

Quatre Mains.

On collaboration, the studio and visual material.

Even though I have been here several times before, as I slide open the door to Reniere&Depla's studio and see the profusion of tools amidst an array of knickknacks and other curiosities, I am seized by an overwhelming sense of enthusiasm and inquisitiveness. Alone in this place, which few have the privilege of entering, I absorb the space and, enraptured, lose myself in it. I allow my eyes to stray from a wad of rolled-up kitchen paper to a plate covered with aluminium foil, a stub of pencil and the remains of pulverized black charcoal trodden into the worn threads of an old carpet. The studio is a glass-covered space, a cube, in a large shed from where the landscape slopes away and the wind stirs its wispy poplars. Luxuriating in the artists' permission to stay here for a while, I move a chair over to the stove and allow my eyes to travel from one object to another. As I browse, I hope to find something that will reveal the secrets of all this material. In the knowledge that nobody in the vicinity is watching, I open every box, every cupboard in turn. Overcome by an irrepressible curiosity, I scour every object in sight, even foraging around in the bottom of pen pots. In a strange house, in someone else's rooms, the most ordinary items seem singular and noteworthy. I poke and rummage around in the studio, examining every object to see if it has an interesting story to tell. Hanging from little nails — pinheads almost — are several works I recognize from exhibitions. Under the feet of the drawing tables are swivel castors, as if it is sometimes necessary to empty the space very quickly and erase all trace of the studio.

What I find in the studio does not solve the question of how Reniere&Depla work together, of how it's all done. In fact, I am even more perplexed as I stand there counting the easels. Whereas I was expecting to see one or two, I find three. So am I to imagine that they start off working alone before ceremoniously transferring the canvas to the joint easel, or are all the easels joint easels and does each artist in turn dash from one work to the next as in a sort of drunken musical chairs? Any hope I had that the mystery of their artistry would suddenly be apparent or reveal itself to me here in the studio, any hope I had of finding a significant clue as I raked through their belongings, a vestige of action, an object that as an artefact would clarify the artistic process - that hope is dashed. The studio is a space associated with some kind of magic, it bears the traces of industry and handiwork, but what is missing is the aureole of the artistry. I expected to discover a tangible remnant that would allow me to take the artistic genius home with me in my pocket: a brush whose hairs go in a different wind direction but which seems to have painted the whole oeuvre, a preparatory study in which I would recognize both inspiration and finished product, something that is both material and product. Those are the sort of things I expected to find, the sort of things I hoped to discover. As in every artist's studio I have visited, I did find autobiographical evidence of its occupant, but the artist himself didn't seem to be there. It is rather like only being allowed to see the visitors' studio when you suspect that there must be another space somewhere where the work is really made. I am not assailed by a sort of artistic ability, I see the material lying there and it does seem to be used - if

not passionately, then intensely. One always expects a studio to be not just a location where things happen but also a testimony to those occurrences. But places rarely diffuse the history they embody and objects are dumb, they lack the power of speech. I replace the spent brush, put the aluminium foil back over the plate of paint and close the sliding door behind me.

Reniere&Depla are two people who in a past that goes back to the mid-1980s for the one and the early 1990s for the other, felt the calling as individual artists. And yet two pairs of hands have now been making work together for the last fourteen years. This partnership intrigues me, but at the same time it raises questions which go unanswered in conversations with the artists. I could sum up the technical aspect of their work by talking about how they paint using acrylics, about the adherency of their canvas, the blending of their colours, the composition of their palette, the dry brush technique, but would that touch the essence of their cooperation? It is not exceptional for two people to work together: a duet is played by two soloists, you need two people for a basse danse and a portrait photograph shows the eye of the photographer and the body of the model. Art forms like theatre and film with a shared authorship appear to be an easy mental exercise. There are also numerous examples in painting where several people paint on the same canvas/work, but usually only one artist in the collective gives his name to the work. So what happens when two people present the same canvas together? When I leaf through catalogues of past series, turning back the pages of time, I am surprised to note that in their more recent work they embrace more and more colour, but also that the ampersand between their names unites them not only in matrimony but also artistically. Earlier works are more individual and can be attributed to one or other of them. But in their more recent work who did what is increasingly a matter of guesswork and at the same time the question becomes less important, less relevant: the works are no longer by Reniere and/or Depla, but the work is by Reniere&Depla. The association was apparent in the dualities in their studio: two drawing tables, two chairs (set at different heights, one with an extra cushion for the back), double the number of dried-up cups of coffee, apple cores and shrivelled up banana skins. Only the paint tubes lay in a communal no man's land and appeared not to have been bought in duplicate, whereas the pencils and brushes had, and stood in solitude in their own beaker bearing the traces of a personal and very particular technique. At some point in the artistic process collaboration must take place so that their work can be presented as one and the single monograph becomes a joint work. Only at a few rare moments does the technique and development of their work require two pairs of hands. Initiation of the work process is fairly democratic, each choosing a starting point from photographs, archive pictures or drawings. Though approach and style differ, the one impetuous and the other more restrained and calculating, they make the first lines in the same way. The subsequent stage of carefully building up the painting and taking it to the next level is, in the words of Paul Reniere, the moment takes over from the act of painting. While the painting process is under way decisions are made but the image prevails and dominates the reality of the starting point (the photograph, the library picture or the

