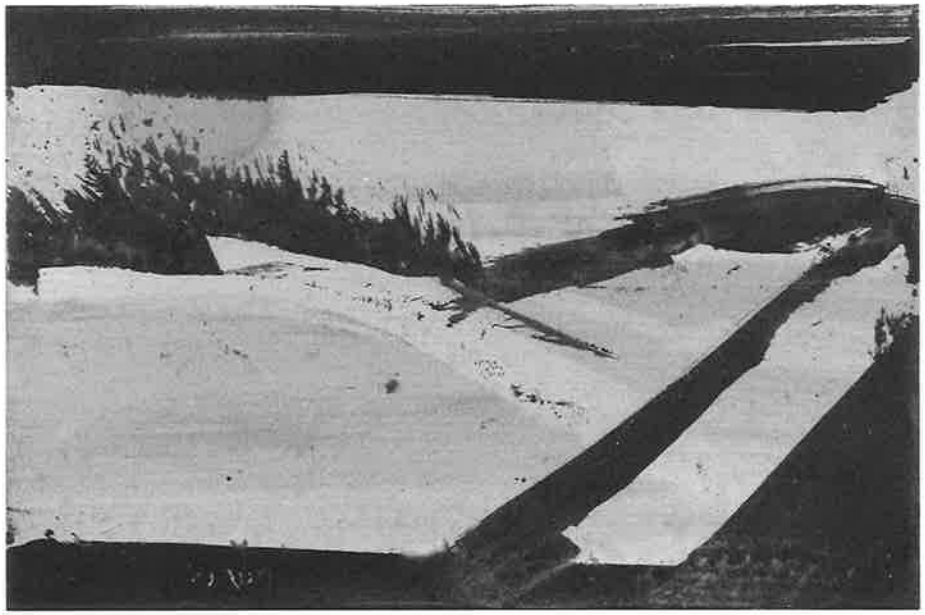
Robert Zandvliet

FLORILEGIUM

PETER BLUM EDITION



UNTITLED, 1998
egg tempera on canvas, 15 ¾ x 23 ¾ inches (40 x 60.3 cm)

Robert Zandvliet

FLORILEGIUM

OVERVIEW 1998–2023

PETER BLUM EDITION

December 2023

Hello Robert,

One early morning recently it dawned on me that we have known each other and worked together for the past 25 years! What better way to celebrate this milestone than to have an exhibition at the gallery with an overview of your work from this period.

Thinking back to the moment when I saw a group of your paintings for the first time, at the Basel Art Fair in 1998, I experienced that sensation of discovery, connection, and awe, that "inner lightning bolt" that is hard to define, let alone to explain. The painting I bought from this group is reproduced here as the frontispiece.

I wrote you a letter right away, suggesting you come to New York to do a print edition together. You responded with enthusiasm and stayed for a week in April of 1999. I introduced you to the master printer Maurice Sanchez at his studio, where you saw a selection of the superb monotypes he had made with Eric Fischl in 1986. Inspired by these, you decided to work in monotype, expressing the distinct wish to use an exceptionally large size: 200 × 100 cm. Maurice accepted the challenge and was prepared when you returned for a three-week stay in the fall. The thirty-two amazing monotypes you produced with him were titled *The Varick Series*, named after the street on which the print studio was located.

It was a wonderful time, not only for the making of a great print project, but also for laying the foundation of our friendship. With the weekdays reserved for the printmaking, we spent evenings and weekends together. We visited Alex Katz, whose work you followed for many years and with whom you share a certain affinity. I recall how gratifying it was for you when Alex acquired one of your large paintings—now in the collection of the Colby College Museum of Art in Maine—from our exhibition "Inner Landscapes" eight years later.

On one of the weekends, we decided to go to East Hampton on Long Island, home for many years of Willem de Kooning, one of the painters you most admired. You were moved when we stood in front of his house and studio, where he created so many brilliant paintings of the surrounding landscape. We sat on the beach and you reflected on this area, of which you had only seen photographs and now were able to experience in person.

Since our first show, "The Varick Series," in April of 2000, our journey together led us to six more exhibitions at the gallery. "Florilegium" presents a selection of your work from the last 25 years, a survey you composed in seven chapters.

This publication—with your comments alongside the paintings, your dialogue with Invar-Torre Hollaus, as well as his insightful text—allows for a comprehensive understanding of your art in general and of this exhibition in particular.

I am excited about you coming to New York so that we may install and celebrate "Florilegium" together!

ROBERT ZANDVLIET—A BOUNDLESS GAZE

INVAR-TORRE HOLLAUS

Since the very beginning of his artistic career in the late 1990s, Robert Zandvliet's main interest has been in landscape painting. With his focus on the classic genre of landscape painting, the Dutch artist continues a long tradition that has shaped the style of Dutch (and, more broadly, European) art from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries right up to the modern era, which he constantly enriches with decisively new and refreshing impulses in terms of painting, composition, and perception.

