

Fragments and Landscapes

On the paintings of Magda Amarioarei

by Koen Wastijn\*

*"The Cro-Magnons lived with fear and amazement in a culture of Arrival, facing many mysteries. Their culture lasted for some 20,000 years. We live in a dominant culture of ceaseless Departure and Progress that has so far lasted two or three centuries. Today's culture, instead of facing mysteries, persistently tries to outflank them." (This quote is from John Berger, one of the first people to visit Chauvet, home of the oldest cave paintings in the world - The Guardian.)*

### Introduction

Painting is definitely one of the most difficult (maybe even 'the' most difficult), ungrateful and merciless yet, at the same time, one of the most convenient media to allow an artist to convey what an artist should convey: his world.

Convenient, because any viewer and potential buyer has established a culture-long relationship with it. (No doubt the artist has acquired an important lead over the other media, which have slipped from church-bound art to the walls of a private patron of the arts...). Thus the average art lover feels more comfortable looking at painting than looking at any other art medium, and will more easily purchase it.

Painting simply survives any crisis, and its market is cyclic.

At the same time, this commercial advantage puts the artist in a bad light.

Not to mention the 'ars combinatoria' phenomenon (the art of combining and recombining a pre-existing register of painterly tools, visual acquisitions, strategies and concepts of how to proceed to trick and convince the viewer. Knowing his art history and doing his homework while painting, and yet desperately avoiding the clichés and traps of the wider world of visual references - with the exception of postmodern phenomena).

So yes, the big issue in painting is to paint without this kind of tips and tricks... and certainly to dare to suffer, unconsciously, from some sort of amnesia... meaning the ability to let oneself go.

(Kokoschka once said, after leaving art school: "Now one has to unlearn how to paint").

Now deliberately ignoring his homework and art history is one thing. However, to acknowledge that there is somehow an enormous amount of 'forgotten and collectively stocked information' is quite another. That sort of information which keeps on 'popping up' once in a while and, instead of creating some kind of repulsion and turning oneself into a neurotic behaviourist, one has to be confident of things to come on the canvas.

A good painting simply has to survive a surgical analysis from the critical operation table. It is more than the mere sum of its organs.

It is almost a "creature" which has seen and accumulated, layer upon layer, a long-forgotten history of collective and particular humans bits and pieces.

Part of cultural evolution. It has its own Darwin.

Starting from the very first signs made on the organic, deeply-hidden cave walls that Cro-Magnons left behind them thousands of years ago, signs which truly challenged the magic world around them, right up to some chalk white wall of a contemporary gallery of today, a museum, a company, or simply a comfortable home like the one we return to.

Situations, indeed, where those signs certainly have a different sort of impact.

Those contact signs, this discharge between that dark, hidden cave wall and the stretched canvas today, is supposed to be the same heartbeat. But is it really?

Is an artist today aware of all this, not too intimidated by the pressure we put on him by asking him to translate this worldly confusion into one comprehensible, orderly chaos within reason?  
Does an artist have to be confident about letting those dormant bubbles pop up to the surface without controlling it, like a heartbeat while asleep?

### Landscape as a constant

A German painter (was it Baselitz or Kiefer?) once wrote that, 'at the end of the day', Mondrian had done nothing more than straighten out the branches of the trees in his early paintings. The Mondrian 'constellations' of +, - and = signs, starting with the fabulous 'Ocean' series (1914), through 'Jetty and Ocean' (1914) up to 'Composition 10 in black and white' (1916) and 'Composition in line' (1916) were supposed to be the tinkling of the rays of the sunrise or sunset on the water, seen from the bank or pier of some other place in the Netherlands. It's as simple as that. The purely physical observation, perhaps randomly, which led to an extremely radical body of work, sounds truly 'demythifying' in this particular case. Originally just images burned on the retina... tinklings.

Or looking at Malevitch's 'Black Square', one could easily isolate the underlying classic Russian icon. There is a shortcut from the Slovak use of colour in religious and folkloristic art to the world renowned and widely consumed 'Marilyn' or 'Mao' pieces...

So, a lot of 'edgy' (or preferably named avant-garde) art contains the viable dose of oxygen to last through the lifelong career and culture-long art history. That dose of fresh air that is sufficient to develop an intelligent and universal 'language'.

Landscape, in that sort of language, is one of the most frequently recurring items, making it an almost cosmological constant.

Is it not 'the thing' we want to turn to when we try to forget all we have accumulated in the course of a hardworking and precarious life. Is it where the painter finally gives in?

In Magda's case it is one of the key substances that lies undigested in the belly of her work. When I saw her paintings for the first time in Liège, she told me that she was Romanian. I was stunned by a series of rather small, monochrome canvases depicting foggy landscapes or urban areas, unsentimental, but making sense by insisting on 'that landscape thing'. Light years away from the usual range of typical and cliché-loaded post-perestroika art.