preparatory study).

I could spend hours, days almost, browsing through the succession of blurred, unrecognizable photographs in the artists' digital photo library. Very occasionally I recognize a person, place or object but usually the photographs contain structural details, reflections and strange perspectives. This is Reniere&Depla's source of visual material. The couple go around like two nomadic photographers capturing everything that passes them with the small lens of their compact digital cameras. These photographs are not documentary, narrative or autonomously artistic. In conversations with them not once do they refer to the photographs as things that could be of value in their own right; they are material, just as their charcoal and paint are used up on the canvas so, too, the photographs are incorporated into the paintings. Yet the photographs are fascinating as documents, for they show how the two artists view things. Sometimes they both take a camera with them on an outing, and though their photographs are not identical, they nevertheless reflect a deep affinity between these two people, not only in work and life, but even in the uncommunicable way they scrutinize their surroundings. Taking a photograph is not the first step in producing a work, a photograph is not turned into a painting. Taking photographs is part of the artists' process of looking and searching. A visit to the zoo in Budapest, a baths in Lisbon or perhaps a museum in London are not blurred into singular photographs. Browsing through the images, the photographs seem to me motionless and expressionless, and though they appear to share a sort of sensitivity with the work of Reniere&Depla, I cannot put it into words. The photographs are not part of a linear development that eventually leads to the completion of a new canvas. There is no direct link between the photographs and the painting; the canvas is not a representation of the photograph. Indeed, the painting always seems to provide an extra layer or dimension. The canvas surpasses the photograph because it represents the sensibility rather than the scene. The painting process lays a sheen over things which clarifies or reinforces. In one work it obscures like a shadow, in another work it illuminates like a gloss and in yet another it shrouds like a mist. Things lose their scale, they seem immeasurably large or small. The canvas is more ill-mannered than the photographs, the painting displays a unity that is not there in reality.

Reniere&Depla's work contains a way of looking and making that is what defines and underlies their collaboration. I study one of their photographs, the messy image L1050575. The photograph is so close to what was photographed that it becomes a mere snapshot in time. Even though the photograph does have qualities of its own as a photograph and has captured a very beautiful moment in reality, it lacks the intensity I sense when I look at Reniere&Depla's paintings. The transcendence or elimination of scale, which seems to be a constant in many works, is impossible to experience in photography because a tiny piece of fluff, a raindrop or woven textile immediately gives away the real size of the object or the scene.

Their photographic material serves as a necessary stimulus, it is both a way of prolonging a view of the outside world and also an emotionally distanced occupancy of that world. The image, which both artists like to talk about as a sort of higher authority, comes into being the moment the photograph is taken. The chance effect by which light is sometimes irrevocably intensified is the first barrier between the real and the original image. The distance between image and moment is further increased because photographs jostle each other in their relentless desire for more and different images so that travel, outings and even a walk close to home result in a surfeit of JPGs. Despite this distance, the photograph is still connected to something momentary; the reference to the real, the actual moment has disappeared, is forgotten or unrecognizable but the photograph still contains an idealistic longing for and reference to the actual.

There is no vocabulary to describe their collaboration. Only for the technical side are there fixed expressions, but the theoretical reduces the ampersand to a team and misses the poetical aspect of their collaboration. Instruments tuned in the same way even when their timbre is totally different can produce harmonic music, and it is the same in the work of Reniere&Depla - no translation, no transposition of key is required. Painting together is done not by dividing the painting into fields and having brushes move across the surface like pawns. The only time two pairs of hands touch the same canvas is with those intervening layers of glaze which very quickly darken the painted image in an almost opaque layer, whereby with rapid strokes the light must be recovered so that the image does not completely disappear under a dark veil.

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