

## **To build is also to look back**

Maaïke Kerman

It is already dark when we order our drinks. Julien Beaucourt and I have meet up at the terrace of Grand Café Wester Paviljoen. He waits restlessly for the questions I'm going to ask. He begins by asserting that speaking about his work is a dangerous activity; there should not be too much talking about art. By the end of the evening he will have spent more than two hours straight talking about the work he does.

When I cycle home afterwards I know Julien is going to his Rotterdam based studio. Since 2013 he has lived and worked there. Every evening he paints until early in the morning. During daytime he also helps Studio Wieki Somers. It is a remarkable schedule, but exhaustion does not appear in his vocabulary. Ideally he retreats himself for days, surrounded by his monumental-scale paintings. "I deliberately live in my own works. They breathe in my studio and are kind of my windows."

To present them as windows seems understandable. They are massive works through which you view nature in a grand form. "What do you think is important in these windows", I ask. "The weight of them", he explains. "Not the physical weight but the weight it acquires when adding layers of paint over paint." This materiality is revealed by the shapes and forms that emerge through the upper coat of each work. The final painting is the result of layers you cannot distinguish. Also, the surface exposes a dynamic mixture of thick globs and fine brushstrokes of paint. "Likewise the mistakes in my work are important. What makes life interesting are mistakes. That is why I usually cut off pieces in the end, it feels like the right thing to do. Otherwise it is not finished"

Although people often respond enthusiastically to the nostalgic and natural images Julien brings to life, he ensures me his work is about the act of painting instead of the picture itself. "It is like dancing: I am not focused on the choreography, I only want to move." His choice of words is logical. I know he used to be a professional dancer. Then he broke his arm and had to stop. He went to The Academy of Fine Arts in Clermont-Ferrand and started painting with the hand he once broke. "It was a horrific period in my life", he assures me. "I was very immature. Lived in the suburbs of France, which was not an artist's world, so I painted my Arabic and Black friends. Teachers criticized me for it which led to me giving up. I was so fragile."

After three years he found his way back. He applied for an open call abroad. "I was completely alone. It saved me because I had to open up and interact with people. I won a very large prize for my sculptures in the United States. When I came back to France, the portraits evolved into more specious and contextual work, about my position as an artist."

One week later, when I visit Art The Hague - his work is on display by Hommes Gallery - I notice the way people react to it. They immediately respond, stop, take out their cameras, point it out to their companions, come back to stare again. Between the presence of more abstract work people are drawn to the powerful and dramatic language that is filtered through his compositions.

Because of the association people make – a lot of them refer to the Impressionists – I am curious about his position in relation to that of the old masters. He explains to me how interesting it is to see how the path towards his work has been walked by others. "Especially when it has been done so great." It draws a parallel to the way he paints. Each layer is built on the previous; the same counts for his paintings and the ones by old masters. He, however, uses modern techniques. His work is more about context; he paints on pieces of paper attached to each other and he cuts off their corners. Eventually he tacks large scale nails in the top to make them hang on the wall. His relation to the past is more one of building than of looking back and his works are a reflection of his view on history and society. "What appeals to me in the old masters is the fact that their painting is about feelings. I just like this method. This is why I paint naturally. For me imagination is a trap. It is a very dangerous thing."

The latter is one of the most important things he learned by working for Anselm Kiefer. Anselm told him "don't think about what can happen, just feel, do it and then fix it". "I am influenced by him. I wonder who could not be. People think influence is a bad thing but I miss not having a master. Size, scale, material, it was all logical because of working for him."

In the future he hopes to pass on his knowledge as well. To do so Julien has to meet people, exhibit, write and get recognized. At the same time it is upsetting to him. "Approval is both a good thing and a bad thing. Fine if you get it, bad if you're trying to gather it. Now I begin to understand that it's part of my world; if I try to get my work a certain position, it should manifest. To manifest you need to have a strong believe in yourself as an artist. Only then you dare be part of the public and social

environment that helps you. It is a process, but I 'm getting there! Watch me sitting here, talking to you!"