If we follow the exhibition's main chapters "Heritage," "Signature," "Road Movie," "Moonlit," "Le Jardin," and "Aurora," we see ourselves confronted with an artist who is intellectually fully dedicated to exploring art history, the world we live in, and the mysteries attending both through the act of painting. Nature is the main source for his inspiration. However, he is not interested in translating the natural world into a realistic, descriptive image. Illustrating what we know and simply confirming already established conventions is not his intention. Robert Zandvliet is an artist who constantly pushes himself to the very edge of our common knowledge, doubting and reconsidering even what seems to be already understood. And he does so with his own previous pictorial solutions, trying to capture the very essence of a subject with each new painting embodying what the artist calls "an idea of landscape." The encounter with a painting by Robert Zandvliet takes the viewer on an eye-opening journey through art history with inventive pictorial solutions fusing both abstract and representational elements, challenging us to question our habits of perceiving the world.

Zandvliet's early work is characterized by mostly flat, graphic compositions of common everyday objects. From the late 1990s onward, a free, associative, abstract pictorial language in the broadest sense became increasingly prevalent in his work. However, concrete, representational motifs always remain the starting point for his paintings. Zandvliet generally uses egg tempera, which he mixes himself and applies with brushes of various widths —sometimes also with paint rollers—in numerous thin, transparent layers and in dynamic but free, precisely placed brushstrokes. He occasionally uses acrylic, especially for large-format paintings; most recently he has been drawn to oils. Egg tempera and acrylic can be applied far more sparingly than oil paint and are less viscous, with the result that even works with multiple layers of paint tend to appear flat and delicate. Looking at several works, we gain the impression that the motif literally slips out of focus and we find ourselves confronted with pure painting.

Zandvliet often works on several paintings at the same time, both on canvas and on paper, using many different colors and painting devices. Thus, he never makes studies, but only individual, unique works. The fascinating aspect of quick—but decisively set—brushstrokes, proving the artist's painterly skills and characteristic of his works since the beginning, is probably most obvious in paintings showing roads and paths crossing a landscape (*Untitled*, 1998, p. 2; and *Untitled V-10.26.99*, 1999, p. 23). We can imagine driving through the vast open range at high speed. The interlocking of fore-, middle- and background pulls the viewer into the image, quite often with a cinematic effect, and we have the impression that we are standing in the landscape.

Zandvliet's paintings are mostly void of human activity or any other kind of narrative storytelling references. Roads, paths, agricultural land and the occasional sailboat are perhaps the only traces of civilization we find in these landscapes, which otherwise remain empty, showing nothing other than pure, undomesticated natural surroundings in which the viewer may feel like a pioneer. We become aware that all his works emphasize looking and perceiving, encouraging a deep understanding of the depicted subject.

The "Stage of Being" series as well as the crucifixion scenes from the same period (*Untitled*, 2018, p. 17) are to date the only works in the artist's entire oeuvre featuring human presence. If a human figure is shown, it's always from the back; we never see a face. These protagonists are similar to those in paintings by Caspar David Friedrich and possibly also Caspar Wolf, two artists Zandvliet appreciates, whose transcendental figures become substitutes for the viewer. But in comparison to the figures in Wolf's and Friedrich's works, who seem either to examine the landscape for a scientific purpose (Wolf) or to stand in contemplation, looking into the distance (Friedrich), Zandvliet's figures appear more nebulous, like spiritual surrogates for human beings. In several works, these figures appear dematerialized, dissolved in color and light, an inseparable part of the paint. For example, we can regard the subject of *Untitled*, mentioned above, as a

crucifix. However, it seems that this fragmented figure tries to push through the narrow opening in the middle toward the light in the background. Metaphorically, this kind of reading even fits the biblical message, but Zandvliet transforms the message into a humanistic one, disconnected from religious issues, urging us to reach out for light, leaving darkness behind.

Zandvliet repeatedly returns to classical, almost archetypal landscape motifs from art history. His paintings are characterized by a remarkable gestural economy, which has become increasingly articulated in recent years. Some paintings are composed of minimal layers of paint and few brushstrokes that evoke a heightened intensity; for example the extremely reduced *Crack (Cave)* from 2022 (p. 27), with its dramatic harsh light achieved with black paint on raw canvas. These compositions manifest themselves first and foremost as pure, abstract, nondescriptive works before the actual motif emerges from the paint and becomes concrete in the viewer's perception. This moment of presence and immediacy is perhaps most evident in the motif of the rearview mirror (*Untitled*, 2013, p. 25), which the artist has used repeatedly since his early work. The example here is especially innovative, as we sense ourselves to be driving into a deep blue-violet darkness. In front of us is possibly a road, but only dimly lit, perhaps by the car's headlights, but certainly evoking a kind of spatial depth, pointing into the distance and thus into the future; in the rearview mirror we see the same nothingness, but we look back, so to speak, into the past on the same road, while in the pictorial space in between we experience the absolute present as on a kind of threshold. Time stands still. Past, present, and future merge into a single moment of heightened temporal awareness where time and space seem to be suspended.

