

# The wood and the trees

*Denis Gielen in conversation with Charlotte Beaudry*

Denis Gielen : Looking back at the various subjects that feature in your paintings, I felt distressed because of this human cry that resounds in them. It's not always loud — sometimes it's restrained. Not unlike the head, which in my memory is purple with pent-up anger. Evidently, the fact that paintings don't reproduce sound, also has something to do with this. These cries affect me, because they distort the faces ; they pass through the skin of the characters, seeking to reach the surface of the painting, which thus comes to embody a feeling, acquires an emotional dimension. The work therefore also refers to what the art of painting embodies...

Charlotte Beaudry : These representations of cries are part of a series that is based on the various mindframes of an adolescent girl who is the central character in this series. The girl seems to sense the limits of the pictorial space and the cries express her extrovert ego through the exuberant gestures that refer to the size of the space, to its expansion. The cry itself belongs to a gestural language. It is an attempt to create space or experiment with it, using an echo to find an extra dimension. But the art of painting imposes its limitations : we hear no sound and we experience the cry only through the image of the face, which is frozen in the effort. These depictions of cries are like a counterpoint to other behavioural patterns, that have to do with introspection, with effacing the self, with hiding things, etc. In this instance through the painting I attempt to represent a body that tries to define its own corporeality and explores its limits. That implies that what the cry expresses, is of no consequence : the cry merely functions as a sonar that scans the surrounding space.

Denis Gielen : The body that seeks to find itself in space is symptomatic of adolescence, which is a — sometimes turbulent, always painful — quest for an identity wedged between two ages, or even between two sexes — I'm thinking of the “ failed masculinity ” of your girls. I'm also thinking of the hand that obviously belongs to a woman, a hand that holds a cigarette as if it were a knuckleduster. The girls you depict seem to have fallen out with a certain aspect of femininity. I'm not saying that they aren't sexy in their knickers, but they are so despite themselves. And when you depict the winners of the Miss World pageant in their bathing suit, you seem to mock them, or at least, you seem to ridicule the image of femininity they promote.

Charlotte Beaudry : I don't want to generalize, but I have the idea that it is possible for a woman to know a man entirely and to foresee his reactions, but the reverse is less likely. Women breathe a certain mystery, there is a certain depth about them. Women experience time and things that matter differently than men. Men may be fascinated by those qualities, but the image of women as a sex object that is propagated in by media, is distressing and oppressive male construction. Furthermore, nowadays this image is not only imposed on mature or young women, but also on adolescent or really young girls. I try to oppose this image in some of my paintings by evoking a defiant femininity (an adolescent girl evokes the male genitals by pointing with her index finger between her legs), using the image of a wasted femininity (the series of Miss World ribbons) or even with a warning sign (the obvious " fuck off " gesture of the hand with the cigarette or the masculine gesture of the woman who grasps her genitals through her jeans). In this context I would also like to refer to the work of Sarah Lucas, which I strongly admire because of its brutal irony and sarcastic humour. I like the provocative element, but also the soundness with which she reverses things : the idea to present femininity using a grotesque male dialectics, is an excellent strategy for a counter-attack. My own approach is less shocking and probably more subtle. I'm also interested in presenting joy, for example by evoking the mouth as an erogenous zone (a vague face with only a distinct mouth with two fingers in it). I also depict the sense of touch : an embrace, reduced to merely an arm and a hand ; the object of the embrace is only suggested (it was actually a tree).

Denis Gielen : An object or a painting can hide another object or painting. You use your brush also to conceal. masks for that matter are part of your iconography, just like the hair that hides the face of people...

Charlotte Beaudry : Reducing the exterior appearance of things, trimming reality to reduce it to certain traits one wants to show, is inevitably part of the pictorial process. By leaving out details so that only a silhouette is left, or even more obviously, by choosing what remains within the frame of the painting and what is left out, it is possible to make that which is absent more significant than that which is present. A face that remains hidden can either raise questions about this face or it can draw the attention to the general attitude of the body, though we don't see the facial features or the eyes. Painting a subject imposes an infinite number of pictorial choices, including the choice itself to exhibit the painting or not. That is particularly true of the

large portrait of an adolescent girl that “sprays” yellow paint on her face. In this context, I’d like to refer to the saying “not see the wood for the trees”. The saying refers to the position of a creator of images, who inevitably looks at things from a certain perspective or even from a prejudiced stance ; on the other hand, it is also like a warning addressed at the public.

