

## Hand Ballet and Reflection

On the Work of Karel Dierickx

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[ STEFAN HERTMANS ]

It is often said of the work of the Flemish artist Karel Dierickx that it has something to do with time. At first glance this type of statement may seem both meaningless and profound. Any artist's oeuvre moves and evolves over time – that is just called evolution, work in progress, or whatever. One might just as well say that every work moves in a double space: real and imaginary, and there's no arguing with that either.

Yet a close critical examination of these two statements might explain something very specific about the work of this withdrawn, virtuoso painter. With a tenacity and consistency reminiscent of Morandi, Karel Dierickx has spent over four decades developing an artistic oeuvre that excels in its circumspection and sensitivity. These qualities are not exactly obvious in the art world at the moment, where effect, brilliant ideas, marketing and sloganizing have become a matter of course.

These days, however, Dierickx's work has acquired an aura and a power of persuasion that would have been unthinkable in the years of cultural snobbery when, as Catherine David once put it bluntly, painting had become an outmoded two-dimensional bourgeois illusion. It turns out that nothing could be further from the truth. The so-called out-dated language of painting is once again more contemporary than ever. Besides painters like Gerard Richter, Luc Tuymans or Michaël Borremans, who have been inspired by the media that developed after painting (photography and film) there are the odd few here and there who have continued to search for the essence of gesture, of subject matter, the appearance of the picture from the movement of the hand. I once characterised the art of Karel Dierickx as that of a 'thinking hand'. By that I meant something very specific: Dierickx's painting originates in the physical impulse of the body, the sensuality, the movement, the presence of the artist in the intimate space where he stands in front of the canvas and is confronted by it. The body seems to know more than any theory, and the reflection of this is the complex, sensitive brushstrokes of the painting hand, formed by its daily ascesis. Thinking and painting occur in and through each other. One might argue that this is true for many painters, and that the lyrical abstract style is to some extent reminiscent of the Cobra credo and action painting. There are indeed some references to this tradition in Dierickx's work, but remarkably his development as a painter has led



The Artist with Jan Hoet (right)  
in his studio, Ghent, 2011

him away from any sort of fashionable influence, and has obviously been fed by a much more timeless tradition, namely that of the art of drawing as it has existed since the Renaissance. Consequently his work has acquired a surprisingly existential overtone. Dierickx's oeuvre is like one enormous sketchbook - this is how a man who has spent decades expressing himself in quiet concentration, with the cautious movements of his deliberate hand, thinks, breathes and moves. Brush technique, colour, perspective, line, composition: the keywords of the time-honoured tradition in a contemporary, compact form - a form that can at the same time fan out within its given limits into an unlimited variety of possibilities. But there is also - not least - the almost philosophical effort of the draftsmanship.

### Ascesis and lyric

The cultural tradition of draftsmanship is indeed more fundamental, older and more timeless than that of painting; it has always been less tied to evolution and fashion. Some of Dierickx's drawings betray an exceptionally sensitive, in-depth knowledge of the draftsmanship of the Renaissance and Mannerism periods, but equally of the draftsmanly qualities in the work of painters such as Degas, Monet and Bonnard.



*Tobias*, 1997, oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm.  
Private collection

The affinity of the movements that drawing requires with the gestures of painting has some striking consequences. In particular, it means different treatment of the surface, the perception of space, and not hesitating to leave portions of the canvas unpainted. The evocation of transparency and 'thin' application of the paint can easily be combined with matter painting, impasto and dynamic paint application.

This all means that Dierickx's work can move freely within what is nonetheless a personal, recognizable grammar. The ability to combine freedom with recognisability – which is perhaps a good definition of character, of a strong artistic personality. It determines the sovereignty of this oeuvre too. Over the past decades, Dierickx has continued to concentrate in a systematic but intuitive way on a dialectical movement in painting that can only be characterised as the one between appearing and disappearing. As he conjures up old motifs – the landscape, a portrait, a still life – he constantly explores the possibilities of both contemporary and ancient art over and over again in a way that remains surprisingly fresh. Motifs crop up, but in the complexity of the colouring, painterly dynamic and composition, the theme, the subject, the motif or the figure seem at the same time to be absorbed and merge with them. On the verge of recognisability, the forms seem to the viewer to quiver, vibrate and tremble. There is often something touching about this, the drama of becoming visible occurs before our eyes, and sometimes it is as if the picture materialises, opens up, as we watch. This is one of the palpable ways in which time is present in Dierickx's work, as something that comes at us like a moving image in the minutes we spend looking at it, but that also, at a very different level, shows how much this dynamic has developed over the decades of researching how something can be made to appear, something that seems to acquire the ability to withdraw again discreetly into the suggestiveness of the forms. The mental space in which Dierickx explores this process and experiments with it, the way in which the hand moves, brushes, draws, scores and scratches, also conjures up a wide range of reminiscences, while the works themselves continue to have something economical about them, something discreet that begs to be seen as