In *Black Mirror* (2012, p. 29), in terms of technical and compositional reduction probably one of Zandvliet's most unusual and most radical works to date, the aspect of suspended time—and perhaps even space and gravity—is taken to its apotheosis: we look into an oily, opaque, absorbing black abyss. This mirror reflects nothing but two small shiny dots of light. There are not many works of art that confront us as viewers' with ourselves in a more direct and radical way.

The aspect of immediacy and presence does not only manifest itself in Zandvliet's smaller works; it's a characteristic feature of his larger works, several of which interpret paintings by Old Masters (for example Friedrich, Hercules Seghers, Rembrandt van Rijn, Wolf) as well as those by artists

primarily from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as Willem de Kooning, Ferdinand Hodler, Piet Mondrian, Georgia O'Keeffe, and even Chinese artists (for example *Strange Stone*, 2011, p. 16, which references the so-called philosopher stones). In his publication *I Owe You the Truth of Painting* from 2012, the artist explains the context of these relations in a revealing way.

But Zandvliet is not simply interested in copying and integrating central, innovative works from art history into his own oeuvre. He selects inspiring, stylistically completely different pictures, thinking his way into them and deciphering the artistically innovative gestures of the time in order to test their topicality in a contemporary context. In some of his works of this nature we might discover echoes from Vincent van Gogh (the exaggerated composition and spatial depth in *Untitled V-10.26.99*, 1999, p. 23), de Kooning (the energetic flame-like colored brushstrokes in *Untitled*, 2005, p. 19), Claude Monet, whose "Nymphéas" series, with its diffuse and hazy light reflections and interlocking of fore- and background via a nearly infinite range of color, became an inspiration for Zandvliet's "Le Jardin" series (2021–23, pp. 31–33).

In such artistic references and interpretations, the viewer is confronted with different points of view, which primarily provide information about a human state of mind, about how the artist looks at the world. This is even reflected in a conventional genre such as landscape painting. For in the history of art and culture, landscape was never only aesthetic, innocent, neutral, emotional, romantic, or nostalgic; it was often also hierarchical, territorial, inclusive or exclusionary and thus interpretable in (power) political terms. In central perspective, the chosen detail fixes the space and creates clear boundaries. The natural human gaze, however, knows no rigid progressions and thus no definitive demarcation, because the eye wanders and is constantly in motion.

Looking back on the artist's career, we can see that he has kept a remarkably intellectual and artistic independence and freedom, an open-mindedness that allows him to constantly renew and surprise himself with each new series of works. Art to him is freedom, not a style or a brand. Thanks to this persisting attitude, Robert Zandvliet's view of the world in his pictures offers the viewer precisely this natural, free, boundless gaze.

Chronology

In the corner of my studio there is a table with about twenty half-painted sheets of paper on it. The recipe is simple and unchanged since 2004; size and subject are always the same. I rarely make a specific color for these works on paper; I just use the paint left over from large paintings. There is no preconceived plan, no specific idea about representation, color and/or gesture. Layer upon layer, these little landscapes arise intuitively. With an empty head and color on my brush, I feel free, skating across the paper.

UNTITLED, 2010
egg tempera and oil on paper, 9 x 12 inches (22.9 x 30.5 cm)

UNTITLED, 2011
egg tempera on paper, 9 x 12 inches (22.9 x 30.5 cm)

UNTITLED, 2017
egg tempera on paper, 9 x 12 inches (22.9 x 30.5 cm)

UNTITLED, 2021
egg tempera on paper, 9 x 12 inches (22.9 x 30.5 cm)

UNTITLED, 2022
egg tempera on paper, 9 x 12 inches (22.9 x 30.5 cm)

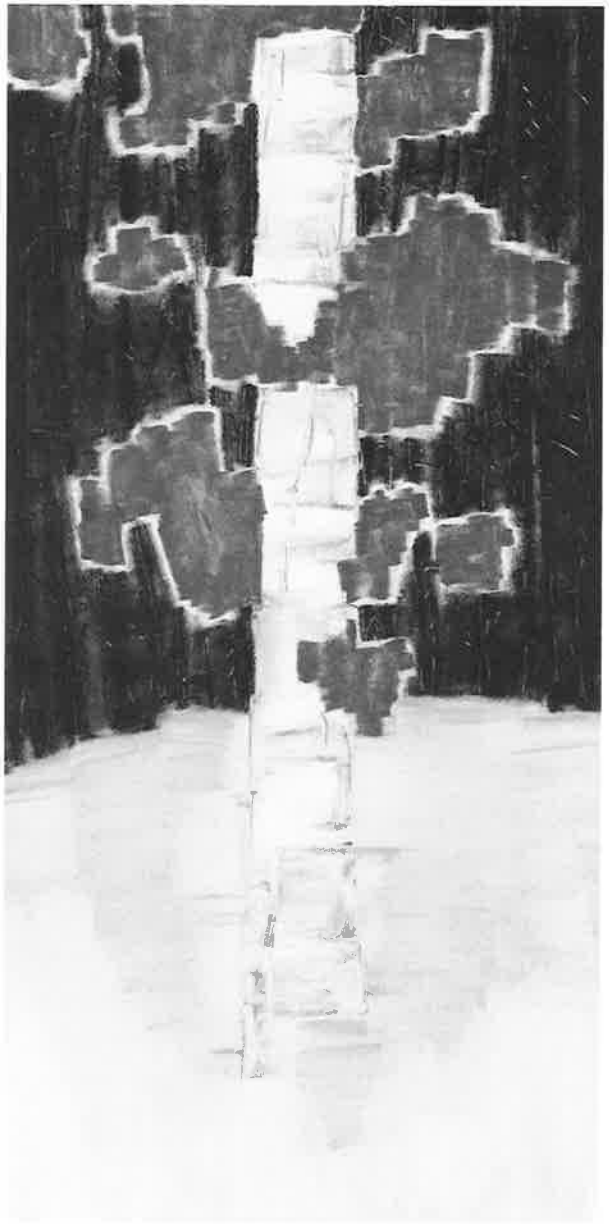
UNTITLED, 2023
egg tempera and oil on paper, 9 x 12 inches (22.9 x 30.5 cm)

