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Fiona Brenninkmeijer interviewing Arnout Killian about his solo exhibition Silent Light at Lisa Norris Gallery in London.

*F: What is the significance of silent light to you?*

A: It connects the paintings in this exhibition in different ways. Game show, Bedside Lamp and Lamp all have (silent) electric light in them. In Hotelroom (big) there is a lamp depicted that is not on and the view from the window is 'silenced' by a sort of overexposure of the light. And of course there is a more mental and symbolic meaning to the title that is harder to pinpoint and has to do with the stillness in the paintings like in Sitting Mannequin for example.

*F: Your paintings definitely have a quality of stillness and solitude about them. You also have a very special attention to light in your work, that illuminates them in a psychological way. Could you say more about the specific meaning attached to this attention to light or a specific inspiration for it? Is there an absence of a human presence for a particular reason?*

A: I cannot name one very specific inspiration for it but as a boy I was spellbound by old Dutch masters like Vermeer and their depiction of 'actual' light. So I think when I paint I am always searching to make the light as 'real' as possible hoping to find back some of that magic. I think showing 'actual' light is something painting can be very good in because it has better colours and more material substance as photography or film.

It's hard to define a specific meaning for the attention to light in general because in every painting the meaning is different (as is the light). In general I am looking for a special atmosphere, somewhere in between stillness and a cinematic tension. For me the magic thing about painting is that it can create another place that you can enter, in a visual but also in a mental way. That is why there is an absence of a human presence. I like to keep the painting as open as possible. A person in the painting makes the viewer a spectator looking at a scene and stops him from getting involved in the space of the painting himself.

*F: What draws or connects you to your subjects? In this exhibition we will be featuring work of mannequins, interior rooms, hotel rooms and a zoomed in lamp. Is it perhaps in part about the everyday, overlooked aspect of these spaces and objects?*

A: I like to choose banal subject matter because for me it is more challenging making something great coming from something unimportant and sometimes even ugly. I often use photos from magazines or the internet. Placing those banal photographic pictures coming from the 'fast' internet into the slow world of painting, changes their meaning and substance. That is something that really excites me. So I don't always have a mission to put people's attention on the overlooked aspect of things but I am more interested in turning uninteresting pictures into interesting paintings.

F: *Do you set out to create a certain mood or atmosphere in your paintings or is this a by-product of your subjects and your interest in the quality of light? For instance, the pristine attention to detail and your polished application of paint, as well as your sometimes unusual use of perspective create a certain feeling of disquiet or alienation.*

A: I want the painting to have a specific mood and personality and at the same time to be open to different meanings. It's not a by-product but something I really care a lot about. The right atmosphere has a lot to do with the light in the painting that I find intuitively during the painting process. I don't have a precise strategy for it beforehand, it's something discovered during the process of making the painting though the picture I choose to paint already triggers it. I like a certain feeling of disquiet or alienation because I don't want to put the viewer in a too comfortable position. I want her/him to get really involved in the painting, look at it with an existential gaze, and not only use it as entertainment.

F: *Would you say there is a theatrical, almost stage like feeling to some of your paintings. The stage is lit and ready for action?*

A: For certain paintings this is true. Gameshow is an example. In Hotel Room the action just ended and the room is left. And then there are paintings that activate a more existential or meditative gaze like Lamp or Lobby. This is how I see it but I don't mind if other people see it different because engagement in a painting is a personal thing and can't be forced by the artist into a certain direction.

F: *Would you say your paintings evolve over a certain fixed period or do you like to go back and rework them over months and years, so they evolve and change with time and reflection?*

A: I like to work on a few paintings at the same time so I can put a work aside for a while and see it fresh again when I pick it up. The time I spend on a painting varies a lot, sometimes a few weeks, sometimes years with long pauses in between. Sometimes I like to rework them when they are not sold

and stay longer in the studio. But when they are put in stock nothing happens because I cannot see them and get irritated by them. Some old works that come out of stock for an exhibition I change even after a very long time. But only when I think I can make them better. Mostly the changes are subtle because I want to respect the work as it was made.

*F: Do you work in series and thematically when it comes to your painting as we have a range of work from different periods of your career? And when you work across different media like for instance installation, how does this feed into your painting practice?*

A: For me making series works well because I feel I can dig deeper into a subject if I get back to it. It's not that I make a series and then a next one etc. but I like to revisit certain subjects and then slowly series come out of that. My problem is that I get bored quickly so working on different series keeps the process fresh for me. Different subject matter brings also more challenge into the process of painting. Painting a landscape is a total other ball game than painting an interior for example.

