

Life Abbreviated

Whenever we encounter in a work of art some awkwardness or abbreviation that strikes us as ‘not realistic’ or ‘true to life’ [...] we should ask ourselves the question: What *other* aspect of the thing seen or event imagined does the ‘unrealistic’ notation make vivid?¹

From encountering an art work to writing about it, art criticism is always inevitably situational. To suggest otherwise would be disingenuous, a concession to that peculiar thing of sovereign, uninterrupted judgment, as if we can ever be unobliged: no mysteries of the self, no plastic in the oceans, no flirtations or bills to pay (where does the list of interruptive anxieties end?). We are the sum of our experiences in relation to, becoming with, art works. And writing is the opportunity to synthesise forms of attentiveness, care and reflection brutalised out of everyday life, and perhaps inaccessible in the encounter with art works. I write works into meaningful existence for myself and, hopefully, for others too.

Here’s the situation: For the past few weeks I’ve been reading the distinguished art historian T.J. Clark’s most recent book, *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come*. Using mostly examples of the late medieval and early modern period – Giotto, Bruegel, Poussin, and Veronese – Clark considers the ways painting has given form to religious and political imaginings of heaven on earth. A focus on this period is, for Clark, to renounce the idealism of a later period. ‘A succeeding Enlightenment,’ he writes, ‘is no longer for us.’

The wonderful easy godlessness of French painting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, still my teacher of the beauty and depth that so-called ‘secularization’ can attain, has little to tell us, sadly, as men in orange jumpsuits plead for their lives on camera. We need the wisdom – which includes the bitterness – of men for whom the *Massacre of the Innocents* and the smell of heretics’ burnt flesh were commonplace.²

It feels like we’re merely surviving, not flourishing, in a stasis time that belies the real veer towards ugly populist right-wing forms of nationalism in the West. Or, if the burnt flesh is not that of civil wars, it is of heat stroke caused by ozone depletion and summertime in winter.

Too, Clark’s book is concerned with the relationship between words and pictures, specifically the force and intensity of paintings to convey worlds and ideas that elude language. Yet, despite wanting to attend to painting’s intelligences, Clark finds he can’t give up words, writing of Giotto’s panel painting *Joachim’s Dream* (c.1303–05) that ‘I need prose – I think art history in general needs prose – to circle round the emptiness, the lack of connection, at *Dream’s* heart’.³

I recognise my own texts on art works as squints into specific situations at the time of writing: they circle around works, words, structures, ideas; more personally, all those obligations. Now I’m writing, puzzling over the seductive fortuitousness of finding *Heaven on Earth* while thinking about Charlotte’s Develter’s paintings. Not a set of legitimising

¹ T.J. Clark, *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come*, Thames & Hudson, 2018, p.52.

² *Ibid.*, p.16.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

theoretical precepts to hang this work on, the text is a frame, or even a tracery overlay. *Amit, Yentl, Hoitz, Laurea, Murrle* and *Stapleton* (all 2018). Somehow these works 'speak to' many of the ideas above.

Develter's abstract paintings seem at first curiously opaque, mysterious. Each of these works, made using traditional means of oil, acrylic, pastel, enamel and graphite on canvas, demonstrate a self-consciously painterly approach to the medium. Aside from the occasional seams, folds and weaves that bisect the pictures, physically holding canvas sections together, there are no lines, only gradients in fields of surface colour and tone. Outlines of forms are not defined by hard edges but emerge, mirage-like, as shadowy contours that catch illuminating light from elsewhere. In Develter's paintings dynamic composition suggest finely-leveraged relations of causality.

Quite aside from the canvas' overdetermined horizontal orientation, the paintings' various lines, whether those seams bisecting the canvas or those defined negatively by contours, invariably suggest landscapes. Landscapes that are particularly barren, inward. Once we view them as such it's impossible to go back. Develter's formal painterly surfaces and layered images – the display of the canvas stitch and weave and the painterly tricks of peel-backs, folds and shadows as signals of knowing virtuosity – seem to want to disrupt this view. Not unlike the strange rocky outcrops at the intersection of heaven and earth in *Joachim's Dream*, they also share something of the metaphysical thickness of Giorgio de Chirico's late afternoon plazas, evoked by little more than scale and shadow.

Perhaps it is the bareness of the landscapes and Develter's knowing pictorial technique – not to mention her own reticence on the work – that leaves me with the feeling that language has no place in these paintings? There are titles but they offer no 'real world' referential anchorage: each consists of syllabic sounds that for Develter produce sound sensations associated with the image. It is an abstract language accompanying imagined places. Each should be regarded on their own as emergent propositions. Resisting identification and association, these works remind us of painting's genuinely radical alterity – its enigmatic power to be strange and separate to us. Not affirmative. Problems to decipher. If Develter's paintings strike us as 'not realistic' we might ask ourselves the question: What *other* aspect of the thing seen or event imagined does the 'unrealistic' notation make vivid?

This question is complicated in 'Mandelfierst' by the single-screen moving image work, *Montanea* (2018), which sets a narrative voiced by Suzanne, a fictional character recurring across Develter's work, to simple computer-generated images of contours. Suzanne, we learn, remembers a time when it was employed by Develter for a period 'when the world contracted a disease'. Speaking as if from the near-future, Suzanne describes a collapse of global systems: the sun went out just like a dying ember, women were liberated, and the deserts expanded. Held between liberation and catastrophe, an imaginary point-of-view hovers above, below and between hazy contours that suggest a desert storm. Here, wherever *Montanea* is, the horizon has vanished. No intersection between the heavens and earth.

Is Suzanne some fully-autonomous non-human entity, or merely the evolved human of the future, no longer living in pure lands, resilient to the growing deserts and the multiplying mirages? A being contented with 'the tension between the certainty of a goal and the impossibility of reaching it'? What *other* aspect of the thing seen or event imagined does the 'unrealistic' notation make vivid?

Jonathan P. Watts is a contemporary art critic based in the U.K.