Denis Gielen : I have the impression that underneath these images, a certain fetishism hides, with of course erotic connotations. Talking about the mouth, you mentioned yourself that a certain part of the body may refer to another, but I’m also thinking of that which comes to mind first as we notice the painting. The objects depicted are far from innocent. I’m thinking for example of the catapult and the megaphone, which both evoke the idea of political rebellion.

Charlotte Beaudry : I bought the catapult in a large weapon store in new-hampshire. I was fascinated by the simple operating principle that underlies it, but this catapult becomes particularly effective because of its ingenious design. it came with the necessary ammunition : white marble balls. I’ve never dared to use the thing, for fear of an accident. Its power is really disconcerting. I depict it rather neutrally, except that I have blown up the painting to monumental dimensions (190 x 190 cm). The idea that a catapult like this can actually be used, makes our brain spin. What will be the target ? What is the context ? The violence remains “off camera”. The combination with the (equally oversized) megaphone indeed makes one think of urban guerilla warfare. I never meant to be that explicit. The images probably function as a sort of warning. These objects exist and it might be useful to use them in some context. It’s like these windows that bear the inscription “in case of emergency break glass”, inviting us to grasp the object needed. I don’t relate the work to a specific political context. But I do consider activism, struggle or rebellion as levers that are often prerequisite. By painting this sort of objects, I can raise particularly tense questions, without for that matter answering them.

Denis Gielen : I have the impression that you consider space in a similar manner, as if it were a remedy for something or a place where rescue is at hand. your architecture looks either rather precarious — like a box or hut — or on the contrary as massive as a bunker. From cardboard to concrete. all of these are spaces that are closed, locked from within...

Charlotte Beaudry : They are isolated spaces, empty shells — they are like “ still lifes ”. Some paintings, entitled surveillance seem inspired by the sort of images made with a camera that monitors city streets or lonely places. They are the sort of images that seem frozen in a paradox of time : moment and duration become one. Sometimes my work also seems to express the idea that people still have to arrive. That is true for example of the decor that consists of a wooden facade, held up by two beams. The “ building ” in a literal sense (as something inert, something weighty), as opposed to the provisional shelter (hut, shed, box). I represent private space or architecture as an undefined place, in order to exclude every suggestion of narrativity and manoeuvre the public in a position where it can simply observe the facts. The “ implantation marks ” (wooden stakes that mark the place where the foundations of a house should be dug) are even more radical in this sense : they are signposts in a silent space that otherwise has no specific features.

Denis Gielen : I have also noticed that the objects not always tell the entire story. The fact that objects recur or that there are plenty of them, is equally meaningful. Just like the individual objects, the whole of the objects depicted is not innocent. For example when you paint flock of birds, I am reminded of Hitchcock’s famous film, in which fear has to do with numbers. In a dictionary of dreams, Gilles Deleuze quite rightly notes that the meaning of a bone is different from that of an ossuary, or that a wolf means something different from a pack of wolves, etc.

Charlotte Beaudry : Deleuze’s ideas have nothing to do with this. I’m not familiar with his work, so I’m not familiar with this allusion either. Of course, in retrospect an interpretation of my work can turn into an autonomous commentary, something that leads a life of its own. Personally, however, I find it difficult to talk at a conscious level about my work, or to justify it. Usually I make choices the instant the plastic dimension of the painting or the image cause the words or thoughts to fade. I may have painted quite a few birds, but I’m perplexed by the association with hitchcock’s film. On the other hand, I thought the intangible vitality of the birds, arrested in their flight through the gesture of the brushstroke, was a particularly inspiring paradox. The absolute opposite of a movement filmed in its duration. Causing an image to stand still, provides an almost infinite range of possibilities. I don’t find these possibilities in moving images, but I do find them to an even greater extent in the art of painting : a succession of gestures that are recorded with brushstrokes.

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