

Waterland

Many of us living and working in large cities spend our vacations in regions defined by specific landscapes: depending on personal preferences, in the mountains or at the seaside, for example. There, we hope to recover and heal from the hectic nature and the pressures of urban life. Why? What is the special appeal of gazing at a mountain panorama or at the sea's horizon?

In his epochal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), the renowned German philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin put it very beautifully. He described the 'aura' of these 'natural beauties' as "infinite distance, however near it may be." What he meant by this was that we are able to recognize the beauty of nature, but we cannot hold on to or truly understand it. It remains 'aloof' or 'ungraspable' and thus is of eternal fascination to us.

Still, the relationship between humans and nature is an ambivalent one. On the one hand, time and again, human existence has been threatened by natural forces, and, on the other hand, humans and their technological abilities pose a threat to both nature and the environment. When, in 2011, the Japanese islands were hit by the Fukushima disaster, the nature of the catastrophe was twofold: the earthquake and the tsunami were followed by a nuclear meltdown. Both nature and human-created technology collapsed. From this experience arises the question how we, as humans, will cope with such catastrophes, globally and regardless of individual cultures.

The theme of landscape plays an essential role in the work of Dutch artist Catharina de Rijke. However, in her paintings, landscape is not meant to be understood as a representation of natural realities or geological formations, but rather as a superordinate poetic entity that always relates to humans. In this sense, the human body can also be a landscape and, vice versa, the landscape can be a body. What resonates here is a spiritual notion of Earth as "Mother Earth" in the sense of wholeness of nature and living beings. With this kind of spiritual infusion of the theme, it is understandable that the inferno described above has left deep marks on the mind and soul, marks that inspired the painter to create several picture series and that have influenced her work to the present day.

The landscape that de Rijke brings to New York is called Waterland. The artist's family comes from the Dutch province of Zeeland, located on Europe's northern coast, an area made up largely of islands and peninsulas. The island, the land surrounded by the sea,

thus becomes the connecting element between the artist's origin, the exhibition place of Manhattan and the Japanese Tenri Gallery. As a defining element, water bridges the different places, continents and lifeworlds.

Hence, the exhibition title refers neither to a real place (in the Dutch province of North Holland, there are both a region and a community called Waterland) nor to Graham Swift's novel of the same name (1983) or the 1992 movie version. 'Waterland' is a self-contained meta-theme, providing a guideline through de Rijke's pictorial worlds. It comprises both the beauty and the fragility of all worlds by and in the water.

To develop and represent the theme's multiple layers, the artist has opted for an extraordinary and unique approach: in the central group of works on the Waterland theme, she abandons her traditional medium – canvas stretched on a wooden frame – and uses pieces of fabric (canvas, jute and sailcloth) for her compositions. For these fabrics, de Rijke developed three different cutting patterns, which are then used in different sizes, from 'child-size' to larger-than-life to monumental.

When unfolded, the surfaces formed by the patterns are reminiscent of cross pattées. This type of cross owes its name to its flared arms. Well-known (symmetrical) forms are the Templar's cross or the Army cross. In the context of the Waterland meta-theme, it is also interesting that precisely this form of cross is also the symbol for the German Maritime Search and Rescue Service. However, these associations are not intended. Rather, during the creative process, they subconsciously or, indeed, unconsciously, resonate in the theme's background.

Folded together in the center, the suspended shapes form soft reliefs and their respective patterns reference the thematic layer. The shape that was created first is also the most austere. The T-shaped, almost straight-lined garb is reminiscent of a Japanese kimono. But the fundamental difference to that traditional robe lies in the textile reliefs composed from different pieces of fabric. With its seams and hems, the patchwork alludes to Fukushima and the way the region has changed five years after the disaster. Figuratively, reminiscent of clothing, the objects symbolize the people who have stayed – mainly elderly people and women – whose bodies and souls were damaged, whose wounds have closed but are still far from having healed.

With apparently simple forms, with the fabrics' muted natural colors and with the way the pieces of fabric are cut and composed, de Rijke takes up a central aesthetic concept from Japanese culture: wabi-sabi. Not having any direct equivalents in other languages, this term denominates something like broken beauty, a beauty that does not

reveal itself at first glance while the 'brokenness' can be of very different kinds: traces of ageing, scars, clouding, unevenness and asymmetries – all those aspects that provoke both deep melancholy and undefined longing. Maybe the best way to describe it is that the viewer is being touched by something that brings forth both a smile and a tear.

Although the Japanese kimono is traditionally worn by both women and men, its form is inherently female. This is shown in the overarching artistic concept, which gives rise to the other two patterns.

