

Ben Cloots, an authentic artist

In this essay I shall attempt to interpret the works of Ben Cloots; an endeavour to try and grasp the specific artistic message of the paintings and drawings that he has created over the past decade. In doing so I shall let myself be shepherded insofar as possible, by two important art theoreticians: Anton Ehrenzweig and Umberto Eco,

As a rule Ben Cloots' work is not easy to read, certainly not at first glance. One needs time. Careful reading is required. The initial impression of his large small paintings give is one of feasts of colours, lines and shapes that subsequently turn into more abstract structures that may evoke a landscape.

Afterwards, when the dialogue between the spectator and the artist develops and when the spectator, from his unconscious, searches for the unconsciousness of the creation process, each and every one of these paintings unveils unexpected things. With Ben Cloots one feels the presence of a deliberate coincidence in his abstract substructures. Intellect and feeling in a perfect union here.

The quest for perfect order is one's primal task when viewing his work. What is hidden under the works' surface? An inner wealth that one can decipher in the entirely abstract substructure of the paintings, hence beyond the landscape.

Anton Ehrenzweig, the psychoanalysis-inspired art theoretician introduced and explained the idea of hidden order in the interpretation of art in his standard work 'The hidden order of Art. A study of the psychology of artistic imagination' (Paladin, London, 1970), thereby providing a very worthwhile key to understanding abstract art. It is necessary that the spectator, certainly someone looking at Ben Cloots' work, do so through unconscious perception. Every creative quest of the art lover's eye thus implies a broad range of possible choices that largely exceed conscious comprehension. It is like the viewing is done with an inner eye.

Ben Cloots' paintings can be read in several different ways. They are open works of art, to which the spectator can make his own contribution, Art historians have made several different comments about his work. Marc Bourgeois looks at the technical process in the painting. Ann Woedstadt points out the work's dual nature, between the figurative and the abstract, between order and chaos. Daniël Ostyn stresses the rich and purely pictorial in Ben Cloots' style and Johan Van Cauwenberghe emphasises the open nature of his artworks. Are they landscapes or bodies?

It is remarkable what everyone chooses to underline. Looking at Ben Cloots' work is therefore an adventure, but essentially remains a form of communication in the sense that he himself gives identifying marks, springboard to reading his works: the titles. But even the painting itself refers to the primordial elements of painting: brush technique and colouring.

Semiotician Umberto Eco, one of the major writers and thinkers of recent times, famous for his novels 'In the Name of the Rose' and 'Foucault's Pendulum' is also the author of 'Opera Aperta' - the open work - an essay on art theory (Milan, 1962). He would undoubtedly qualify Ben Cloots' work as 'open', because his paintings offer several ways of reading them. And because his work is not only about him but also about the other, the spectator, it provides scope for a personal interpretation of it.

An attempt at concluding now. Ben Cloots is an artist that departs from vague landscape facts or impressions of time that he abstracts from and transposes into abstraction. In addition to that he is a real contemporary painter who pays heed to issues of colour, shape and lines, layers and transparency and places signs within these pictorial fields: figures and arrows.

In this perspective he is an artist who has remained true to Modernism and whose work is akin to Fundamental Painting as it has been since the 1970s until now. He is an artist whose authenticity has earned him a real place in the rich spectrum of art in Flanders,

Ernest Van Buynder

Honorary President of the association M HKA

Painting is the colouring of a process. A process is setting previous history in order.

Ben Cloots' recent canvasses attest to a linear and systematic evolution in a surprisingly sharp way. Springing from pictorial abstractions of chaos, his current paintings reach a remarkable level of serene synthesis. Ben Cloots has departed from most of the concrete references in favour of some light colours applied with broad brush strokes.

Distancing oneself from reality is never an easy affair. Nevertheless there are retrievable historical developments that channel the train of thought followed. Since the nineteenth century, ever-changing lines of approach and starting points have produced a spectacular increase of what is on offer in terms of iconography, Micro- and macro-visions, literary and philosophical connections have invariably led to an 'open' style of painting.

