

Anne Van Boxelaere
“A Minute, A Day”
FRED&FERRY GALLERY
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*There is the moral of all human tales:
'Tis but the same rehearsal of the past,
First Freedom, and then Glory - when that fails,
Wealth, vice, corruption - barbarism at last.
And History, with all her volumes vast,
Hath but one page*

With ‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’, the nineteenth-century English poet Lord Byron wrote a long, narrative poem about the travels and reflections of a young nobleman. In the fourth part of his autobiographical account, Byron muses on the rise and fall of the great empires in Western civilizations. These lines of poetry inspired American landscape painter Thomas Cole fifteen years later to paint a five-part series: “The Course of Empire”. Cole depicts the epic episodes in the development of an imaginary city, with an undisguised criticism of the ultimate destruction that man wreaks upon himself.

It is the inescapable logic of this process that **Anne Van Boxelaere** aims to portray. Triggered by the almost unquestionable, factual succession of growth, glory and decline, she introduces the painting cycle into her own, abstracted visual language. Van Boxelaere first made eight large drawings, which she then tore up inexorably. She applied the snippets to canvas, then took them off, put them on again, took them off again - a careful building up and breaking down that is repeated several times. The results are unexpected textures, arbitrary patterns and an intriguing patina. The narrative of the series can also be read in its details: the nails around Van Boxelaere’s canvas move along with the rhythm of the swirling landscape, of the (dis)orderly society.

In the first part, ‘The Savage State’, she furthermore solely works with the colours red, yellow and blue and, even though black lines suggest vague, initial urban elements, the primaevial landscape is virtually untouched. In ‘The Arcadian State’, orange and green are introduced; the noise swells. The next stage is characterised by all kinds of mixed colours and mixed forms. It is bewildering: it is ‘The Consummation of Empire’. The pendulum swings, however, and a decadent delirium follows. In ‘Destruction’, a suggestion of fluorescent camouflage, among other things, symbolises the impending destruction. What is left is ‘Desolation’, a collection of remains that do not adhere to the rules of the softly visible grid. It is a confrontational vision of the future, in which “the multitude has sunk to dust”. A new phase, at the same time alike and not at all alike as the unaffected beginning, is dawning. The passage of time takes the form of an ever-shifting circle.

Circles also recur in another group of paintings by Van Boxelaere, in which she transposed advertising brochures onto canvas in multiple layers to arrive at their fundamental colour palette and structure. The circles, but also the other lines that she adds to these works, acquire an additional meaning. Here, they refer to the lines of sports fields, to the demarcation of socially acceptable behaviour: they delimit areas within which established, but unwritten, rules apply. However, who drew up those rules, and when, and why, is rarely clear, but they are still obliged. They have to be.

Van Boxelaere works in direct relation to her surroundings: the physical, pre-eminently urban, landscape, and the mental one. Due to the sometimes rigid administration that governs both areas, she discerns a certain detachment. In the hermetic system of everyday life, no one feels at home anymore; escaping from the restless noise, from the “laws and practical encumbrances”, is almost impossible. Mesmerized, Van Boxelaere observes the schizophrenic social systems and oppressive developments in densely populated, densely built Belgium. In her deeply felt canvases, she fillets the insane grid that was supposedly constructed to provide something to hold on to, but that turns out to be a submission hold. Sometimes she breaks open that oppressive framework, sometimes she cleans the rubble of the passing storm.

To capture this unmistakable tension between order and disorder, Van Boxelaere experiments with large and small formats, with different types of paint, with rubber, epoxy and ink. But also with figuration and abstraction - her figurative and abstract works are different interpretations of the same world. Some situations can be articulated concretely, even require a literal statement; in others the silence speaks.

Some of her most recent works are stripped-down tales of blossoming and decay - almost as if a single pixel from 'Destruction' is highlighted, enlarged and explored to the core. These paintings are based on a personal photo archive that Van Boxelaere owns. The striking photographs capture daily scenes in a shady war zone. Nevertheless Van Boxelaere finds, for example, “Nature Morte”, or: how bittersweet life goes on, has to be lived, thanks to and despite all the peripheral factors.

Van Boxelaere makes the scenes her own by blurring and clarifying what strikes her - a universally human outline, the shimmering water that flows. It is like in “A Minute, A Day”: a clear light falls over the suffocating grid. A liquid golden glow that floors the viewer.

The unbridled progression and the immoderate modernization that Thomas Cole opposed have undeniably come to fruition. The crazy speed with which this existence, this planet is consumed is unseen. The tabula rasa that morality arrives at, according to Byron, seems to some to be inevitable, if not desirable. The extravagance runs up against its own limits. But Van Boxelaere brings to mind no minor detail. Where the ravaging seems irrevocable, she sees a flower, a source, a light. She shows that in every human tale there is also hope, or comfort perhaps, in beauty, in connection, in truthfulness. However long or how short it may last.

Eline Verstegen