### In more detail

Later on the landscape element was developed further, but the figurative and representational part was put aside in favour of something more hybrid, plastic and screenplay-like. Some of her paintings show a 'gaping wound' or opening which leads into some earlier timeframe, or even into a completely different visual cell. The gaze is trapped in a telluric fault line and rebounds towards the surface. As if one cannot control one's view. Then, on the surface, there appear strange figurative 'suggestions' or visual embryonic details such as a tube, part of a dug-up, broken gas system or waterworks... or even the remains of some abandoned kindergarten.

Magda's work is full of such modest traces, like a couple of branches or a heap of leaves, or simple narrative remnants, or the beginnings of 'stories'. But they all refer, in one way or another, to the elements of a classical landscape. And then, suddenly, a clear-cut, razor-like geometrical surface tears open the painting. And the

setting has again changed its channel or course.

Propositions for spatial divisions, which challenge any logical control.

On certain lacerated, geometrical complications, the colour spills over into the 'woods' or onto an underlying layer, and in these layers to some conduits, which then abruptly stop.

Then comes the feeling of a vacuum.

Or even of ubiquity, detailing, fragmentation and image zoom. All tools which try to organise a new operating system.

To think is to show, and to show is to think. The work is not simply a matter of seeing, but by seeing it, making it yourself, making some sort of understanding of what unfolds in front of you (and in you)... So it reads like a sketchy storyboard, with its decisions and hesitations and half marks. The painter often lets the viewer conclude the piece.

In that sense, the work testifies to a remarkable maturity. The painter allows you to drift in and out during the whole painting process, opening up her methodology in front of you.

Also, Magda often groups her works in sets of 2 or 3 canvases.

She puts the size of the canvases in perspective.

Large and small formats.

A smaller size might offer a more spacious opening than the larger size. The configuration of the paintings forms a complex script, allowing for visual complexities, which take over the stories from each other.

One of the most curious features in her most recent pieces is that they all contain the same building blocks (not unlike 'minecraft'), like some sort of DNA.

Some paintings are the result of a longer timespan. It could even be several years.

She 'launches' pieces, puts them aside and takes them up again months later, according to the demands of the moment.

The canvases are 'woken up' and updated on that very time-territorial information of the past 2 years.

One of the pieces that bears witness to this weird, geological layer-mechanism is an exquisite painting which shows, at its base, a large, light blue spot.

A sort of synthetic blue, surrounded by a moss green bank. Tranquility at first.

But the pool could even be highly toxic. One can sense that.

Above this peaceful scenery floats an industrial smog-like, mutating 'mechanism'.

Is it a plastic reckoning between opposite registers?

Ground and underground?

It reminds one of some Renaissance painting, for example, the altarpiece of Saint-Cecilia by Raphael, painted in his later years. This masterpiece shows the metaphysical taking over from the earthbound worries. Saint-Cecilia, her eyes fixed on the hereafter, lets her musical instruments slip out of her grip. Pure metaphysics, duelling with gravity.

In another piece, perhaps, the most minimal of the entire show, the separation of the two registers is even more clear. The bottom part cracks away (a bit like the 1974 'Splitting' American house of Gordon Matta Clark). Were it not for the fact that the underlying layer is a marvellous atmospheric blue, it would not have been mentioned here, but it is trapped under the upper part, the house detail part: an open door? One has the impression that the day part is trapped under the night part.

When asked for the exact colour of that 'door opening', Magda answered " Prussian blue mixed with Van Dyck brown". A very profound colour indeed to confront the atmospheric blue of the 'day' part.

Some of her colours simply liquify and mingle, like a relaxed social situation, or the colours rub against each other until some sharp geometrical entity aggressively cuts through the fluffy zone.

Never total peace.

## Screenplay

Another noteworthy piece features a misty landscape with pine trees...(a crossover between Swennen and Schwitters in his Norwegian period?)

High up, a dark brown stain (night?) next to an azure blue spot (day?).

At first one sees a realistic representation of the trees, pine-green coloured, evolving into a schematic, almost comic drawing, while the colours shift from a pinkish yellow to an orangey light green. And finally, at the bottom, a pure, linear, bluish tree.

The painting almost functions like a tutorial of how to paint a pine tree in different styles, a quick do-it-yourself kit of compressed painting techniques, all rotating around the same subject... waiting for the sun.

Magda Amarioarei's latest pieces are a painterly treat.

They possess this very fragile balance typical of a tightrope walker, progressing along the wire, and making that risky step beyond that point where all symmetry is irretrievably broken.

*"Things emerge when the equilibrium is destroyed, when something goes astray." (Slavoj Zizek)*

\* Koen Wastijn is a contemporary artist living in Brussels