Heritage

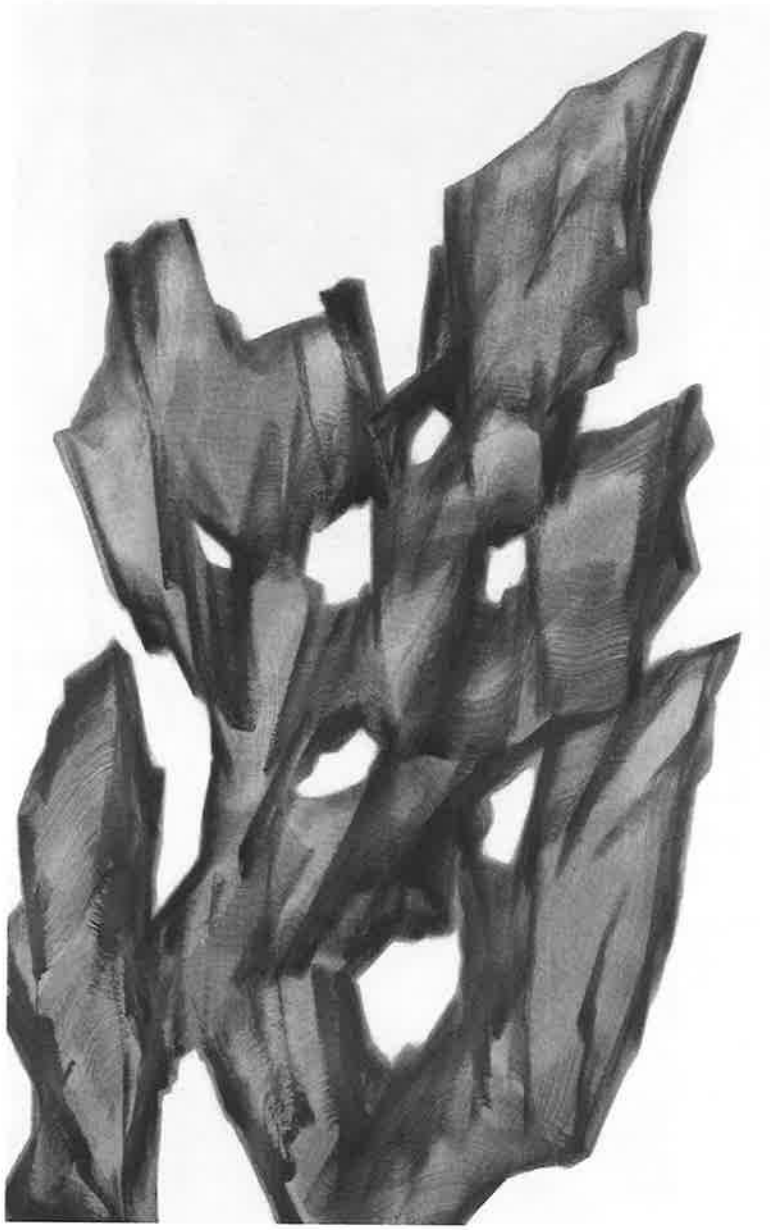
Painting is an inexhaustible source and I have never experienced its history as a burden. So I have seen the zigzagging road to the horizon in Van Gogh's Wheatfield with Crows, *Max Beckmann's* View from the Ship's Hatch *or Milton Avery's* Hint of Autumn. *Every image that I admire by my predecessors I can remake ruthlessly. By painting them again, I try to better understand certain subjects.*

The paintings I use as starting points can come from various style periods, crisscrossing art history. In most cases the paintings are also directly related to my own work. (For example, my "Seven Stones" series refers to Zhou Tang's Strange Stone *and Georgia O'Keeffe's* Black Rock.*)*

