

## **'THIS MUST BE THE PLACE'**

### **Six new paintings by Dirk Vander Eecken: after-images of previews of where we want to be.**

Dirk Vander Eecken (°1954, Mortsel) presents six new monumental paintings in the exhibition 'This Must Be The Place' at Van der Mieden Gallery in Antwerp. In many ways, this series seems to be a new benchmark in Vander Eecken's subtly consequent oeuvre as it appears there has been a whole new and surprising evolution since the last two encounters I had with his paintings. It is immediately striking that the artist's typical colorization with its restrained vibrations and subtle, almost invisible nuances has a completely different aura in this series. In my opinion, Vander Eecken has always been a master in using polychromy for the purpose of achieving a richly varied and very layered kind of 'conceptual monochromy'. An enhanced monochromy, which leaves the spectator lingering in a comprehensive atmosphere of in-depth colorization, but which also gently leads the viewer to every detail, every anomaly in this nuanced spectrum. In his sensitivity for polychromy, Dirk Vander Eecken went all out in a more exuberant way for this series. Previously the colour vibrations used to quiver inside the canvas with a kind of restrained energy, now they are almost splashing out of the painting – but with a modesty suggesting decadence, a party, a place where you would want to be. It is not a coincidence that when Vander Eecken talks about this series, he often utilizes the term Rococo. While Baroque is the historic art genre known for exuberant celebration, Rococo possesses a more contained, introvert decadence. These new works are a feast for the head and for the eye, in that order. After looking intensively, it sometimes seems to resemble a carefully un-stylized version of what Op-art intended for the spectator's eye in the 1970s. In contrary to this movement Vander Eecken addresses an emotional gaze, rather than the formal, retinal and almost neurophysiologic gaze in most Op-art.

A second significant and rather fascinating difference between this new series and most of Dirk Vander Eecken's previous work, is to be found on the level of the image and its semiotics, which takes place as much in the image as in the mind of the viewer. This series seems to encompass images which, in some way or other, have already 'previously' nested in the artist's mind. They appear to be emotional reproductions of mental, almost universal images, which were already present in our retinal memory as a kind of collective primal images. In relation to this view, Vander Eecken himself likes to use the metaphor of "photographic reproductions of images which, in a way, have left the darkroom too early". They are already present but still have to partly develop themselves on the retina, a task which he explicitly reserves for the viewer. The meaning of these images is to be found 'in', or better yet, 'in front of' the image, in contrast to previous paintings done by Vander Eecken, where the semiotics seemed to take place 'behind' the image. It may thus not be called a coincidence that in this series the grid structure, which used to be so utterly typical for Dirk Vander Eecken, makes a move to the background. The image and its meaning predominate to a larger extent. It reveals itself more as an image which has literally 'partly developed' itself in the function of the gaze. In this series the gaze appears afterwards, although it previously used to be captured within the image. In that sense these paintings can be more rightly called 'after-images of previews' rather than 'previews of after-images'. It is fair to say that this is then one of Vander Eecken's more approachable series, where the possible meaning is directed towards the viewer to a greater extent, and even lends the opportunity for the recognition of a kind of universal 'pseudo-figuration'. After all, it stands out how landscape-like some of these works are. When viewed up close, these works seem to direct the gaze in a rather subtle and organic way from a close-by, earthy horizon, towards a

more distant one, to eventually make the gaze explode in an all-encompassing heaven firmament which vibrates in golden tones. They seem to be almost idealistic, utopian land- and skylscapes. Whereas someone like Constable still brushed them onto the canvas in a retinal-realistic way, Dirk Vander Eecken sprays and grids them in an equally retinal way, directly from his mental fantasy into ours.

These paintings are not paintings anymore, they have become places for the head and the eye, places where the brain as well the retina can –and want- to dwell.

Places where they must be.

Thibaut Verhoeven, Gent, november 2015