

Hans Theys

On the inevitable and on the jagged trajectory The work of Eric De Smet

Introduction

I am paying a visit to Eric De Smet. Several sculptures stand in a lovely, large space where a number of sizeable and evidently monochrome, black and blue pastel drawings measuring 130 centimetres by 150 also hang. The drawings feature vast planes or faltering lines, usually standing out against the white paper and the smudges which emanate from the planes and the lines like some sort of depth-bestowing shadows. They are based on observations. Their forms are called 'trajectories' or 'trails'. The hanging and standing sculptures have similar, jagged contours. They are made of wood, polyurethane or bronze. In the middle of the space is a magnificent sculpture whose height puts me in mind of a giant I saw twenty years ago walking towards me head and shoulders above everyone else down the middle of the main shopping street in Vienna. The proportions are superb. The work appears to have legs, shoulders and a sort of head, as if representing a primeval father towering above adult men. It is made of polyurethane, but has a variegated bronze-like patina produced by rubbing it with polyurethane glue which was then singed. Hanging on the wall are smaller wooden sculptures, with the same jagged contours, which together form a beautiful asymmetric composition. One of these little sculptures is lying on the floor.

We then visit a large attic space, where several sculptures and two groups of small drawings are displayed. The sculptures have the same jagged shapes we have already encountered and were sawn out of plywood or MDF with a jigsaw or fretsaw and then coloured black in such a way that the colour of the wood still shines through. At this point I discover a folder containing the earliest drawings. They are very dark and most have a grey background. They were produced around 1986 and all the exhibited works stem from them. They constitute the beginning of what the artist now regards as his oeuvre. The second group of drawings consists of delicate 'signs' or 'trails' on light-coloured paper. The third group is made up of paintings in which both 'sign' and background have been painted. These are the most recent works.

The artist is economical with his words, speaking hesitantly but not without self-assurance. You soon realize that this man has spent years thinking about his craft and his work and that this reflection is closely bound up with the traces he leaves behind in the form of works in concrete, wood, polyurethane, bronze, paper (he has made himself) or computer prints. It is not easy to reproduce our conversation for as the artist wastes no words, his statements, written down one after each other, come across as rather apodictic, whereas they were expressed hesitantly, as if they themselves were the remnants or traces of an experience that is otherwise impossible to communicate. Hesitant, but decisive, like a yoga practitioner or footballer who has a movement coincide with the decision to execute it. And that is also how the works come across: as clearly established things. Things which don't tell us about an artist's personal mythology, but about his relationship at a given moment with an object he

has observed and then materialized in one energetic, but wrenching movement, in a collision between the paper and the drawing material.

Before 1986 De Smet made wonderful sculptures using natural materials like branches and rope. However, underlying these works was an idea that might be described as conceptual. This conflict is still a feature of his work today, rather as if each was an attack on the linear, on a false authority, on stifling rules or structures.

The artist tells me he broke away from the pre-structured around 1986 and that his works, which he calls 'trajectories', became more organic, more jagged. "No road you travel is ever straight", he says. "Chance plays too much of a role for that." At the same time he wanted to graft his work onto what he saw and not onto a concept. He has the impression that his work has since become increasingly free. He shows me drawings from that time, which are very dark and clearly different from the other two groups of drawings he hung up for our conversation. "As a colour, black refers to mourning, to loss. Now all my works relate to mourning. In a book I once quoted a poem by Ida Gerhardt in which she refers to Vermeer. Vermeer's background was different to ours. People used to have a different perspective. There was a holdfast, a grand story. Space was defined. But gradually I wanted to lose the black and use more colour." The dark drawings have an affinity with the sculptures sawn out of MDF or plywood with a jigsaw or fretsaw and are also called 'trajectories'. The artist describes their shape as 'monstrous', but then he is referring to their organic, jagged contours.

"There came a point," the artist continues, "when I found working with natural materials finite and I soon began repeating myself. That was when I started drawing again, always basing it on observation, and my real work began. (Laughs.) Since then I have seen my drawings and sculptures as trajectories, as roads travelled, also in the metaphorical sense. My works are attempts to condense movements, which acquire meaning through that condensation. You make a lot of rubbish, a lot of noise, but every now and then you create something that you recognize and that strangely enough others also recognize. Only now am I beginning to acknowledge, or learn, that an artist's work is clearly related to the things that occupy him daily. I am now taking stock of where I'm at and I see that my work has evolved and that the things I am now making impose themselves through my actions."

