

"When I was about 16, I used to like drawing. Then, at a certain moment, I started to use a lot of hatchings. I drew all sorts of shades in black and white. Sometimes, when I am painting now, I still think of that, how I superimposed these veils of lines." The reminiscence is Steven Aalders', one of the representatives of contemporary abstract painting. In his recent work the veils of lines have grown into veils of colour and paint.

One of Aalders' most recent works is the painting *Vertical Thoughts* (2001), which belongs to a series of eight. It confronts us with a flat white surface (90 x 140 cm). Exactly in the middle there is a thin, black, horizontal line, which recurs on the top and at the bottom of the painting. Through the axis of the upper surface there is a vertical, snow-white band, four centimetres wide. To the left and right of the band, parallel to the white middle band, there are six equally wide coloured bands, three by three, equidistant from each other, separated by a white space in between. The first band is yellow, the second is orange, then there is a black one, then a white band, then a slate grey one, then a dark blue one, and then a bright red one. Underneath the horizontal line in the middle, the colours are reflected, but not in the same order. The white band in the middle, the axis, is but a weak mirror image of the band above. It looks bleaker, because it has not been layered with oils, but merely consists of the white of the grounded canvas, left blank.

The vertical bands feature in an invisible grid of 35 bands, each four centimetres wide. They appear in pairs (with regard to the colours), in an alternating symmetry. The vertical line, subtly framed by three horizontal lines, is the element which determines the image. It steers our (western oriented) gaze from left to right and from top to bottom. Furthermore, the alternating symmetry introduces a diagonal movement into the pictorial surface, resulting in different perspectives which all at once impose themselves on the viewer. Our glance dances as it were over the canvas, directed by sequences of images, yet the dance never turns into an exalted movement. Our eyes rather glide rhythmically, always encountering new surprises. The festive character of the bright colours and the shrouded white of the spaces in-between emphasise the rhythm.

The work balances opposite elements. Stagnation (the engaging white centre around which the rest of the image tilts) is combined with the concepts of the grid and graduation, which in turn are linked to the idea of pictorial elements evolving along fixed schemes (of colour). *Vertical Thoughts* is a radiant painting, encouraging contemplation. It is a typical example of Aalders' abstract imagery, in which every single pictorial element stretches beyond its own borders.

The title *Vertical Thoughts* – which is both the title of the exhibition and that of the series – is borrowed from a work of the American composer Morton Feldman (1926-1987), whose minimalist music regularly accompanies Steven Aalders while working in his

studio. In his collected writings Feldman, who counted painters like Jackson Pollock, Philip Guston and Marc Rothko among his friends, compares composing music with making a painting. Inspired by Robert Rauschenberg's statement "that he wanted neither life nor art, but something in between", Feldman records "I then began to compose a music dealing precisely with 'inbetween-ness': creating a confusion of material and construction, and a fusion of method and application, by concentrating on how they could be directed toward 'that which is difficult to categorise'."<sup>1</sup>

That which is difficult to categorise according to Feldman, is equally ever-present in Aalders' work. Born in 1959 in Middelburg (The Netherlands) as the son of a protestant preacher, Aalders does not regard himself a nostalgic modernist, but as an artist who seeks to comprehend the modernist tradition in depth, with the aim to advance it. According to the artist, he feels drawn towards modernism, because it searches for the "essence", for that which represents a larger reality outside the reality of the painting itself. In Aalders' view, the painting is a model, a thought. In his quest for essence, Aalders feels related to artists like Marc Rothko or Agnes Martin, while at the same time he is influenced by the more concrete art of Ad Dekkers and the American minimalists. "Minimalism refutes the existence of another reality outside the reality of the object. I myself, however, do believe in a spiritual principle, and that is why I like pattern and shape. They provide me something to hold on to, preventing me from fluctuating. Rules are liberating. The idea of the whole, the unity to which an artist like Judd refers in his work, has been shattered in post-modernism. The concept has been replaced by one of seduction: the seduction of the ornate detail. Yet I do believe that we can still work along the lines set out by Mondriaan and the 'minimalists'. The language they employ has by far not been exhausted."

In 1987, having finished his studies and staying in Barcelona for a year, Aalders is confronted with a choice which will constitute an important moment in his artistic development. With hindsight, it set out the course for his recent work. At the art academy, Aalders had experimented with both expressionism and more reductionist styles of painting. The dualism became an artistic dilemma, for it required to be resolved. Aalders had to choose between simplicity and gesture.

Visiting a retrospective of Donald Judd in the Fundació Joan Miró, he was greatly impressed. Up till now Aalders had considered Judd's work synonymous with detachedness. "Having seen the exhibition, I knew I had to follow in the wake of Mondriaan. I really felt that I had to choose. That was what Judd's exhibition meant to me. The southern, modernist architecture of Sert toned down the Spartan character. My ideas about art evaporated, and were replaced by a delicate poetry. The delicacy and clear outlines I loved did not imply a boring, barren art. Upon my return home in The Netherlands, I had to start all over again."



After his stay in Barcelona, Aalders' work becomes increasingly abstract. Initially he still produces work in which for example bare branches – elements of the landscape – are defined by the linear rendition en composition, but gradually the spaces in-between claim more attention and the branches become more stylised. Boats on the beach in Greece or the geometrical structure of landing-piers in harbours inspire quiet images, in which the importance of rhythm and repetition steadily increases. Coloured ink drawings constitute the anacrusis for paintings composed of horizontals and verticals. The earliest painting from the exhibition *Untitled* (1995) confronts us with the step towards complete abstraction. A white canvas, standing, is framed by thin black lines; it is furthermore divided by eight horizontal black stripes into nine equal, vertical bands. Apart from the graphical and serial character, the work breathes a contemplative atmosphere, reminiscent of artists like Ad Dekkers or Jan Schoonhoven.