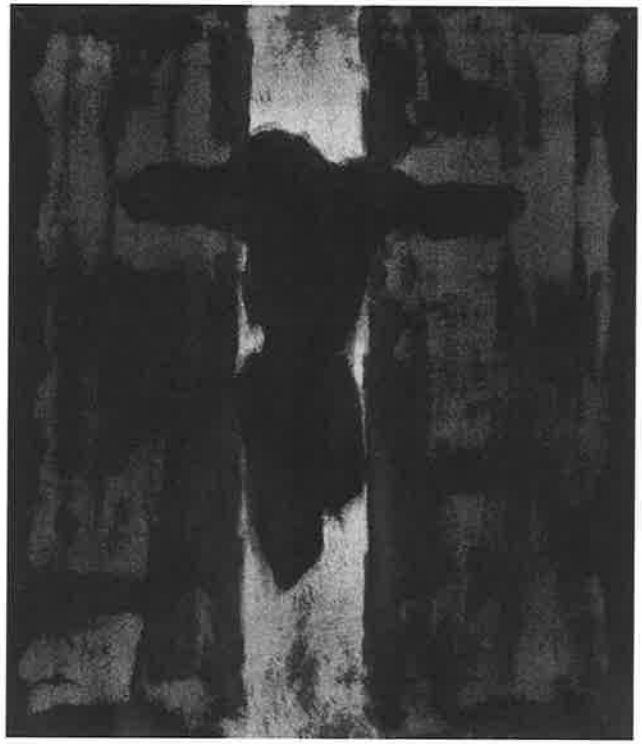
The result is never a literal translation and certainly not a copy. It is an attempt to get closer to the core of the work, without disavowing myself. It provides an insight into my gaze.



UNTITLED 08-24-23, 2023
monotype, 86 ⅝ x 46 ½ inches (220 x 118 cm)



STRANGE STONE, 2011
egg tempera and spray paint on linen, 91 x 56 ¾ inches (231 x 144 cm)



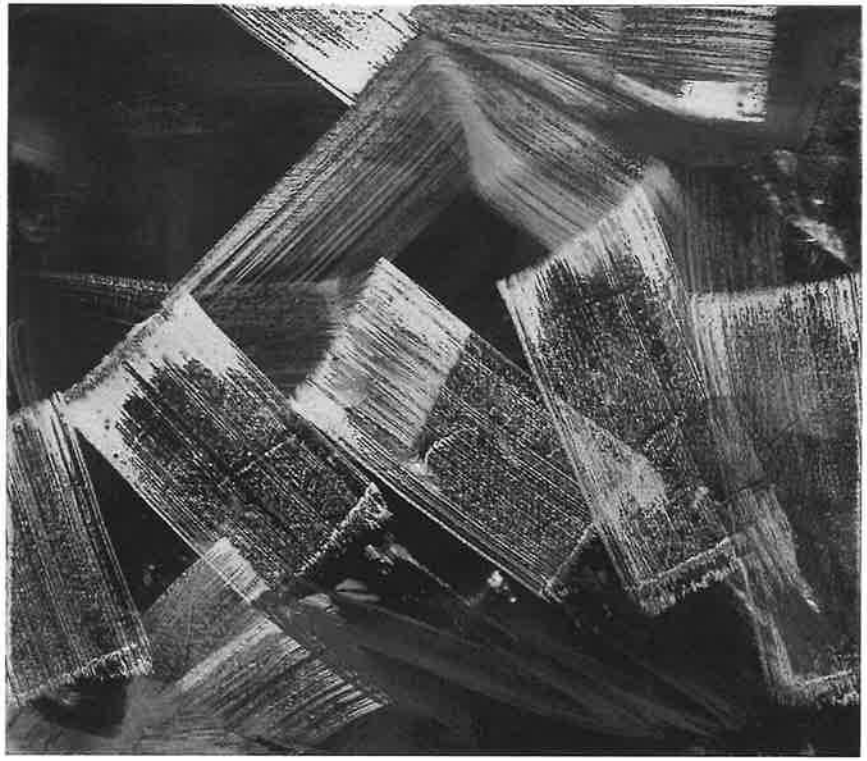
UNTITLED, 2018
acrylic on linen, 28 ⅜ x 24 ¾ inches (72 x 63 cm)

Signature

The problem with style is that it is too often used as an excuse. To quote Willem de Kooning, "Style is a fraud." I am not aiming to arrive at a specific style or handwriting. But there has always been an awareness of the material, the canvas, the paint, and the brushstroke. In the beginning, there was the discovery of the block brush. When this was no longer sufficient, I mounted four brushes together to create a wider brushstroke. Next came the wallpaper brush. And eventually I replaced the brush with the repetitive imprint of the paint roller. But there was always that inner dissatisfaction—that my handwriting looked too smooth, too round, and too easygoing. Virtuosity. Obviously it gets in my way most of the time. I will end up somewhere without a brush, like the Chinese painter Gao Qipei, with only paint on my palms, fingers, and nails.