The drawings in the second group were painted with very thin acrylic or very thin vinyl paint made by Flash. "Flash's black is particularly good," De Smet tells me. The third, most recent group of works consists of acrylic-based paintings. They differ from the other works because they also endeavour to reproduce the environment in which the trace is embedded.

"I try to paint as I used to make those wooden sculptures," De Smet explains. "At the same time I would like to make the sculptures even thinner, make the trajectory more weightless. Perhaps that's what I want: to make the trajectory weightless. The sculptures are at their best when they all take the same direction, when they are not really spatial, because then the sculptural aspect supersedes their visual effect. In recent years I have also produced work using the computer. I scan images and then manipulate them. This also produces reflections. We can never forget that all forms of

truth are a reflection. Taking into account physical evidence, of course. First we set out the course and then we go and explore the boundaries... I once made a work for Middelheim Museum which consisted of two arches, one of which was broken off at the end, burned. For me the piece denoted the end of linear thinking, of scientific thinking which can jump from one conclusion to the next by ignoring the 'incidental'. It was a homage to Prigogine. But the purely conceptual was not for me. Just as marrying and having children isn't based on concepts either."

Conversation

There was a time when you made a number of works with geometric symbols, circles or triangles, which you attacked with an eraser.

EDS: That was when I came to see the concurrence of necessity, chance and desire. If you don't structure, you don't have anything and the result is chaos. Chance is a given and other than that there is endless desire.... I am fascinated by the rejection of every kind of fixed form, hence that physical erosion of geometric forms and my continued aversion to a modernism that is seen as placing flat surfaces on a flat surface. For me it's all to do with acquiring freedom, which runs counter to our desire for structure. Freedom means that a line should not be drawn with a ruler, but it also means rejecting all forms of authority, everything imposed on us, wherever it comes from. I am reminded of a wonderful story about Lacan. He didn't want his freedom of movement to be hindered by a red light, so his daughter had to map out routes where there were no traffic lights. She had to come up with a compromise to prevent them being excluded from society. Every work is a form of compromise, even if only because of the limitations imposed by the materials. Because there is of course other evidence, frequently of a material kind, which you cannot ignore: physical forces at whose mercy you are, like the sheet of paper and the piece of charcoal you use. If they happen to be what you want and you are on form, then something can happen. That is what the voice adds to speaking, the way something is said and determines what is said.

Can all forms of authority be rejected?

I don't think so. But you can fight for the freedom to express your opinion and 'establish things'.

There is still a lack of freedom?

The older I get, the more convinced I am of our total 'undecidedness'. I believe that is the thread that runs through my work. As a young artist you start making work because you want it to take you out of your sequestered world. You see art as an escape route, but eventually art also proves to be something determined, something that confines you. The more recent my work, the more monstrous it becomes. Monstrousness displays a poetic condition, a form of nostalgia: your work is the pursuit of a compaction of life, an attempt to give meaning, but all in all that meaning appears to

be another illusion. So I think that being engaged in art is a question of faith. Not a question of religion. In that respect I have found reading Kierkegaard enlightening. The undecidedness about the sacrifice of Abraham made him tumble into religion whereas it made me tumble out of it.

Working locks you into your own short-sightedness because you are unable to distance yourself. My wife always says that things never go according to plan. She is right of course. Nobody has an exact picture of himself, nor of what he does. Derrida says that truth is something that has to be established and I find that an incredibly beautiful statement. Perhaps artists are people who are engaged in establishing truth. And slowly, very slowly, we learn collectively something else as well. At least that's what I assume. Everyone, artists and scientists, gradually help set out the course, going against the current. At the same time an establishment can also be totalitarian. Because everyone tries to make others subservient to oneself. We don't escape this in art and art education either. Everyone manipulates. There used to be masters and slaves, but even today people are made into instruments of money and power. Art is an escape from conditioning, which is not very comfortable and fundamentally Darwinian. But art also relates to power.

Yet you experience an increasing freedom in your work.

The realization that we are short-circuited was fundamental for me. You see that with young artists too: on the one hand they want to express their innermost feelings and on the other hand they want to make a career. They are in a situation to which there is no answer. It is a double bind. For me that was an almost insurmountable reality.

