

Anecdotes Evoke Poetry

On the Work of Jan De Maesschalck

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What is the difference between a drawing and a painting? There would appear to be a degree of consensus here. Drawing has to do with lines and tone, with paper as its medium. Painting is about paint, colour and form on canvas or panel. Drawing is fast, painting slow. Drawings usually cost a lot less than paintings. Drawings can also be studies in preparation for a 'larger' work, but there are countless exceptions in this regard.

Sometimes the distinction is unclear or close to irrelevant, and this is the case with respect to the work of Jan De Maesschalck (°1958). He is, for want of a better expression, a painting drawer. Most of his work takes place on paper, although he also uses canvas and panel.

It goes without saying that backgrounds are important – canvas 'absorbs' very differently from paper. But for De Maesschalck it's all about painting. Or alternatively, making images with the material that suits him best.

For several years, a considerable portion of said images were produced for newspapers and magazines such as *Humo*, *De Standaard*, *De Tijd* and *De Morgen*. And while they may, as a rule, have been 'instrumental', De Maesschalck has in the meantime created his own world, image by image.

I have written elsewhere about De Maesschalck's work and I am once again confronted with the same question: how do you describe it? De Maesschalck has been active in the public domain for 25 years, and his works run into the several hundreds. But if you pick one at random, you're obliged to say: De Maesschalck. Why?

A few years ago I wrote the following about De Maesschalck's work: 'The images are somewhere between the ordinary, the strange and the impossible. It's a game designed to slightly unsettle. A frown, a smile, an association, sometimes momentary bewilderment. They conceal an inclination to melancholy, not the unbearable abysmal sort; rather the incurable but not life-threatening sort. There's also sarcasm from time to time, and the occasional splash of mockery, but never maliciousness. And we also see silence, an intense self-evident silence that makes us uneasy. The world in these drawings turns in a placid sound of silence, as if behind glass. It turns inside a head – you can almost hear it whizz. The head, of course, is the head of the artist, but there is



clearly a measure of distance. The glass isn't blurred, as certain artists prefer it to be. It's clear, but it's still there, and it buffers, muffles.'

Untitled (The law of gravitation) (2013), acrylic on paper, 41 x 58 cm

Mild melancholy and irony

Since I wrote the above I've seen new work on a regular basis and have had the opportunity to talk to De Maesschalck about it on occasion. And while what I wrote still stands, good artists tend to become clearer and more complex as they acquire a fixed place in our thoughts as years pass.

Jan De Maesschalck is a melancholy character, so much is clear. Few if any of his images do not testify to this either explicitly or implicitly. But his melancholy is mild, and inalienably combined with a mild irony.

Equally undeniable are his love for material, fascination for light, shadow and reflection, his focus on the female figure, his preoccupation with space and architecture, his need for cultural history, his incessant search for our facial expressions, our shapes and movements, from which perhaps something of the order of a 'soul' might speak – ironically he offers no opinion

From the 'soul' to God is only a few illusions away. And God, like the devil, is in the details. This is where the sensual complexity of his work is to be located. It swarms with detail, details that initiate countless tiny movements and feigned movements.

Piles of books pictured one by one, the meticulous rendering of the blue mosaic tiles in a swimming pool, a long drawn out row of identical benches, apparently endless furrows in a field, countless pebbles on a beach, rows of shelves in a cupboard, a large house with several open windows, uniform bare branches in a winter landscape, a painstakingly perfect manuscript: all bear witness to the pleasure of painting, pleasure that has its roots in the sensual, repetitive concentration of the monk at his desk.

Sensuality is unmistakable in the work of De Maesschalck. It is present thematically in his interest in the female body, for example, in light-filled spaces and landscapes, in the proximity of the everyday, in the muted glow that often characterises his figures. But it is also evident in his technique, shapes, tonalities and use of colour. Time after time we hear the words of the painter, content to leave traces of his 'quest', no matter how the patient, line-perfect 'draftsman' in him would like to go about his business.

Anyone examining these detailed, carefully crafted works will find such traces everywhere. They testify to a nimble swiftness (De Maesschalck works for the most part with quick-drying acrylic paint), to an unexpected lawlessness, to a monk who likes to freewheel and insists on it – without ever denying his place as servant of the images he creates.

Untitled (Valencia 1937)
(2013), acrylic on paper,
53.5 x 82 cm



Longing for a scar

The said images often have two faces, a genuine face and a counterfeit face. Observers can't avoid noticing how 'photographic' De Maesschalck's work appears. In line with many contemporary visual artists, he also works from existing photographs or photographs that he has taken himself and, as he himself insists, he wants to make his images *accessible*. But 'contention' is located in the anomalies – some small, some less so – the shifts, the dislocations, in which the apparent realism transitions into soft surrealism.

I imagine this comes about while the work is being created, that drawing and painting induce their own countermovement, that the expert hand craves a moment of clumsiness, deviation, error. A scar.

A scar is a sign of the time, and time as we know is light; and light marks everything with two meanings. Without light, no shapes, no colours etc. At the same time, light erodes colours and shapes. Light facilitates both creation and decay and in this paradox melancholy thrives. In like fashion to Edward Hopper, whose work he admires so much, light for De Maesschalck is a primary character, or better still, the primary presence. He has painted countless manifestations of light: the light of every season; light in the morning, at noon, in the evening, at night; artificial light, angled light, floodlight, frontal light; light on houses, in interiors, on landscapes, in windows, in water, on our bodies, and also on our faces.

Light is inescapable for every painter, of course, and the painting of light remains an inescapable and perpetual question, an ongoing struggle. Edward Hopper maintained that he had only one ambition: to paint light on a wall. At the end of his life he succeeded and magnificently so.