UNTITLED, 2005
egg tempera on linen, 67 ¾ x 50 inches (172 x 127 cm)

UNTITLED, 2019
egg tempera on linen, 24 ¾ x 28 ⅜ inches (63 x 72 cm)



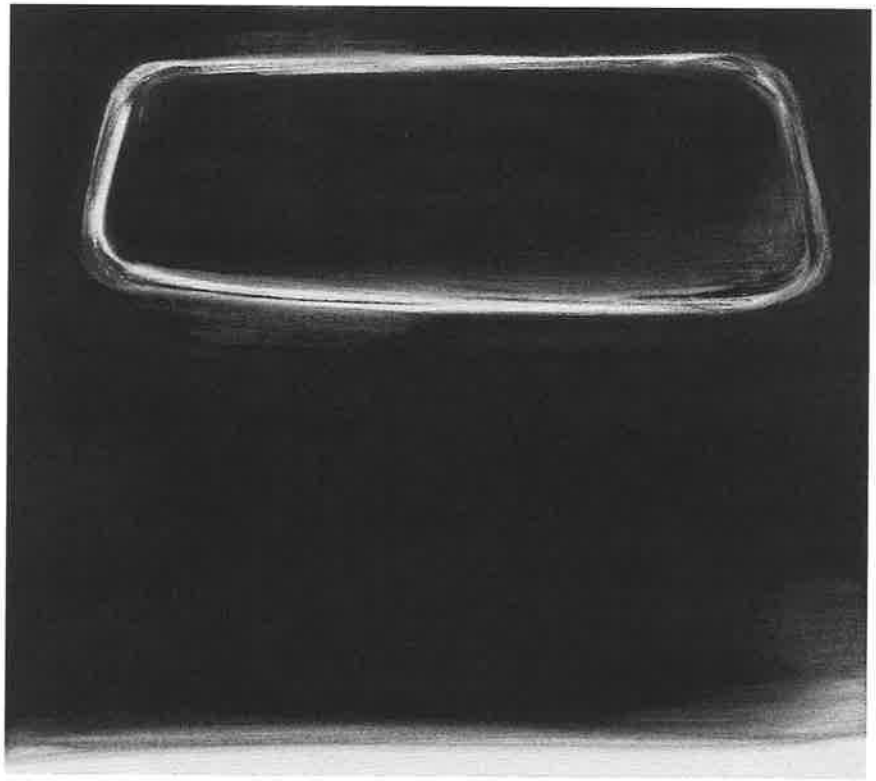
UNTITLED, 2010
egg tempera on linen, 24 ¾ x 28 ⅜ inches (63 x 72 cm)

Road Movie

In the 1965 film Pierrot le Fou, *Jean-Luc Godard plays with the illusion of film and reality of filmmaking. During a wild car chase, the two protagonists argue with each other. At a certain point, the actor Jean-Paul Belmondo, who plays Ferdinand, looks directly into the lens of the camera via his car's rearview mirror and admonishes his costar to stop fighting so that "they" (the viewers) won't hear everything. A reversal takes place. Ferdinand looks back. The viewer feels viewed. He is, as it were, pulled into the film and in the process confronted with himself.*

UNTITLED V-10.26.99, 1999
monotype, 39 ½ x 78 ½ inches (100.3 x 199.4 cm)

UNTITLED, 2019
egg tempera on linen, 24 ¾ x 28 ⅜ inches (63 x 72 cm)