The sound installations I make have a connection with the paintings but not always in a very direct way. With both the installations and the paintings I try to create an illusionistic space. Of course there are things in the world of sound and the visual that connect, like rhythm, structure and colour. I think sensitivity for these things can feed each other if you work in different media but I don't have a fixed plan or clear strategy to connect my installation work with my paintings. When that happens, fine, but I don't want to force such a thing too much because I want to let things grow from the work itself. Half a year ago I made the exhibition *Grating the Grid* at NLisUS gallery in Rotterdam where for the first time I combined paintings with a sound installation. The paintings were a very specific series based on television noise that fitted well with the sound installation, so there it worked.

*F: What inspires or guides your palette? Although generally neutral or soft, they do conjure up a certain retro, or 70s vibe in my mind, would this be fair to say?*

A: The pictures I pick to work from are chosen for a big part on intuition. Things that are stuck into my mind probably trigger me in this process and they are often related to the past. So I think it's fair to say that they often depict something retro but not because I am looking for a 'retro' look or style. I disagree with you that my palette is neutral or soft. I always mix my colours very precise. Also when things in the painting are 'neutral' or even depict something greyish or even white I mix a very specific colour for them because that's the only way to get the light working. I try to use as little colours on my

palette as possible to keep the colours in the painting connected but if necessary I buy extra colours to get to the precise value of colour I need.

*F: Do you feel your paintings in this exhibition engage with a contemporary and/or political discourse, (for instance like the paintings based on the debris from the hurricane that devastated New Orleans) and if so, in what way?*

A: Yes I feel that, though I believe there are more perspectives to look at painting than only within the contemporary and political discourse. With the paintings based on pictures of damaged buildings from hurricanes the engagement is maybe more direct as with most of the paintings hanging in this show. A painting like sitting mannequin though can also be read as a comment or even as a symbol of a certain political situation. A painting like Closed, just shown in the Gallery also has clear political overtones for me. It's maybe not so easy to read in the other paintings hanging here but I feel they are connected with a certain contemporary feeling/discourse in a sense that they are reacting and reflecting on the fast way pictures exists in other media outside the art world. A painter can grab pictures from this fast world and slow them down and give them a body and space so that it becomes possible to give them meaning again. That is a contemporary and in a way also political use of the medium painting I am interested in. For me art happens when there is an exchange between artwork and viewer. That exchange is a very personal thing because it happens in a one to one relationship different to the political that has more to do with an exchange or clash between groups of people. Of course I know the political is part of or interferes with the personal on different levels but it's not the only thing that counts for me in art. I am also very interested in the more psychological aspects that art can reflect or evoke.

*F: As an artist you must regularly experience others projecting meaning and interpretation onto your work. What would you say about your work (specifically in reference to this range of work in the exhibition) and what would you like, if anything, for your audience to take from the work?*

A: First of all, I don't belong to the type of artist that believes only his idea about the thing he makes is the right one. I am very suspicious about artists explaining exactly what their art is about because the reasons why they made it can be totally different from what they say. But then there is the work itself. I strongly believe in the end a work has a life and personality of its own. So as different people react different to the same person, different people react different on the same artwork. I can live with that, as long as the viewer took time to approach the artwork with an open mind and tries to get engaged in it

*F: And for fun, as a kind of anecdote, what, if anything, has stuck with you since art school?*

A: I studied Audio Visual at the Rietveld Academie. Because it was not 'normal' to paint there I had to defend myself doing painting and react on other media in a very early stage. So in the first years I was more busy with doing performances and making films and installations than paintings.

I remember very well the first lesson of the legendary Amsterdam artist called Peter Giele. We entered the class-room and he was sitting there naked and blindfolded and tied to a chair that was put on a table. Also his mouth was strapped so he couldn't say anything. On the table was a note saying the lesson was that we had to discuss what to do with him and then do it. In the end two students decided to untie him and put him in the water behind the school to swim with him. It was a nice performance but I didn't feel I learned something from it. When I told him this later he was very open to this criticism. He really liked what I was doing with the paintings and pushed me to go on with it and not to care about the scepticism of others. That generosity and open-mindedness really stuck with me.