

*Gust Duchateau, Peindre sans souci*

*“People take pictures everywhere, all the time. At Auchan, I have never seen anyone taking pictures with their cell phones. Is it even allowed?”*

*“I asked myself why supermarkets were never present in published novels, how long does it take before a new reality makes it into the dignified realm of literature.”*

Annie Ernaux<sup>1</sup>

Gust Duchateau (b. 1944) is one of those painters whose quiet persistence defies art historical logics. There is no false modesty in the Brusseleer’s small oil paintings of everyday scenes, which most often stem from photographs he used to take with disposable cameras, and now takes with his cell phone. As curator and critic Martin Germann once pointed out, Duchateau’s radicality lies in the fact that he has always done the same thing. In his paintings on MDF and Masonite panels—materials he insists on purchasing at the local *Brico* hardware store—the artist predominantly depicts common Belgian sights. These include supermarkets and gas stations, roads lined with advertising signs, the seaside, parks and streetscapes captured in the middle of the day, beer bottles and bar tables, bakery vitrines and colorful ads promoting good deals on meat.

In Belgium, these everyday surfaces and “uncommon places,” as a photographer like Stephen Shore might call them, bear none of the epic grandeur of Americana. Duchateau paints these mundane subjects with such consistency and deadpan lyricism, that his paintings paradoxically appear unencumbered by the idea of finding beauty in ordinary things. His approach to the banal and the everyday is tender and tranquil to the point where sublimation seems beside the point. What transpires from his work is a guileless kind of enthusiasm for the way things look. This attitude towards the real imbues his paintings with a comforting sense of relief—yes, we all go to the supermarket.

To contextualize his work, it’s worth mentioning that Duchateau had to quit studying art at seventeen in order to help his parents run the family business. He later worked as an illustrator for a cartoon magazine, a screen printer for a graphic design studio, and eventually, as a colorist for the advertising brochure of a Belgian supermarket. The influence of these day jobs is evident in his paintings, reflected in his sense of color and his quasi-Pop Art attraction to the graphic design elements which populate our day to day lives and consume our attention. Duchateau is a painter of modern life’s middlebrow—the sweet smell of the supermarket emanates from his paintings of store interiors like discounted *Madeleines de Proust*.

<sup>1</sup> Annie Ernaux, *Look at the Lights, My Love*, Translated by Allison L. Strayer (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003)

There is a short and seemingly eclectic list of painters that come to my mind when looking at his work. And while it may seem odd to associate him with artists he has no direct connection to, it's worth pointing out a particular strand of painters whose unyielding attitude echoes across time and space. The modest pastoral motifs and rural scenes painted with great persistence by Lois Dodd (b. 1927)<sup>2</sup> from her immediate surroundings, resonate with Duchateau's pictorial sensibility. In a different capacity, it's also interesting to consider the practice of Dyke Blair (b. 1952), who, in the midst of Neo-Expressionism, began rendering photorealistic scenes from his daily life in small-scale gouache and oil paintings. In comparison, Duchateau's work appears strikingly unpretentious. Some of Duchateau's most audacious compositions such as his downward-looking view of a shopping cart near a grey Toyota Yaris also resonate with the quirky photographic inclination of much younger painters like Simon Mielke (b. 1990).

However, the most interesting parallel that I am tempted to draw is between Duchateau and the immensely shy and reclusive american painter Albert York (1928-2009), who worked for a prominent postwar frame maker before working as a carpenter. At a time when billboard-sized paintings were the norm, York used small scraps of wood—presumably repurposed from his day job—to make intimate paintings of cows, dogs, birds, flowers, green meadows and red wheelbarrows. In his essay on Albert York, the poet William Corbett (1942-2018) points out how it may be that York, who also persisted in painting the same motifs throughout his life, was “not so much against the tide of his times as indifferent to it.”<sup>3</sup> The same could be said of Duchateau, whose idiosyncratic and stubborn approach to painting grants him a place of honor in this unofficial lineage of artists who paint *sans souci*.

- Emile Rubino

---

<sup>2</sup> Here, we could also think of Fairfield Porter (1907-1975), or more contemporary painters like Maureen Gallace (b. 1960).

<sup>3</sup> William Corbett, *Albert York* (Boston: Pressed Wafer, 2010)