

PLAYING WITH TIME JURY REPORT 2011

One of the wonderful things about painting is its ability to transcend time, its propensity to regenerate itself in response to current events and in turn to shape them. Painting amplifies itself and its times, offering critical reflections of the world, images less fleeting than newspaper photographs. Contemporary history paintings are in vogue—paintings sparkling with social turmoil. The jury has seen some impressive examples over the past few years.

At least three exhibitions have been dedicated to the genre in the Netherlands this year. Their titles speak volumes. TENT in Rotterdam presented the work of fifteen painters in *Every picture tells a story*. The Museum voor Moderne Kunst (Museum of Modern Art) in Arnhem spoke literally of *The end of history and the return of history painting*, and Museum De Pont in Tilburg showed work by a group of artists who call themselves the *Wild Gillende Schildersgilde* (the 'Shrieking Shrieking Painters' Guild').

As the jury observed in its report for the Royal Awards in 2008, 'If there is chaos and commotion in the world around us, there is also chaos and commotion in painting—an emotional and intellectual turbulence.' Since then, the new genre has become more firmly entrenched: the modern-day history piece is clearly here to stay. And that of course stands to reason. Even in the Netherlands, one of the wealthiest and most prosperous countries in the world, recent developments have only increased the need for critical reflection.

Art's engagement with current events has even led to legal proceedings. In the spring of this year, the court in The Hague dismissed a case brought by Louis Vuitton against the young painter Nadia Plesner. The dispute centred on Plesner's painting *Darfurnica*, an indictment of the genocide in Darfur, inspired by Picasso's *Guernica*. In the midst of media celebrities like Paris Hilton, we see a small, naked black boy with a Louis Vuitton handbag over his arm. Not wanting to be branded a symbol of wealth and power inequality, the upmarket fashion house demanded that the work be censored or removed from public display. The court, however, concluded that the logo in Plesner's now world famous painting was functional and proportional, and accordingly upheld the artist's freedom of expression. The painters who competed for the 2011 Royal Awards are no less critical of our society's mate-

rialism and obsession with appearances. Those who aim to achieve harmony are moved to do so by the sense that we have lost our bearings. One contestant remarked wryly, 'They don't like anything dissonant in Barbiceland.' She represents our consumer society as an acid pink dolls' paradise or, in another painting, called *Welcome to join*, as a funfair where obsolete army tanks have become objects of entertainment. And let there be no mistake: a theme park featuring tanks actually exists in reality.

Painting not only throws a spotlight on its own time, but—even more wonderful, perhaps—it has the ability to extend and bridge time. To appreciate this, we just need to look at a few paintings of earlier date, once again paintings of small boys, like Rembrandt's portrait of his son Titus (1655), where the boy, lost in thought, glances up from his writing desk. He seems to look up just as we appear in front of him. But the portrait captures far more than a random moment in time. With Titus we reach out over the centuries, he from 1655 to 2011, the other way around, spanning more than three hundred and fifty years. That certainly gives pause for thought.

Better still, for the same price, literally with one and the same museum ticket, we can go even further back in the past to meet another young schoolboy looking up from his work. The two children are just a few paces apart in Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam: Rembrandt's *Titus* and the *Portrait of a Young Scholar* (1531) by Jan van Scorel. Different as they may be, the boys have remained kindred spirits through the ages.

Titus looks past us, gazing into space, reckoning with time, while Jan van Scorel's self-assured young scholar faces us squarely, eye to eye. He has been there, poised, for four hundred and eighty years—almost half a millennium—with his frank gaze and light blond hair neatly styled under his red beret, in contrast to Titus' mop of tousled curls. He transcends time, but he also represents yet another wonderful quality of painting: its ability to conjure up images and create illusions.

Painters today play with light, just as their predecessors did in the past. Van Scorel's earnest young scholar holds a sheet of paper which is lit from behind, so that we see in mirror image the words he has written with his quill. Translated from the Latin, the inscription reads, 'The Lord gives all, He possesses no less for it'. Aphorisms of this kind were used not only to teach pupils Latin but also to foster moral and religious ideals. The text

in the painting is explained on the balustrade in front of the boy: 'Who is rich? He who covets nothing. Who is poor? The miser'.

This portrait is a paradigm of civilization. It illustrates the importance that influential fifteenth-century philosophers like Erasmus attached to art and education. Erasmus spoke passionately about the social problems of his day and, as a humanist, he believed in progress through intellectual advancement. Jan van Scorel, and later Rembrandt, gave expression to those ideas in their art. Although a twenty-first-century observer might consider the boy in Van Scorel's painting not only clever, but an insufferable know-all, he represents a moralism that lives on today. One has only to look at paintings like *Darfurnica* or *Welcome to join*.

We are still a nation of merchants and preachers, though increasingly more interested in money than morality. As a result, we lost an important work from our gallery of schoolchildren this year. *The Schoolboys* (1987) by the acclaimed Marlene Dumas was sold abroad by Museum Gouda for hard cash, unfairly bypassing other public collections here in the Netherlands, where art today is too easily dismissed and too rarely appreciated.

The Royal Awards, introduced by King Willem III in 1871, have now existed for one hundred and forty years. That is something to be proud of. As chair of the jury, I have the honour to recommend to Her Majesty the following four artists as the winners of the 2011 Royal Awards for Painting.

- ♦ Marie Civikov
- ♦ Omar Koubaa
- ♦ Katja Mater
- ♦ Navid Nuur

Two paintings by each artist can be seen at the exhibition at the Royal Palace. They are also published in the catalogue, which was designed by Karen van de Kraats. The catalogue itself is another source of pride, with special thanks to Marlene Dumas, whose article written for this occasion affirms that 'the flatter the world becomes, the more obvious it is that painting is still necessary'. This year's jury—Tjebbe Beekman, Hanne Hagens, Stijn Huijts, Carla Klein, Ronald Ophuis, Lily van der Stokker and Wilma Sütö—endorse those words.

Wilma Sütö
Chair