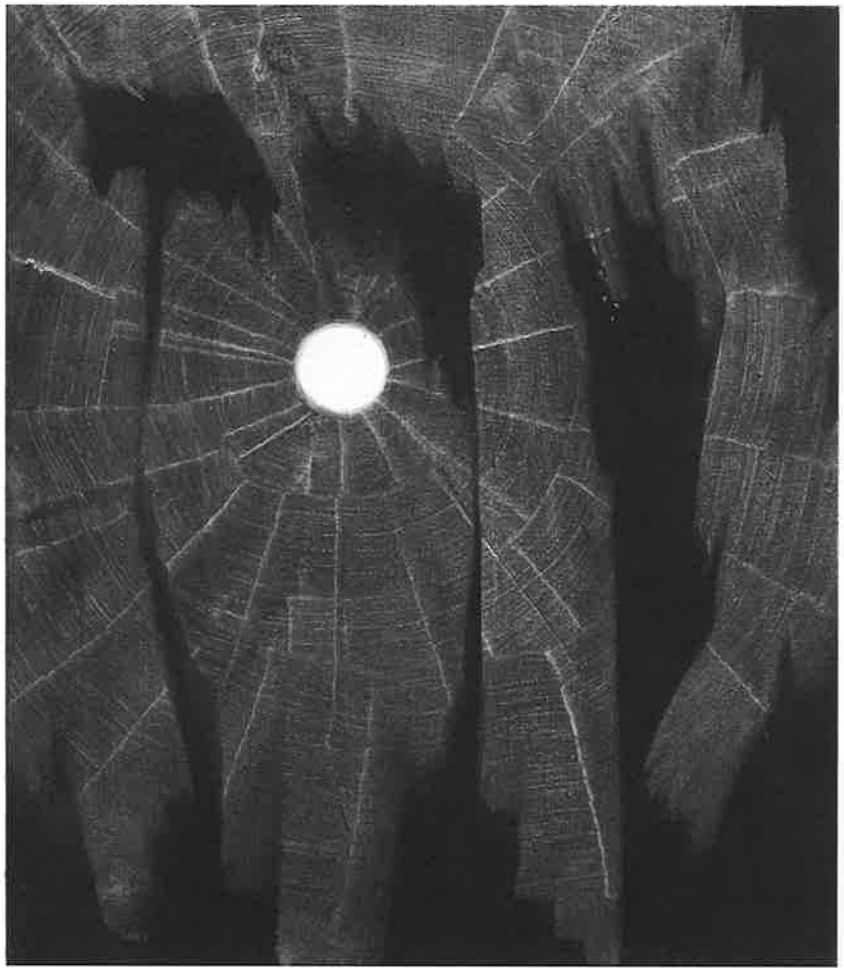


UNTITLED, 2013
egg tempera on cotton, 24 ¾ x 28 ⅜ inches (63 x 72 cm)

Moonlit

I am drawn to the moon and respect its cycles. I prime my canvases and make sketches at the time of the new moon. In the first quarter I reconsider my ideas and doubts. And the day before the full moon, I know exactly what and how I want to paint, and I do that fearlessly.

CRACK (CAVE), 2022
egg tempera on cotton, 65 x 31 ½ inches (165 x 80 cm)



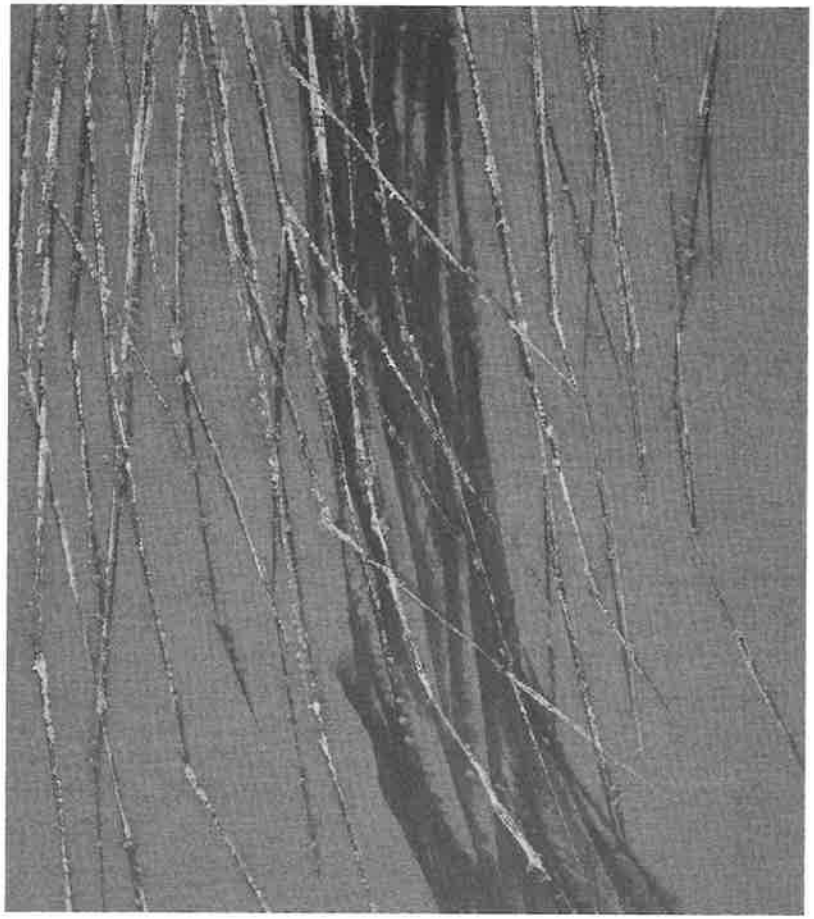
UNTITLED, 2014
egg tempera on linen, 28 ⅜ x 24 ¾ inches (72 x 63 cm)

BLACK MIRROR, 2012
egg tempera on linen, 67 ¾ x 56 ¾ inches (172 x 144 cm)