well. A strange, touching dialectic between appearing and disappearing. This combination of asceticism and lyrical animation is the inspirational motor of his work; it is also its great integrity. You need patience to see it. The work requires more than recognisability – it requires the capacity to miss something in what we see and to integrate what we have missed into what we see.

### Tranquil radicalism

It is as if Dierickx wants to capture this possibility of missing something, which is intrinsic to every act of looking, on canvas, on the surface of the philosophical frustration that is typical of looking: what we see, always partly eludes us too. Dierickx paints this human limitation with an unbelievable wealth of forms and techniques. Hence this type of painting, once declared to be old hat, triumphs over earlier conceptual trends. It absorbs all the thinking about concept, visibility and philosophical issues and presents it in a form language that becomes increasingly fascinating the more it remains steadfast in its obsessions, repetitions, resumptions, variations, modulations and techniques – in the tenacity



*Varengville*, 2009, gouache, 35,5 x 29 cm.  
Private collection



*Portrait of the poet Leonard Nolens*, 2010,  
oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm. Private collection

with which the most fleeting impression can have a great impact on us if it is captured in just the right way, with an autonomy that has something innocent about it. In that sense Dierickx can, without reserve, be called a radical painter – on the understanding that this radicalism, this combination of asceticism and lyricism, is an intense exercise in pictorial reflection, a reflection in which sensitivity, sensuality, impasto light effects and line flow easily one into the other. The painting is not so much a fixed object as the result of a process that is completed in and by looking at it. That is why the observer paints, as it were, with the painter, by learning to understand what was at stake when the painting was still open to change. Potential and completion are therefore extensions of each other, they keep the work open for the next picture, yet within the picture itself there is still the possibility of a certain completion, because at a certain moment it is 'left in peace'. An extremely delicate, carefully balanced and always difficult process.

*Bonnard's Studio*, 2012,  
drawing (mixed technique),  
60 x 47 cm. Artist's own  
collection



After all, nothing can have a more dramatic and more suggestive effect than the moment when the painter decides, in the middle of a compelling movement, to lift his hand and decline to complete the line or the composition, or to partly remove it from sight with a well-aimed erasure or smudge. It is the moment at which thought about what can be seen is given the chance to be left in peace again. For this reason there are moments in Dierickx's work that evoke intensity precisely because their possibilities are left open: they show how thought tapers off when painting has become everything or nothing. This is the point at which painting comes close to the stylised radicalism of Morandi, as well as to the gossamer-thin suggestiveness of some Japanese masters. So, Karel Dierickx walks a fine line then, as did the classic modernists: his work is at its strongest where it balances between figuration and abstraction, between tradition and contemporaneity, between what is revealed and what is left to the imagination. In that sense his work is extremely vulnerable, and that is a deliberate choice, a matter of artistic conviction.

## A melancholy soldier

It is perhaps not exaggerated to say that the key to this oeuvre is integrity – a difficult category, suggesting an insistence on being morally right, what Nietzsche once called the arrogance of the modest. But this ambivalence in the very concept of integrity may also be understood as striving for integrity: on the one hand being torn between the overconfidence of wanting to paint everything (i.e. uniting the processes of watching and becoming visible), and on the other hand constantly withdrawing to the narrow basis of the self-determined terms of what actually constitutes art.

This means his oeuvre also contains an intrinsic ethic, an unending quest for an ever elusive integrity. The struggle is never easy. Dierickx is a fighter, too, a melancholy soldier, a man who strives for the one unsurpassable, right brushstroke. Aesthetics are accomplished with a sort of moral understanding of rightness and accuracy.

