

Pieter Vermeersch

Text by MonicaSzewczyk, 2007

Despite their nearly platonic composure, the paintings of Pieter Vermeersch are rife with contradiction. Pure abstraction on the one hand and photographic realism on the other are perceptible in the colourfields and gradations (works occurring on canvas and architectural supports). A gradation is always *both* a demonstration of the range in value of pure, flat colour *and* a five hundred year old 'trick' used to create the illusion of three dimensions. If the works are hermeneutic, tautological even – referring to the behaviour of paint – they are *also* painstaking copies of worldly light phenomena. They tend to occur in series or remain contingent to a given space; but in the final analysis an autonomy is sought.

In each canvas of the latest suite of ten *Untitled* paintings, a pool of light streaming into a room may be perceived out of a spare arrangement of vertical and horizontal fields of chromatically muted paint. Each rendition has a different tone—moving from light to dark. But the movement is not marked sequentially in the gallery installation. If their free dispersal aids each painting's autonomy, another strategy obscures it: the ten paintings are contingent on ten photographs, each exposed at ten different stops, or measures of time and of light. Like the Impressionists, Vermeersch studies the effects of light, but unlike their competition with and outdoing of the then new photographic apparatus, his (especially latest) work seems to submit to the a priori photograph only to prove that this is a way for contemporary painting to gain strength through complexity. What we get is a depiction of the behaviour of light *and* a depiction of the behaviour of paint *and* a depiction of real space all in a single picture. At the tonal extremes of light and dark the image most notably recedes to near abstraction. These are paintings that strain the eyes and reward a looking that is as intensive as the artist's gaze, when he aims at the exact depiction. Here, a tension boils between the stillness and the movement of the image – not only the restless movement between dialectically paired conceptual conditions of abstraction/representation, autonomy/contingency; but also the phenomenal movement of an image that, when looked at long enough, seems to transform itself before the viewer's eyes. Jeff Wall has written of still works such as paintings, photographs, sculptures and the graphic arts that "we judge the depictive arts on how they suggest movement while actually excluding it." Subjected to this criterium, Vermeersch's work may be said to sustain movement in two distinct ways: through the analytical dialectics of the image as concept and through the phenomenal contradiction of a moving/still picture. Call it a mind/body movement.

A much earlier suite mundanely entitled *8 paintings (date)* depicts an equally mundane view of a window of a car with a wiper on a low diagonal. Executed eight times from the same photograph in an almost machine-like devotion to a machine-

produced picture, this was Vermeersch's early manifesto of painting's limit conditions: laborious process, purified content and maximum tension between the prosaic and the sublime, all in the service of an intense experience of the conditions of visibility. His second project in the current exhibition consists of a videotape of a wall painted white which gradually dries as a shiny black field (due to the particular qualities of the paint medium) that is projected back onto that very shiny black wall (which, as the video testifies, was painted earlier in the very space of projection). Here we have painting as tautology. But we also have painting as an escape from itself – an escape because the experiment introduces actual movement to painting through the drying process and the time-based medium of video.

Now, if the artist is allowed his contradictions, then the onlooker (and the writer pondering all this) might also venture one – a counter to the tautologies, the meta-conceptions and the dialectics and even the experience of pure presence. This contradiction may arrive in the form of an old fashioned, literal or even literary reading of the depicted space in Vermeersch's suite of ten *Untitled* canvases. What we have is an image of a door ajar, a space leading onto another – a threshold. Why choose this scene? If, beginning in the sixteenth century, windows, mirrors and maps proliferated in the genre paintings of the Low Countries to assert (rather self-consciously) the newly modernising art of painting as a *window onto the world* or a *mirror held up to reality*, then Vermeersch's imagery may be read to allude to an altogether different condition for painting. The artist often deploys mirrors alongside his paintings, as a challenge as much as an equivalent to the image. As for windows – the car window depicted in *8 paintings* does not frame a world with Cartesian assurance, but presents a thing caught in restless renewal (via the wiper which continually clears the slate not just for the window, but perhaps also for painting). Now, another scene appears, devoid of windows or mirrors. This threshold, read (even if only in part) literally, begins to designate a liminal space where painting is allowed movement between different worlds, realms of thought or spatio-temporal dimensions.