In Ben Cloots' work, figuration slowly makes way for an almost architectural structuring of areas with pure abstraction as a consequence. The work surpasses any anecdotal narrative. It conjures up ethereal atmospheres and underscores the significance of spatial impression. Essence is reached: a supreme sensibility crystallised in colourful and strong areas of tension with their own aesthetic to boot.

Some signs, tones, hyphens have their role to play in the midst of these wide spaces. A dialogue comes about. What is more everything is painted solidly, fluidly, poised and in true virtuoso style,

Thus Ben Cloots gives good old 'universal' abstraction a fresh impetus and a personal, carefully thought-out content, both violent and calm.

Marc Bourgeois

Member of the Art Committee of the Province of Antwerp

Member of the Belgian and International Association of Art Critics

Ben Cloots' paintings mainly have 'space' as their subject.

Is it therefore surprising that one day they will literally unfold in space?

That they'll fold together like origami?

That they'll get bronze wings?

It's remarkable how Ben Cloots succeeds in making a transition from the pictorial to the sculptural; or how he can seamlessly switch from two to three dimensions without a change in style. He succeeds in linking organic textures to geometric, constructivist, almost architectonic dimensions. This makes for an intriguing balancing exercise in which the occupancy of the surrounding space provokes forthright esthetic experiences. In short, his images are strong in all their fragile vulnerability!

Marc Bourgeois

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Writing a contribution about Ben Cloots' recent work is not an easy task. The dialogue with the work is not always straightforward. In order to test our feeling we sent a picture of a painting (Groot Eiland I) to different friends all over the world without sending them the title and asked them for their interpretation of it. The descriptions were extremely divergent. The painting was interpreted as the portrayal of a human figure in all sorts of positions. Others describe a landscape, which tallied with the title. In our view this is positive for Ben Cloots' work, The painter does not push the spectator in a straitjacket in terms of choice. He gives you full freedom.

However for Ben Cloots, his works are an expression of the impressions that remained within him of the landscapes that touched him during his numerous travels around Europe. He has transformed these impressions into lyrical creations, But a question still remains: might he have made use of the human body in order to illustrate all these impressions of landscapes and thereby put some order in the chaos that some landscapes bring with them? Moreover, Man is ultimately also an element of the contemporary landscape. That is why the artist reaches the boundary between the figurative and the abstraction thereof in some of his works.

We have to promptly add that this interpretation is not applicable to all of Ben Cloots' works. His pastels are painted a lot more abstractly and serenely, and when grouped together they reinforce each other as a portrayal of a varied landscape. Furthermore, the landscape here is depicted in its essence, free from chaos and turmoil.

This distinct vision of the landscape, where nature and culture are reconciled, is achieved by Ben Cloots with an art of painting that comes from gut (lyrical, not always rational). He gives it his all. Colours are going their own thing in this whole, Blue, red and more recently also orange are the predominant colours.

These colours provide a tasteful, poised but lyrical image. The colours have a life of their own.

Ben Cloots uses these colours in a controlled way. Oil paint is used in broad peaceful and large, layered areas, that sometimes cover each other, and are transparent at times so as to play off depth and space against each other. In this chaos, unity and peace are reached by the addition of lines, figures and letters. Is this at the same time a manifestation of Man's contribution in the lay-out of the landscape?

Different art connoisseurs and museum directors describe Ben Cloots' work as excellent, painted smoothly and in the style of a virtuoso. A fresh impetus and a personal yet passionate content is given to universal abstraction, fierce and restrained at the same time.

The opinions uttered by these experts really correspond to how Ben Cloots views art and the practice of art. He once said: 'All art and all we know consists of four things in essence: lines, shapes, colours and tones. As an artist you try to strike an aesthetic harmony and try to translate this into a painting or a statue. In short you try to create a specific work of art. All shapes around us are communication. Communication is a story that you try and transmit. That story can speak to you or not.'

Ben Cloots is a unique artist who has surprised us in his recent works by obliging us to look at the essence of the landscape in his self-willed way.

Dr Frank Daelemans

Honorary Head of the Department of the Royal Library of Belgium