

Ms. Nouwen

Ms. Nouwen is a painter. But she could just as easily be described as an iconoclast: in her case, to paint means as much applying oil paint to canvas as it does destroying the paintings thus created. But don't be mistaken... This destructive act is not the result of frustration and incapacity: Ms. Nouwen possesses all the qualities of a virtuoso academic painter, acquired during her years of apprenticeship at the Antwerp Academy. According to her, painting in a photo-realistic way is a relaxing activity, a distraction. No, Ms. Nouwen has rather a revenge to take on the world of images.

Dozens of printed photographs lie on her work table. The very ones that she reproduces on her canvases before making them disappear under a magma of coloured oil. A quick glance at the multitude of photographs reveals the artist's taste for an iconography of violence, both physical and mental. Photos gleaned during readings, saved during surfing on the net or reproductions of her own paintings at various stages of execution, all the images testify to an extraordinary intellectual curiosity and an insatiable visual appetite. Nouwen explains that before being scattered on her table, these images were hung on the wall, grouped according to categories and principles that Aby Warburg, the founder of iconology, would not have disavowed: pareidolia, surrealism, objects, crucifixions...

When asked about the nature of her link to the Christian religion, Ms. Nouwen hastens to affirm her current agnosticism before evoking her education in a Catholic context, confessing an exacerbated obsession with the image of the crucifixion and talking about regular visits to St. Andrew's Church located a few hundred meters from her studio. There, between Palm Sunday and Easter, she relishes the efforts of Father Mannaerts, a former art historian, to reintroduce the "canvases of passion": in front of the sculptures and paintings in the church are stretched out large purple fabrics to hide them from the view of the faithful. A visual Lent that the iconoclast Ms. Nouwen savours with pleasure.

On the floor of the studio, in front of a series of large canvases facing the wall, another multitude of images. Printed for the most part on glossy photographic paper, dozens of A4-size photographs have been vividly covered with touches of oil paint. When asked about these marvels of pictorial improvisation in which humour and blackness of soul are mixed, Ms. Nouwen confided that she had already produced several hundreds of them... without ever having considered them as real works. Nevertheless, she plans to exhibit them all in the near future. Brushed at a brisk pace, a naked body appears crucified in the structure of a painter's easel, reducing to the absurd the painful path of the artist in the discovery of the infinity of the pictorial domain.

To paint a painting requires several months of hard work from Ms. Nouwen. The paintings are not done one after the other but concomitantly. Several texts, written by fine amateurs and connoisseurs of the mysteries of oil painting, have so far examined

Ms. Nouwen's work, paying more attention to the stages of their creative process than to their iconography. The revolution visible in the latest canvases should bring about a reversal of this trend. The painter no longer seeks to remove hyperrealistic motifs from the viewer's gaze by covering them with abstract motifs. She confronts the spectator with a joyful and exuberant pictorial semiotics. Severed peppers that have become frightening faces share the foreground of the paintings with interiors of mollusks evoking, not without malice, vulva and dilated vaginas. When fragments of paintings or sculptures from the history of Western art are recognized, the beauty of their stylization takes on a strangely burlesque character.

When she mentions painters whose work she appreciates, Ms. Nouwen says she is jealous and irresistibly attracted to the paintings of Dana Schutz, Jana Euler, Allison Katz or Amelie Van Wulffen. Before adding that the work of male colleagues also touches her, that Walter Swennen remains in her eyes the greatest Belgian painter, and that the presentation of Frenchman Mathieu Malouf at his retrospective in Dijon stimulates her desire to escape from traditional hanging methods. During a recent trip to the United States, she says she was impressed by the works of James Son Ford Thomas, a gravedigger, self-taught sculptor and blues player who died in 1993. Celebrated today for his ability to thwart the adversity of existence, James Son Ford Thomas has created a work that reveals the inhumanity rampant within every social group. An ambition that undoubtedly also drives Ms. Nouwen's creative activity.

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