

A Conversation with Marenne Welten

March 30, 2022

When did you first start painting?

I started painting seriously in 1998. At that time I was working on a show at The Vleeshal Middelburg. Before then, I made gouache paintings on paper about my thoughts and feelings. The gouaches were centralized, which is to say, I worked from the center, so it was obvious to paint on canvas in the same way.

Why paint from the center?

It was a safe way; it seemed logical. My early paintings were predominantly white texture, and the figures in the center were mostly suffering or injured people. They were often missing one leg or one eye. After a while I wanted to explore the whole surface of the canvas. This is when I started to explore color as well.

Many of the paintings from this time are relatively small. Why small paintings?

What do they do differently?

Small paintings are a way for me to explore one side of the possibilities of oil paint. They force me to act fast without hesitating or having too much time to think or correct. By painting fast I'm less aware of order, form, composition, color, etc. I'm shaking off the things I know. This process also teaches me how to deal with a big canvas. When you paint on a large canvas, you have to think about how you're going to compose it. It's more complex.

There's been a shift in your work recently, away from a thin dabbing or accumulating marks on the canvas, to a heavy impasto surface. Here it almost feels like you're carving an interior out of the paint itself.

Can you speak to this shift?

Yes, I have painted with thin layers, and those paintings are special. But when I would come closer to a finished painting, I felt disappointed. The paintings were very well received, so there was really no reason to change my practice in that sense, but I wanted to explore oils more fully.

For these newer paintings, I start with a thick layer of white oil paint, and then I paint on top of that surface with color. It's kind of a struggle. It's not easy to paint color over a thick layer—everything is a mess. These thick layers of paint also take a very long time to dry, which is another reason why I like this way of working. When working with thin layers of paint, I could only work for a day before it was dry and I had to stop. These thick layers give me much more time to work.

Is there something about the struggle to paint this way that appeals to you?

We are educated to make perfect images. When you go to school, they teach you how to draw a perfect image. I want to destroy the image you have learned to find. I like when it becomes a mess. I want to destroy the image in my head when I am painting. So I make this kind of mess, to see what follows.

Imagine a house. The people who live there make the front beautiful and clean. They put all of their stuff—the rubbish, the things they don't use—in the back so nobody can see it. That's what I'm interested in finding. That's where you find the subject, and I think the subject has to

come from the paint. The paint is pushing the subject to the surface. It comes from a space between the abstract and the figurative. It is emotional, but also very formal.

The works in *Mirrows* are perhaps, at first sight, formal. They're about painting, but they also have an emotional layer underneath the form. I don't want to express emotions directly. I will always look for a formal way to express them.

How does having more time to work the surface of the painting affect the image you create? Are they more or less predictable as compositions?

When you have thick layers, there is time for things to go wrong. Sometimes a painting goes very wrong! You can feel it. It is a strange feeling. But once you know it is going wrong, you no longer have anything to lose. That is the most interesting moment for me. Perhaps I am always looking for the moment when things are going wrong, because I think that is when the most interesting parts of the painting can emerge. In that way, the painting becomes a record of the search.

Time also gives me the chance to repair the damage I've made, to allow the subject to come forward. The subject remains unimaginable until it comes forward, and for that to happen, I need time to allow something to come forward, be destroyed, come forward, be destroyed, over and over again. It's like a puzzle. Things eventually fall into place, but it takes time.

This process is like riding a horse. If the rider has control, you don't feel the power of the horse. But if you let the horse take control, you really feel its power. In this way, I am painting the way I try to live my life. I learn a lot about my own life and my personality from thinking

about and looking at the way I paint.

In "Rooms" (2020), the paint is so thick that it has an almost sculptural quality. The standing figure is emerging from the painting, lifting off the canvas. Are you looking for a third axis for the picture?

Yes, indeed, I'm looking for another dimension in this painting. The painting is about a girl sitting on a chair. You can see her back. It looks as if a man is standing behind her, but is he really? Perhaps the man is in her thoughts or in another room parallel to the room where she is sitting. You can feel the possibility of space and time between them.

This painting seems to have a narrative component too.

Yes. When I started painting 20 years ago, I was painting about the death of my father. He died when I was 11 years old. And no one explained to me what had happened. Of course they told me he had died, but no one told me what had happened. Everyone wanted to go on with life as if nothing had happened. My mother didn't want to show me photos of him. She couldn't—she was overcome with grief. When I was about 40 or so, I still wanted to know what had happened to my father. The only way to do that was to construct a narrative.

Several paintings show quotidian scenes of domestic life. Are these the scenes of your childhood? Are they part of the narrative?

To build the narrative, I go back to the house where I grew up, in my imagination, of course. I go back there, into the memory, and see the things that my father left behind. Shoes, books, these things tell you a lot about a person after they are gone.

I began painting rooms, shoes. At first these things can seem empty, but they were all the information that I had, and when they are empty, you find what lives inside of them. A room is very emotional. If ten people go into a room, and you ask them what they saw, one by one, each of them will tell you a different story. People enter a space, and they fill it with their own emotions, memories, experiences. Everyone has their own thoughts and their own imaginations.

A long time ago, I had a dream. I was in the living room at my parents' house where I grew up. When I was young, I hated that room. I always felt disgusted in that room. But in the dream, I didn't feel disgust. It was just a room, a color composition. I could see the space with painter's eyes, and it felt completely different. I realized that looking at these memories with my painter's eyes helped me a lot. After that, I began interacting with my memories from childhood formally, and it helped me to live through them and to understand them. Painting is a way of understanding life.

What is the meaning behind the term "Mirrow?" Is it a cross between a window and a mirror?

The simple answer is that it was a mistake, a misspelling, but of course, a mirror and a window have similarities. They both have a frame in which things happen. In a window the spectator looks into the distance, in the other the spectator looks at the self, but they can both reflect thoughts and memories instead of the reality of what is being seen.

For me, a mirror will always be an object with a different meaning. The experience of losing my father at a young age left me acutely aware that people could disappear, and I wanted to prevent this from happening to me and the rest of my

family, so I made up a series of rules. I was 11 years old and had the magical mind of a child. I decided a mirror was a dangerous object because it could reflect parts of the body, and somehow I thought the reflecting body part would be in danger. Of course, I didn't tell my mother these rules. I remember walking through a big hallway full of mirrors with her, trying not to break the rules without her noticing. It really was a nightmare. A window was less dangerous within my rules, though I was only permitted to look at things through the window that I wouldn't mind disappearing.

How do you decide when a painting is complete?

I don't. It happens. The only thing I have to do is to be alert for that special moment. And of course, there are a lot of special moments while painting, so you have to be very concentrated and equipped to spot the moment. It's almost always a mixture of intensive attention, intuition, acceptance of the unknown. The worst experience for an artist is the moment when you can't see the painting anymore because you, yourself, have become the painting. Sometimes when this happens you have to look at the painting upside down or see it reflected in a mirror to see it again.

The active work that I do is the building and destructing of the image again and again until it falls into form, a form I couldn't have expected or imagined.