This is noticeable in his sculptures too. His figures are unmistakably the work of a virtuoso draftsman, who rubs, scratches and drafts with paint, a man who waits for the right stroke, as it must manifest itself from the right frame of mind.

*Stil Life*, 2013, oil on canvas, 31 x 27 cm.  
Artist's own collection



His sculptures show this same carefully balanced hand ballet, the restrained touch that leaves an impression, a trace like a paintbrush or charcoal leave, the gesture of the hand that must create the form, knowing that it is exposing itself if it decides after all to add that brushstroke. This is an exhausting demarche, whereby he must constantly put his own existence - the vulnerability and power of it - on the line. Returning to where we started, it is clear that the effects of time and space manifest themselves here in a very specific, urgent way, namely as the categories that make the existence of the painter as an existential movement visible. This is why many of his works initially seem introvert in nature, but appear daring, extrovert and dynamic on closer examination. However melancholy his way of looking and capturing may seem – the half perceptible landscapes, in particular, often excel in their absolutely correct ‘deploration’ of the imperfections of the human eye – the sensitivity always looks intensely vital, it manifests its poetic sigh as a no-nonsense, tenaciously maintained discipline, as a primary survival instinct in and through observation, mistakes, new starts, struggles with the artist’s own consciousness which is itself harassed by looking – and transforms this looking into a reflection on thinking and looking. The circle is at once both particular and universal.

### **The intimate and radical studio**

The extent to which existentialism and integrity are a part of Dierickx’s personality is clear from the way in which he speaks of his studio and tries to define this room very personally. Over and over again, in every interview or conversation the overriding importance of the studio as a mental space comes up. Those who visit the studio get the surprise of their lives. This is not the usual industrial-looking open workshop, but a small - you might even call it intimate - back room in a pleasant old villa, overlooking a stylised urban garden, full of light and quiet. The place speaks for itself in its intimacy and radicalism; over the many objects in the room, spotted with endless different shades of colour,

the world of the canvas on the easel emanates into space. The stained sink, the dirty cloths, the paint-stained shoes kicked off in a corner, the spots on the walls, on the reproductions pinned to the wall, yes even the vague smudges on a window – they turn reality into canvas, and the canvas on the easel into an integral part of life. The thickly caked palette, the messy open paints stuck together in prehistoric-looking lumps, shining in the daylight, extend the painting into the tiniest corners of the room in which the painter has sat working, all alone, for decades. The power with which this osmosis between painting and living is revealed makes Dierickx's studio a rare sphere of experience in which restraint and freedom, quiet and powerful dynamism, attention and lyricism blend effortlessly. Indeed, one might say, in the well-known words from Wagner's *Parsifal*: space becomes time here. Less mystical perhaps than Wagner intended, but nonetheless at least as charged, at least as complex and fundamental.

'*Auf der Suche nach dem eigenen Ich*' ran the headline of *Die Welt* back in 1990 with reference to this work. But the search for the self is the same as that for the very essence of painting, and from there to the essence of existence as a looking, thinking being who lifts his hand to reflect something of what is seen and realised. Everything Dierickx makes is created as if from nothing, like work started





*Twilight*, 2013, oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm.  
Artist's own collection

from zero each time, and ends up being a radical aspiration to say almost everything about looking and realising. Renewal and endless variation, two concepts that are usually opposites, go paradoxically but easily hand in hand in his work.

### The freedom of the older master

Because of his existential radicalism Dierickx will always remain aloof from the current generation of Flemish painters, but that aloofness has only strengthened its aristocratic power of persuasion over the years. It is the aloofness, the integrity of someone who is such an integral part of the great painting tradition that he no longer needs, as it were, an environment, a school or a trend. The working of time and space around him is enough for him. It is the breathing of an oeuvre for which the iconographic space of its own intimacy is enough, which is also recognisable quite simply as human lebensraum. It is the freedom of the old master who has reached that stage about which Paul Klee once said that one had only to take the line out for a walk. It is the freedom of the old Matisse: the hand knows its way through the complex ways which the art of painting has amassed for it throughout all these centuries, settled in its own existence. Freedom and rigour, a room full of light and reflection. A work that spreads out into the view in the window. An artist could not ask for much more. ■

*Translated by Lindsay Edwards*

Left: *In the mirror*, 2013, oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm.  
Artist's own collection