

Exposition “Let’s play house” - Niels Vaes, Aporia gallery Brussels, April 22-May 14, 2017.

Niels Vaes is a young artist (°1987, Hasselt) working and living in Brussels. Drawing, painting, assembling and building spaces. He is creative and manifold and offers an atypical formal proposition; in this sense he is a typical artist. If we look at the formal content of the works he remains to be an atypical creative.

There is always something happening in the art of Vaes. For instance the materials which he applies as raw building material: wood, concrete, metal, glass, (oil)paint, ink. They are treated as “things existing on their own” within their own history and they become meaningful in the finished artwork. Vaes works them in a free and spontaneous manner and confines them to their essence. He displays the material only in thinly drawn contours. The materials remains visible and absorbs through the painting process, a lightness even in the concrete works. His painterly touch migrates and disperses over the image plane allowing the substances to be themselves. In this sense the style of Vaes could be denoted as postmodern as well as contemporary. Vaes explains his working procedure by proportioning the paint which remains visible in the final work. He does not refer to signs nor symbols (at least not in the exhibited series). He does not correct in the finishing stage which allows a palimpsest to emerge; the materiality provides lines and colors with depth and authenticity.

Coincidence is a buzz word for Vaes. The lines on glass or in the concrete support are paint without a preliminary scheme. The final image emerges from a randomly spread of painted strokes and empty zones on the working plane. The resulting symbiosis between manipulated and open areas have a filling up effect for the beholder’s eyes. If a chronological order would exist in the procedure of Vaes then the first step would be a two-dimensional painting. However by looking closer, the painting is already three-dimensional in that initial stage; a difference in depth exists between the painting on the back side of the glass and the forefront which has not been painted. This suggests that Vaes is painting a three-dimensional volume. The method (églomisé) reoccurs in other parts in his oeuvre and is a connecting element between independent works - it constitutes a part of the artist’s artistic development path. Nevertheless, it is the paint as such that Vaes wants us to see.

The idea or motive for these paintings emerges from a figurative memory which is translated in the creative method. The meaning of the works is not indicated by means of titles. The latter only allude to a number of possibilities. The interpretation lies with the viewer who looks for (formal) analogies as to determine a valid sense. This originates from an effect of colors, movement, weight, layering of paint as well as the materiality of the support. The color effect and movements connect to an emotion relative to the space as well as to the material in the form of paint, concrete, metal. The transformation into different slants and multiple dimensions are not visible at first glance. It invokes apparent paradoxes with the traditional academic language; an abrupt mixture of colors, backgrounds which seem (looking at close range) to misfit the overall frame and perhaps, the regularly painted patterns in a disarray of asynchronous painted strokes. These are visible contradictions that surprise and make the works of Vaes

intensive and interesting. They force the eye to look at and consider the painted surface as a whole. Without referring to any symbols or text, Vaes is convinced to provide enough guidance to the viewer to reach the endpoint in the observation process. There he will experience a sense of relief, détente and calmness. The sentiment goes beyond our common way of thinking because it doesn't relate to any known experiences. Vaes demands a specific effort of personal imagination because the image is situated outside of our day-to-day visual habits and routines. It is a proof of the artistry of Vaes and an illustration of his assertion, fantasy and resourcefulness.

Vaes' works are multilayered and requests for an explicit (re)action of the audience which begins with an invitation to look beyond things and assimilation. What is the subject in Vaes' language of pictures - discomfort, disparity, confusion? If at all we would need to define as such, it would most probably indicate an uneasy state of mind but at the same time an invitation to overcome this condition. The visual language is abstract but portrays the artist's individual emotion. Rather than asking "how does a work of Vaes look?", it would be more appropriate to ask "how does a work by Vaes feels?". This is the more so as the works are clearly abstract. The referral to the artist seems obvious through the energy with which the works were executed. A further question to ask relates to the type of feeling - is it anger or even a stronger protest? The nuance between these two is not apparent at first sight but seem one and the same. This is as accentuated by the octagonal form of the support as an clear demarcation of the place where the action is set as a battle field. The eruption of colors figures a catharsis which smooths out in glowing color waves which pre-figures the start of a healing process.

The materiality underscores the violent outbreak as an outspoken individual statement. Despite the density of the applied materials the art pieces radiate a lightness as an (personal) encouragement to escape this confusion and puzzlement of the mind. The materials are shown in their lightest form and configuration as a means to emphasize that healing is already on its way. This is the invitation and message for and from the artist and to the viewer. At this point subject and direct object seem to coincide with one another giving the art of Vaes an aura of general truth.

Still, as the proposition emerges from the artist it is the artist who is the genuine subject of these art pieces.

Bart Roefmans, Brussels, 12 April, 2017.