

## ***Jan De Vliegheer Went Fishing***

Written by Prof. Dr. Willem Elias

The essence of Jan De Vliegheer's painting is in that he reverses the basic principle of abstraction. If someone were to ask you to define modernism in one word, chances are you would give the right answer, which would certainly be 'abstraction'. This movement emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, although it began earlier in the nineteenth century. In 1810, Goethe published his 'Theory of Colors' describing the difference between warm and cool colors. Many scientific studies on color and form were then soon to follow. The general assumption was that colors held meaning, and were generally regarded as symbols for something else. People have believed since the origin of mankind that there was a kind of archaic language of color and aesthetic symbols must have some kind of psychological meaning. Physiology studied the effects of colors on the body. Linguists searched for syntax for color. Beginning in 1875, psychological experiments developed to examine how a person reacts to colors - whether he or she is attracted or repelled by any one color. But it was not until the start of the 20th century that the abstract movement took this knowledge and created abstract paintings. The founders of this movement were Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich. The basic principle of this modernism is that painting should neither mimic, nor express reality and that reality can be reduced to the relative proportions of colored forms.

One of the characteristics of postmodernism is its reversal of this rule: postmodernism suggests that there is no need for abstraction. Postmodernism believes that there can be figuration in relative proportions of color forms. According to postmodernism, figuration is, in fact, always abstract, because its underlying aesthetic will - to a larger or a lesser extent - always be based on various kinds of proportions of color and form.

In these paintings by Jan De Vliegheer, this is true to the greatest extent. His fish - the subject of his exhibition at Mike Weiss Gallery - are swimming in such a way where their shape justifies their presence. No matter how polychromous they may be by nature, they take on the color that JDV imposes on them, based on his composition.

If you'd like proof of this: we can imagine turn the work, and the water will not run out of it. The fish will not escape from where they belong, according to the composition that is based on the principles of abstraction. A fish is, after all, just a spotted smudge of paint. The theme of Koi fish fits perfectly within the logic of his oeuvre: it is something quite ordinary that has an unusual and hidden meaning. Though it is but a means for De Vliegheer's act of painting, it represents another layer of intention: a reflection on the cultural values of human beings and a questioning of these values' impenetrable foundation - or is it an abyss?

De Vliegheer has painted busts, landscapes, classical interiors, decorative plates and wineglasses - and now he is painting fish, but not just any fish, only the best: the sought-after koi carp.

Why? Is it that he has been focusing on culture for too long and now longs for nature? Certainly not. Man can never know nature. As soon as man sees nature, he turns it into culture. Whenever man is looking at a landscape, he sees the relativism of its cultural connection. Humanity loves cultivating nature - with domestication at its pinnacle. Chickens can range freely, within the boundaries of the coop and the orchard, and cats are free to roam, but separated to ensure that they go no further than the neighbor's garden, while birds have to remain in cages and fishes in tanks or pools. The evolutionary journey from the

wolf to a pampered mutt on your lap - or the scruffy mongrel in the street, depending on its owner— has taken quite some doing by civilization, and what is clear is man's determination to dominate and domesticate nature, at all cost. The freedom of fish is limited, and with koi as living works of art, their owner is distinguished by the fact that he possesses them.

The koi motif also fits in wonderfully with De Vlieghe's habitual, yet idiosyncratic 'series'. *Cyprinus carpio*, also known as brocade carp, is Japan's national fish. In order to improve them they have been mutated to produce various colored offspring. They are expensive and have become collectables. In this sense, they can be considered a metaphor for art: they are beautiful, costly and provide people with the opportunity to own something that distinguishes them. This is in line with Jan De Vlieghe's subject of choice: the glory and transience of art in the human psyche and the culture that springs from it.

The koi fit in well with his castle gardens, bourgeois interiors, portraiture, institutional architecture, decorative plates, wine glasses only the rich sip from, that transcend their function, and that all of this may be trivial, but ostensibly it is telling. These objects reveal an old aesthetic of power, that in which beauty was a rigidly determined entity, and was equal to the truth and that which is good. These objects illustrate how wealth is not measured by the weight of gold, but by showing it off. These signs are a reoccurring theme in Jan De Vlieghe's oeuvre. These are the symbols of dominant culture. However neutral De Vlieghe's point of view may be, he reveals the culture to us, and also questions it. His subject matter emanates from the faded glory of symbols of power. Hardly a coincidence, the way he paints these objects emphasizes their transience.

Figurative or not, Jan De Vlieghe did learn from abstract expressionism, from Pollock's drips, a high point in the freedom of painting, to the creative destruction of figuration, as demonstrated by Willem De Kooning, he learns from these great examples. Just so there is no misunderstanding: the grid-like spot patterns surrounding his figures are not technical errors, but a pictorial search for a new aesthetic, and a relation to the old one. To counter the habitual order of society he proposes a joyous, vivacious disorder, characteristic of a new society. He paints from the shoulder, a liberating technique that was transmitted from the lyrical abstractionists I mentioned earlier, and allows for greater expression than working from the wrist. His dynamic energy precludes the patience to wait for one layer to dry before adding the next one. So he paints 'alla prima', wet on wet, like the innovative painters of Monet and Van Gogh before him. There is a sharp contrast between the rather strict aesthetic of old decorative pieces and his utterly free, possibly even frivolous, painting technique. After his grey and off-white period of the nineties, in which alienation was often the pervading mood, expressed for instance by evoking the atmosphere of the years before and after World War Two, recently Jan De Vlieghe is using a vivid, lively color palette. It is a feast for the eye, painted in a fluid manner. Painting 'loosely' from the shoulder is more liberating than painting 'loosely' from the wrist. It is a tribute to the art of painting itself.

Another important aspect of his technique is his all-over-composition. This is the method he uses to organize shape and color on the canvas, according to a geometric or lyrical system, and in this aspect Jan De Vlieghe harks back to the Italian early renaissance. Yet it is a rhythmic repetition of shapes all over the surface and that seem to continue beyond its edges that suggest the abstract expressionism movement from which Jan De Vlieghe's found his main source of inspiration: Jackson Pollock's dripping, Willem De Kooning's destruction and Cy Twombly's colorful scratches are specific points of reference for his work.

Also, De Vliegheer is closer to Duchamp than one might surmise. His designs – even the koi carp - are ready-mades in the sense that they do not, in fact, have any fundamental significance. According to Duchamp's principle it is the artist who decides what is art – never mind whether he produces it or not. Jan De Vliegheer could have illustrated this by incorporating other elements in his compositions or painting non-figuratively. Yet, this is abstract painting as a De Vliegheer can be perfectly well hung upside down. Duchamp's ready-mades stimulate the viewer to reflect. Though Jan De Vliegheer certainly does not intend to impart any social message upon the viewer, his work does trigger reflection about eastern and western culture and in particular about contemporary painting.

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Willem Elias obtained his Ph.D. in Philosophy in 1989, studying the relationship between education and contemporary art theory. He studied Ancient Languages, Ethics, Leisure Studies and Science Development at the Free University of Brussels (VUB), and Museology and Adult Studies at the University of Leiden. Presently, he teaches Adult and Cultural Studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, he directs research in these fields, and he is the dean of the faculty of Psychology & Educational Sciences. He is an art critic and the chairman of the Higher Institute for Fine Arts (Hoger Instituut voor Schone Kunsten). In 2003, he became a member of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Sciences and Arts, section Arts (Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten in de Klasse van de Kunsten). In 2009 he became a member of the Belgian Ageing Studies team. He works and writes on the topic of ageing from a philosophical perspective.