

WE ARE THE LIGHT!

STEVEN  
AALDERS

# March

Nothing comes from nothing. Every new artwork emerges from its predecessors. When first putting brush to canvas a painter will consider the surface's edges, and so too do earlier works—his own or those of others—run through his mind, whether conscious of it or not. There's no true beginning and no repetition, only a recurring new beginning. It wasn't any different for *Twelve Months*, a series from 2003. Working on these twelve paintings for a year, I tried to join two concepts from art history: the seriality of the seventies, as by Jan Schoonhoven, and the age-old depiction of the seasons as seen in Breughel and the Limbourg brothers. The composition—a partitioning of the surface into horizontal lines and vertical bars—is the same in all twelve paintings. The only variable is color, granting varying degrees of difference within a theme.

Steven Aalders (1959, NL) is a painter known for his meticulously crafted abstract oil paintings. His approach shows color in its essential form, thus underlining its baffling complexity. He studied at Croydon College, London and Ateliers '63 in Haarlem. His first museum solo exhibition was at S.M.A.K. Ghent, in 2002, while the Kröller-Müller Museum will be hosting an exhibition in 2020. Held in numerous private and public collections, he's a favorite of many. In 2017 *The Fifth Line: Thoughts of a Painter* was published.

WE ARE THE COLLECTION!

A CERTAIN  
LIGHT

But I knew none of this as I started. I could make out an image in my mind's eye, one that did not yet exist. As always, I worked methodically, fleshing out proportions and color in a to-scale mock-up before ordering stretchers and mounting, then priming the canvas. I decided on the last two paintings from the preceding series, *Vertical Thoughts*, as a jumping-off point. I had divided their horizontal surface into two layers, one on top of the other, in an orderly formation with six bands of color. I felt it could serve well the image I had in mind: an orderly structure at once simple and complex; a uniform complexity, something akin to a Romanesque façade. I mirrored the plane image along its horizontal axis, resulting in four stacked rows of six colors. It would take the dimensions of a square, 126 × 126 cm, hardly small but not too large either, a decently sized easel painting by my then standards. With the design, drawn in lines, done I could start coloring. To form color combinations I made, as usual, collages with paper I had painted with watercolors. I based each set of six colors on the colors in the work of predecessors, works I had stored in my 'musée imaginaire' such as *Transwest* by Kenneth Noland which I had become very familiar with in the Stedelijk Museum, or *Winter Landscape with Ice Skaters* by Hendrick Avercamp. Having designed and completed four paintings, I decided to add four more, and as they steadily progressed and I kept seeing more and more possibilities I asked myself what size the series should grow. The possibilities seemed endless. Meanwhile, looking around at the paintings in my studio I had come to notice a rotating motion in their composition—a consequence of the bands of color repeating and being mirrored. The colors moved across the surface with a circular motion. I also noticed how the various palettes, based on the work of predecessors, gave each painting its own feeling or light. This discovery, of the cycle and changing light, drove me to add four more, totaling twelve. Each piece would be dedicated to a different month of the year, as well as a color study of an Old Master. *May* would thus become a color study of a fair Frisian landscape by Gerrit Benner, with lush green grass, blue skies, white clouds and yellow and red sunlight, while *January*—now hung in AkzoNobel's offices—with its subdued palette of ocher, gray, white and brown, might be seen to evoke that same winter's month, but is, at the same time, a color chart of the wood, stone and plaster in Saenredam's *St Odulphskerk in Assendelft*. After the series was exhibited in its entirety, each month was sold separately as time went by. I kept one. It's in my room and I'm currently looking at it. It's the month *March* [P295].

Five fine black lines divide its silver-gray surface into four parts horizontally and into six colors vertically, which are repeated four times. It's an orderly pattern. With a ratio of one to eight, like the human body, the bands of color are mirrored along the vertical and horizontal central axes, and repeat throughout the painting. Twice has the mirrored image been shifted to set askew the work's symmetry. However distorted, it still yields a robust composition. Four colors—red, green, blue and purple, each with approximately the same average brightness—can be distinguished against a light gray background. Two are quite nearly subsumed: one band is a light, warm gray, the other white. They're a 'break' in the order. Coupled with the light background they create a sense of space. Invisible lines may be drawn between the colors as you follow them across the surface, creating ellipses, ovals and circles, or you might combine the colors in various ways: blue paired with white in the upper right feels clear and bright but makes for a far more subdued pair with warm gray in the center. And they are, in themselves, changeful. The colors were formed from multiple layers of oil paint. Beneath the background's silver gray are underlayers of red-brown and ocher yellow. Blue was painted over orange, beneath green there's red and vice versa. All of them were attuned to one another during the final phase. Some were painted over in barely varying hues, until the right balance was reached. Viewed with a raking light the thickest layer of white—in fact a cool, very light gray—resembles a relief. The contrasting underlayers cause the colors to behave differently with every change in light. On a bright day, warm, like noon in midsummer, scarlet red is most pronounced while the yellow hues in green come out. At dusk, purple and red change to near-black as blue shines. The dynamism inherent in colors is comparable to a play, with colors as its actors. 'Painting is color acting,' Josef Albers wrote. To act is to change one's character, behavior and mood.

The colors in *March* were based on a painting from the Late Middle Ages by Dieric Bouts, *Het Laatste Avondmaal* (The Last Supper) (1464–1466) [P294]. It can be found in St Peter's Church in Louvain, Belgium. The red, green, blue and purple bands of color in my painting restate the colorful robes worn by the figures gathered around the table in Bouts's painting, the white of the tablecloth and the warm and cool gray of the architecture. But what I was really aiming for was to express something about that serene Flemish interior, something intangible—a certain light, quiet and austere, as on an overcast day in early spring.

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