

Hans Theys

Something about the minimal, the humble and the tender New paintings by Hadrien Loumaye

First something about the minimal

Donald Judd writes somewhere that sculptors and architects never think about space. The only one who has given it any thought, he writes, is Giacometti. He goes on to suggest that we start thinking about space. I quote from memory. "First you take a stone," he writes, "and you wonder where you can put it and how. Then you take a second stone and wonder where you can put it and how." Sometimes we are allowed to think as crudely as that. Especially in the ugliest country in the world, where you won't find a single beautiful park, square or street.

The power of the minimal consists in the possibility of variation. The fewer parameters you use to allow a work of art to come into being, the greater the scope for variation. We see this in the work of Walter Swennen, who uses very few colours. We see it with Bernd Lohaus, Berlinde De Bruyckere, Ann Veronica Janssens, Tamara Van San, Laurence Petrone and Hadrien Loumaye.

There are not that many different musical notes (more than seven, but fewer than a hundred, I think), not that many chemical elements, not that many numbers and letters, not that many phonemes (about thirty per language), not that many words, not that many ideas and feelings. But the number of variations is infinite.

The Chinese painter Zhang Xiaoxia pointed out to me that Chinese traditional painting consists mainly of black stains, lines and dots. Sometimes a little bit of colour is added. He himself tried to introduce a touch of green. We find a similar simplicity in etchings and engravings. If we look at Ensor's *View of Nieuwpoort*, we find curved lines for the contours of the clouds, dots for the building blocks of the church, short, thick lines for the grass and thinner lines for the ripples and reflections on the surface of the water. There are not many different types of lines, but there are many, many different etchings.

This is also the case in Hadrien Loumaye's recent work. We see monochrome-looking paintings made up of several transparent layers (usually) of one colour. The layers don't completely cover each other, so we see different values of one tone, of one colour. This disparity creates atmospheric (nebulous) or pictorial (resulting from the contrasts between colours or values) depth. Sometimes some brushstrokes are applied. They are not geometric or figurative, but they are recognizable as Loumaye's typical movements: a dance-like carving in space. The painter's interventions are visible and legible because they are limited in number.

At a later stage, two canvases were physically combined to create a new ensemble. Later on, some of these canvases were no longer rectangular. In this way Loumaye created a new, personal world that doesn't threaten ours.

Then something about the humble

Twenty years ago, I wrote that the minimal (not 'minimalist') work of a now prominent female artist was humble; that she related to the world, the exhibition spaces and the visitors with humility. A handful of female authors writing in German, French and American catalogues have since fought this

observation tooth and nail. They regard as reprehensible the suggestion that (the work of) a woman can be humble. They prefer to write highfalutin nonsense that resembles the hot air used by blind theorists to praise male artists. They prefer to adopt old-fashioned arguments, which appear to lend weight to an oeuvre that is secretly considered too light, too thin. (True to the age-old principle of categorizing what you don't understand and covering it with the epithets of yesteryear.)

Humility is the attitude of the agnostic, the person who knows that he, she or they cannot be certain about anything. Humility is the attitude of the Taoist sage who does not speak or act, who does not believe that things have to be steered. It's a polite form of being, we might say. And not without the highest ambition: the desire to leave the world intact by intervening as little as possible.

And finally something about the tender

This work is tender. Presumably this says something about the author. Not because he has 'expressed' or 'translated' his own tenderness, but because anxious, egocentric, noisy, arrogant, dominant artists are unable to make low-key work. They have to manifest themselves loudly because they are hollow, empty, needy, hollow, needy and full of emptiness.

By chance I met the author of these paintings. I have established that he reads and paints continuously. The last two years he has come a long way, following a path that seems to lead inwards and towards things that are almost nothing.

For fellow scribes who like to shape their writing by contradicting my statements, I want to add that 'humility' is not the same as 'humiliation'. And that politeness can go hand in hand with a healthy ambition, which for true artists is nothing more than claiming the right to be who they are, and the right to act as they please artistically.

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