"I think one should firmly state one's points of departure. Oddly, when you opt for one thing, the other gets back in by the backdoor," admits Aalders, in whose recent work the opposition between the Apollonian (rational) and Dionysian (the sensory) seems annihilated. Whereas colour played a minor part in Aalders' work until 1995, the artist has recently presented himself as a true colourist. Colour has become the mediator par excellence of a certain expressivity and gestuality – and that is true also of the shades of white the artist employs.

Aalders builds up a painting with layers of oils, starting with dark shades and working towards light ones. Underneath the white areas, there are various coloured layers. These make the painting more fragile; they also take long to dry thoroughly. But because of the opacity of the white the surface is pushed forwards, emphasising the physical, objectlike character of the painting. In nearly all of the paintings some part is left blank, showing us the grounded canvas, which pulls our gaze as it were inwards. The artist increasingly started to paint more opaquely, less translucently, to make the material aspect more concrete. "That does not imply that the colour of the layer underneath is no longer visible. When painting the bands of colour, I usually apply the paint on the complementary colour. Yellow, for example, is applied on purple, and the blistering orange is applied on blue. In all of these various combinations the colours always behave differently. Having applied different layers of colour, I start to fine-tune." Only rarely does Aalders use paint directly from the tube, when applying for example a bright cadmium red, usually he mixes colours. Before starting to paint, the artist premeditates every detail of the concept of the painting: the colours, the width of the bands, the thickness of the paint, etc. These he records with a sketch – a collage of stripes of paper, coloured with water colour – he then carefully works out in oils. "Oil paint is a sort of matter. As the paint has more 'body', i.e. as it contains more pigment, the paintings 'behave' more concrete, like bodies in space, and they become less sensitive to fluctuations of the light," according to the artist.

Since 1995 Steven Aalders has created various series of works, which at first comprised four, later sometimes ten or twelve works. The series *Megisti* (1996) and *Findhorn* (1997) each consist of four works. *Megisti* (4) was inspired by the landscape and atmosphere of a small Greek island. It consists of four vertical bands of colour – red, light grey, bright yellow and tourist blue – with increasingly wide spaces of white in between. The Mediterranean sun-drenched character of this work meets its greyish, blurred counterpart in *Findhorn* (3), a northern, Scottish landscape with a green, black and pale blue band, which are distributed equally about the white surface; the two bands on the right each meet on their left an equally wide band painted in a strong off-white. The confrontation of the bright virtuosity of the southern tradition with the dark northern atmosphere results in a wonderful image of the possibilities of colour and texture. These are reminiscences which manifest themselves as it were layer upon layer in matter.

Another example includes the series *Going West*. "On a visit to Marfa, Texas, in 1997, I saw Donald Judd's 100 Boxes. These are one hundred aluminium boxes which slightly differ from each other. They are exhibited in two former artillery sheds. Through the glass wall on both sides, the Texan light enters, making the boxes shine. Deeply impressed by this Orphic play of light and colour, I had the idea to produce a series of ten small paintings. I wanted to transplant Judd's architectural sculptures to the tradition of the easel paintings. My point of departure was the side-view of the ten basic shapes and (more or less) the proportions Judd had used. What is important about the work, is the association with the series *Paestum*: Marfa as a modern Paestum, the box as the blank core, the templum. Each painting was painted in a different colour, in the same order as the spectrum: yellow, red, violet, blue, green. It resulted in one single work. Its title, *Going West*, refers to Judd's experiments with space and architecture in America's West, but also to the orbit of the sun, which colours the sky. Whereas the series *North South* (a small series of rather serial, minimalist, empty works in black and white, PT) is about temperature, *Going West* is about colour."

After these paintings with pale surfaces, Aalders felt like making more colourful paintings, using the typical deep, round Dutch palette. "I wanted a painting with bands in deep Dutch colours."

In the series *Color Studies* each work is divided into nine equal vertical bands. Five of these function as background, while four are the figurative element. In total the series comprises twelve paintings. The point of departure for each work is imposed by the colours of a painting by an ancient master whom Aalders greatly admires. The artist used Vermeer's *Milkmaid*, Benner's *Friesian Landscape*, De Kooning's *Pink-Fingered Dawn*, De Smet's *Village Fair*, and Van der Weyden's *Crucifixion*. The *Color Studies* are about rhythm, symmetry and the equal partitioning of pictorial elements. But above all they are about colour, the influence of one colour on the adjacent colour, and in this sense they refer implicitly to Josef Albers' *Interaction of Color*, in which the latter elucidates his theory of colour.



Unlike the paintings inspired by for example a walk through the Scottish Highlands or by reminiscences filtered by time, these works seem a playful contemporary comment on the painterly tradition. The coloured bands, which seem to continue endlessly, suggest some sort of emerging and vanishing of colours. Also in this instance, the emotions reside in the colours, the surfaces and the skin of the painting. The essence of Aalders' veiled universe consists of an encirclement of the metaphysical by condensing the physical.

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1. Friedman, B.H. (ed.), *Give my Regards to Eighth Street*.  
*Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, Cambridge 2000, p. 147