Happily I now see that art can be beautiful again. Because however insurmountable the situation may be, you nevertheless manage to go along with it in a rational way. For example, when putting together the Werner Cuvelier exhibition at Galerie El, where we showed work that was still strictly conceptual and at the same time work that is unashamedly beautiful again. I believe there is a real nostalgia for beauty and that in this respect art can be emancipatory. Mark Manders, for example, gives shape to that silence, to that strange speechlessness in the most incredible way. Paul Celan manages it, too, but from a different tension: the failure of the European culture after the camps.

Yet we are happy with the return of unashamed beauty because we feel it springs from a different tension. In Piero della Francesca's case, beauty stemmed from faith. Science and religion still seemed compatible then. But today we pull ourselves out of the morass by our own hair like Baron von Münchhausen. And the new beauty is unashamed because we do it ourselves. We are no longer saddled with a world view. As a young man I thought a different life awaited me. Paradoxically enough I acquired the freedom to realize that dream through teaching. Teaching gave me freedom in my art. I have never had to make concessions.

At the end of the 1970s you made your concrete works.

EDS: Yes, for a while I had made blue paintings whose structure was reduced to an ever-narrower strip. But I saw myself slipping into a kind of fundamental painting,

which didn't satisfy me. I thought my work should to be more allied to a physical presence and that's how those concrete works came about. As a young man I worked in the building trade and discovered the beauty of concrete. Except that I noticed that marks in the concrete were unwelcome and avoided as much as possible, whereas to me that was the beauty of it. Though at the time I didn't call it beautiful; I talked about the legible historicity of the development of a work. (Laughs.) Eventually, however, working with concrete proved laborious. The works were very heavy and that made them difficult to handle. After that I made my own paper for a while, because it offered the same possibilities: it allowed me to leave physical traces. These traces became increasingly important. I was also greatly influenced by postmodernism, where diffusion seemed to be the starting point and the endpoint, but after a while you were left with nothing. What I really wanted to do was structure an area of tension in relation to power and in so doing respect the evidence of nature. So later on I also started working with branches so as to explore the tension between nature and culture.

I think that art consists of what always evades explanation: what makes desire visible. That is also what we call beauty, I think: it is what people look for in landscapes. And rightly so! Perhaps Braque's most beautiful works are the little landscapes he made at the end.

By desire do you mean giving shape to the dream of being different?

EDS: You could also put it like that. I call it desire because it has to do with eroticism. We are conditioned physically. Man is the only animal to be aware that he is alive and so must die. We want to escape that. Desire and art start from our mortality and our will to live. Religion and art are escape routes. It's all about the desire to foil our finiteness. I call it a confrontation with death. Young people who want to make art must feel that intuitively in some way. And then they dive into that abyss, a bottomless abyss.

Or they get away from the place they don't want to be.

EDS: As I did. I know exactly where and when. I was born and grew up in Welle. The municipal library had a few books about art, including one about Rubens, which appealed to me for various reasons. (Smiles.) They also had a catalogue of the Expo 58 modern-art pavilion... Recently while clearing out my parents' house, I found a charcoal drawing I did when I was twelve years old. I knew exactly what I wanted to do in life. My father never supported me, but he did tolerate it. (Smiles.)

The first time I visited the Tate Gallery I was drunk with emotion. That was one of my best experiences. I was twenty-two at the time. The first time I saw Cézanne, in Paris, I was bowled over too. Fortunately I studied in Brussels and not in Ghent. Lots of wonderful things were happening in Brussels at the time, things which wouldn't make an impression today and wouldn't be regarded as important, but which shaped me. In Paris I also saw drawings after nature by Mondrian: work on a level that left me feeling uplifted.

The relationship with my sculptural work is based on writing. Each registration is a

moment. When you write, you register something. You start off selecting. You make a selection and that's where you begin to register things and to apply norms, norms which you yourself impose but norms nevertheless. In fact when selecting you revert to the binary, which really you should be able to avoid, but that is an illusion. I believe the only ones who escape that are Rothko in his large paintings and perhaps Ryman in a number of things.

When you no longer feel the selection?

EDS: Yes, with Rothko we disappear into musicality. Richard Strauss' last works and Paul Celan's poems have that too. I love Celan's poems, where the language explores its borders and the smallest word can enlighten, if only because it was written by a man who stood with his face to a wall. Celan speaks from an experience we try to suppress. Only in art is the unsayable sayable. Art only begins where language fails.

Montagne de Miel, December 26th 2013