The second basic form of textile relief is characterized by the wide, flaring skirt-part flowing down from an imaginary waistline and by pointed sleeves. With this slightly playful form, de Rijke points towards her own past and the traditional Zeeland costumes that her grandmother still used to wear. From the 16th century onwards, these costumes were passed down from mother to daughter and featured a starched white linen bonnet under which usually a lace bonnet peeks out. The second type of textile relief is vaguely reminiscent of this beautiful traditional dress boasting a little velvet jacket, a cotton skirt, an apron and a shawl. But here, too, the individual form is made up of different, partly overlapping pieces with visible seams. As opposed to the kimono-form, however, there is sometimes color. A pale blue stripe runs along the shoulder and sleeve of a monumental form, gaining in color intensity and taking on a wave-like curve towards the sleeve's end. This curve ends abruptly at the hem, hanging in the air like an unfinished thought.

The Netherlands, too, were stricken by a catastrophic flood in the past. The night of January 31st to February 1st, 1953 saw the most devastating storm tide of the 20th century with about 2000 lives lost in the Netherlands alone and the province of Zeeland being flooded.

Referred to as 'De Watersnood' in the Netherlands and in Flanders that storm tide, too, was of catastrophic dimensions. It also gave rise to the question in which way the environment could further be used as a human habitat. In the subsequent period, this challenge was ingeniously mastered by hydraulic engineers, resulting in a technological sensation, which is still referred to as the Eighth Wonder of the World: the gigantic Delta Works flood defense, featuring different types of coastal fortification, which is still one of Zeeland's most notable attractions.

The above-mentioned 'unfinished thought' could be a reference to collective memory, in which the disaster is engrained and passed on from one generation to the next. But still: while featuring a muted color scheme, due to the dynamic curve and the pale blue shade, there is a perception of gentle serenity. This basic mood is paralleled by the fact that, as part of Delta Works, the artificial Neeltje Jans

island has been transformed from an information center into a leisure park.

While the first and second basic forms are clearly reminiscent of traditional Japanese or Dutch costumes, de Rijke developed the third form in an associative way. She composed textile objects marked by greater abundance: richer, heavier, larger, featuring wider panels and larger pieces of fabric. This third type of textile relief references New York itself, a city that, in the past and in the present, provided and still provides space to the most diverse groups of immigrants and people. The relief epitomizes generosity and cordiality. It is the most motherly of the three forms attributed to the female body.

Working like a sculptor rather than a painter, in this impressive series of works, de Rijke has not only created a subtle three-dimensionality in the fabrics (all of which have different tactile and visual qualities), but has also found a way of symbolizing the complexity of the Waterland theme in relation to the three different places, countries and continents while simultaneously unfolding the aspect of 'Mother Earth'.

In the second series of works, in which the artist returns to her medium of painting, she complements those thematic areas. The respective place and its history are each densified in one vertical painting: at the beginning of the entire series of works, de Rijke created a composition on 'Fukushima' in whose center a formation of dark color shadings rises upwards. The shades are broken colors with nuances between black, brown and dark blue, reminiscent of driftwood, fragments and burnt things.

In the painting's upper part, however, the shapes dissolve into a lighter zone with pale blue surfaces, soft yellows and burnt sienna (an earth tone), giving rise to thinking of old myths, for example of Phoenix rising from the ashes. The brighter, lighter and more calming colors link this composition to those on Zeeland and New York, which feature the same format.

Another series comprising three slightly smaller vertical paintings picks up the theme of femininity and clothing again. Stylized women's heads, each one wearing a headdress that is recognizable as such, despite strong reduction. Like with the textile reliefs, the hairstyle of the figure representing Japan is reminiscent of traditional bonnets such as those worn at weddings. In the composition featuring a female figure seen from behind, we are reminded of the Zeeland bonnet; referencing New York, the third headdress is created in an associative manner.

Featuring predominantly shades of blue, a fourth group of paintings completes the Waterland theme. Sometimes the blue seems to

dissolve, other times it appears to densify: from this sea of blue arise, in the mind's eye, consolidated forms that are best described as 'islands'. Associations like shore, cliff, beach or estuary may come up; the gentle pigmentation that sits on the surface in an almost tactile way underlines the character of a sandy island.

These 'island'-paintings have the same format as the three female heads, whose body color also features the same characteristics as the islands: varying paint application from fluid to dry, grainy surfaces, soft blue shades.

The human being is an island, flanked by the rivers of the past and the present, while the future lies ahead, still undefined. A comforting thought.

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