De Maesschalck and Hopper succeed amazingly in letting light – their light – shine over our elusive presence in the world. They don't do so in a wispy, woolly manner, but concretely and with precision. It is with this precision that they come close to our riddle. And by rendering impermanent light time and again as something inescapable, all sorts of things begin to happen in, around and outside the painting.

By immortalising momentary light, and through the use of framing, perspective, carefully chosen moments, attention to isolated figures, tranquil interiors, unpeopled landscapes, reflective windows and mirrors, alienating objects, De Maesschalck creates a sort of vacuum between motionlessness and motion, between what we see in the image and what we presume before and after it. The precision of his images gives the impression that he has cut through time and space with a scalpel, like cutting into an ice-cream cake with a sharp knife. And things happen in that moment of splitting that are 'impossible', that only the creator of the image could have conceived. De Maesschalck thus draws our attention to the artificiality of his apparently 'lifelike' images.

Painting is also gambling

Having stated clearly and sufficiently that Jan De Maesschalck paints/draws 'keenly', with 'precision', 'realistically' it's now time for me to contradict myself.

It's my good fortune to have a few of his pictures in front of me on the table as I write. It's a pleasure to be able to explore his techniques, his paint, his

Untitled (2011), acrylic on paper, 27.5 x 36.5 cm



Untitled (2010), acrylic on paper, 27.5 x 36.5 cm



Untitled (2013), acrylic on paper, 36.5 x 46.5 cm



articulations, his colours, his light and shadow at close quarters and for as long as I like. But this proximity also has something important to teach me.

The more I look at his better images, the more I realise that De Maesschalck does indeed want to *paint* all the time.

Let me use the German painter Gerhard Richter to illustrate what I mean. 'Painting', Richter wrote, 'has nothing to do with thinking, because in painting, thinking is painting.'

In other words, painting has its own logic. And its own optics, kinetics and memory. And no matter how much a visual artist like De Maesschalck might want to maintain control over his images – they have to be 'right' – the brush and the paint ultimately do their own thing. Painting is also gambling.

Just as painting has its own logic, it also has its own capriciousness. Paint isn't printer's ink and that becomes very clear at close quarters.

In one of De Maesschalck's favourite drawings, we see a woman in profile sitting on a table or cupboard and holding a book in her hands, which rest between her legs. She's half naked, her legs and her rear uncovered. She's sitting in a dark space in front of closed grey curtains. We don't see her face. A successful and typical De Maesschalck drawing, both recognisable and alienating at one and the same time.

When I explore the details, trace the path of the paint, drawing merges into painting, as understood in the modernist sense. Splashes, blunders, 'untidy' fragments, untamed brushstrokes, blurred areas where colours overflow, tiny unidentifiable marks, traces of erasure: all evidence of the actions, hesitations and speculations that are barely perceptible in what appears at first sight to be a 'sharp' image.

In the image I have before me, as in many others, De Maesschalck handsomely combines the two souls inside his heart: the painter and the drawer take pity on one another, like a man shaking hands with himself.

And what does such an *entente* have to tell us? Here also two souls are visible, one epic the other lyrical; a prose writer and a poet. I know of few images by De Maesschalck in which both are not in evidence. The anecdote or narrative is rarely absent, yet poetry is also often verbally present. It's hard to conceive of the one without the other in his work. Anecdotes inspire poetry and poetry has need of the anecdote as its ground of existence. In De Maesschalck's best work both are simultaneous, like a leaf and the wind: inseparable.

Then it doesn't matter what happens. De Maesschalck likes to reveal, let us see how everything is inspired by a sort of elementary silence. Landscape, human being or interior, they're all still-lives in essence. Two girls working at a table in a library deep in concentration, a snow-covered landscape with dark branches like Arabic calligraphy, women reading books in countless shapes and positions, a boy asleep, an abandoned bus stop or hotel room, children playing in a courtyard under excessive light, a grand piano in the middle of a building site: distinct images, but just like the humour and the 'surrealism' in each, the undercurrent of this work is silence.

It's not an unbearable silence – in fact it's even appealing – although it has its roots in the essential desolation of all things. De Maesschalck isn't dramatic about it. His solution is both simple and thorny in equal measure; beauty.

Untitled (Loop) (2012), acrylic on paper, 36.5 x 46.5 cm



At home in itself and nowhere else

And in the middle of it all – the silence, the melancholy and the humour – a great deal of looking is going on, especially by women. Indeed, ‘women looking’ is a constant in his work. And as we know, the eyes together with the hands are the most difficult to paint. Moreover, the eyes, the way someone looks, is also difficult to express in words.

What do the many female eyes De Maesschalck has immortalised have to say to us? All sorts of things. Vulnerability, loftiness, indifference, wonder, introversion. But especially silent amazement.

It seems obvious to suggest that all those eyes, all those looks, reflect De Maesschalck’s own gaze; its restless amazement that can change into surprise and, now and then, into bewilderment. And the ever drawing, painting hand is its accomplice.

In the final analysis, I’m inclined to think that the eyes and the hand are here in search of harmony, rhyme in incongruity, grace in the merciless common-or-garden. Or the other way round: the unreal in the drudgery of the real.

That too makes De Maesschalck’s work attractive; it shuttles lucidly and restlessly between deed and dream and is only at home in itself; in the imagination of the paint. ■

FURTHER READING

Jan De Maesschalck 2005-2014, Teksten/Texts: Bernard Dewulf & Eric Rinckhout, Uitgeverij Hannibal, 2014

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Untitled (2011), oil on wooden panel, 40 x 48 cm

