of a love affair. In real life Mayakovsky committed suicide. Did an impossible love have something to do with it? Or was the poet slowly crushed by a stifling ideology he had initially endorsed?

The series was rounded out with older work from 1988 in which he had painted Lily Brik, Mayakovsky's infernal beloved, as a ballet dancer between two floodlights (from a concentration camp?), and with archetypal images of workers going to the factory and Party members climbing the steps en masse on their way to a congress. Not one of them has individual characteristics.

The paintings are reminiscent of Eisenstein's films, although the painter says that he was primarily inspired by television documentaries and old photographs from Soviet propaganda from the 1930s.

Colour is defining

In the exhibition *Cockchafer, Fly* (Meikever, Vlieg) of 2008 Vanriet investigated the position of the artist in Nazi Germany. One of his starting points was a little film the painter had found on YouTube. In it the children of Nazi bigwig Goebbels sing innocent children's songs. Eighteen months later their mother killed them because, supposedly, after the Third Reich no better life was possible.

Still, the exhibition in Vanriet's regular gallery *De Zwarte Panter* (The Black Panther) was dominated by several monumental works. An unsettling torchlight procession in pitch darkness, in which not one person can be seen. Across from it hung a black work and a red one, both with the same motif: a white-hot fire consuming a building. One motif executed in various colours is a recurrent element in Vanriet's oeuvre: it shows the defining role of colour in the perception of a work and a situation.

The world is on fire, the hordes are on the march, innocence will be murdered. And: *Life is a Cabaret*. For Vanriet also paints the singers, actors and dancers of the German revues of the 1930s. He portrays the infamous Mefisto, Gustav Gründgens, who collaborated with the Nazis, and he also paints a portrait of the Communist singer and actor Ernst Busch, who was saved from execution by that same Gründgens – however unlikely it may seem.

In 2009 Vanriet held a small exhibition in which he explored the mental landscape of his youth: football gods, cinema and social housing in the Antwerp neighbourhood of Het Kiel.

Yet the war continues to dominate his oeuvre: in the same year he had an exhibition in Düsseldorf with works centred on the Villa Hügel, the property of German steel magnate and Nazi sympathizer Alfried Krupp, and in *Closing Time* (2010) he showed his most recent paintings: a series of portraits based on photographs of people who were deported. Painting is, and remains, war. ■

FURTHER READING

Closing Time. Jan Vanriet, bilingual (Dutch/English) catalogue of the exhibition of that name in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp, 24 April-3 October 2010 (Antwerp. Ludion, 2010)