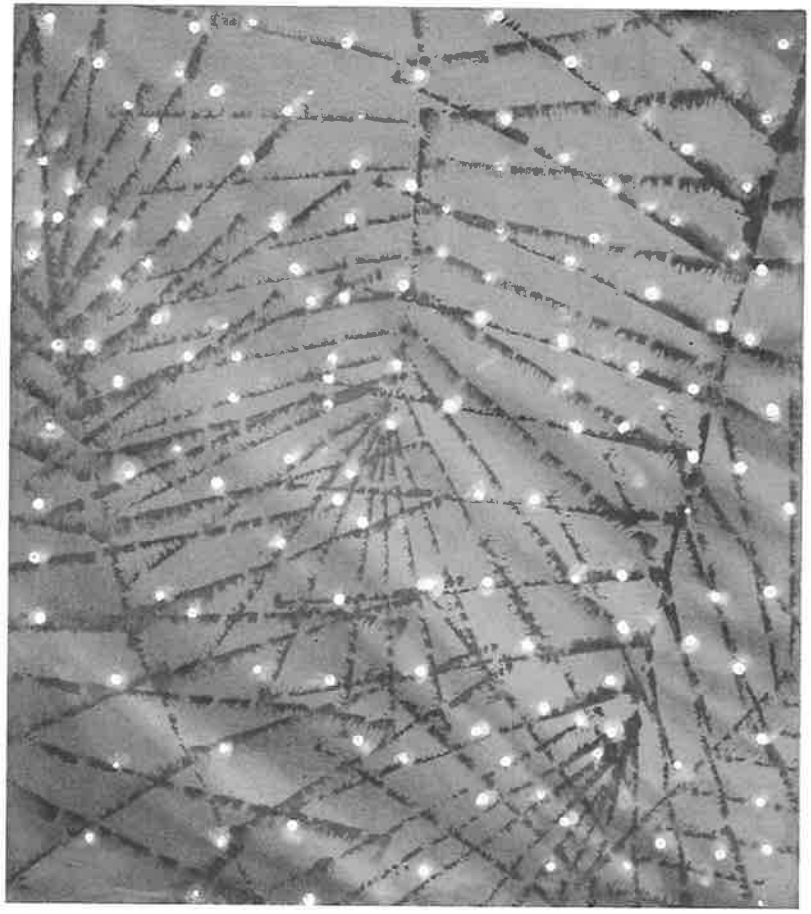
Le Jardin

The Gaia hypothesis is a scientific hypothesis that states that the biosphere interacts with the nonliving environment in a way that creates a self-regulating complex system to maintain environmental conditions for life on earth. The hypothesis was formulated by scientist James Lovelock in the late 1960s. He described all living material on the planet as one organism and named it after the Greek goddess of the earth, Gaia.

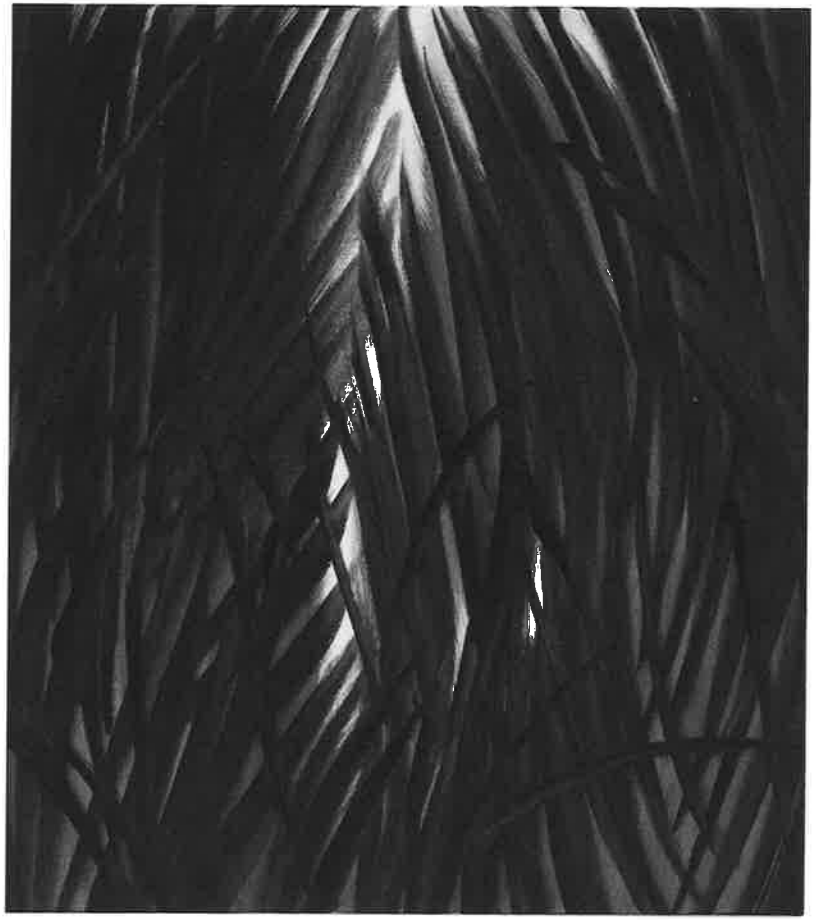
With this thought, I looked at my own backyard and marveled at all the different grasses, plants, shrubs, and branches, each with its own exceptional structure, shape, and color, but at the same time connected and interwoven with the vegetation in its own vicinity. I want to fathom the complexity of this network. To gain insight, I have to unravel the web and first visualize the singularity of one single leaf, one type of twig, grass, or reed.



LE JARDIN XXVII, 2023
acrylic and oil on linen, 35 ⅜ x 31 ½ inches (90 x 80 cm)



LE JARDIN VIII, 2023
egg tempera and oil on linen, 35 ⅜ x 31 ½ inches (90 x 80 cm)

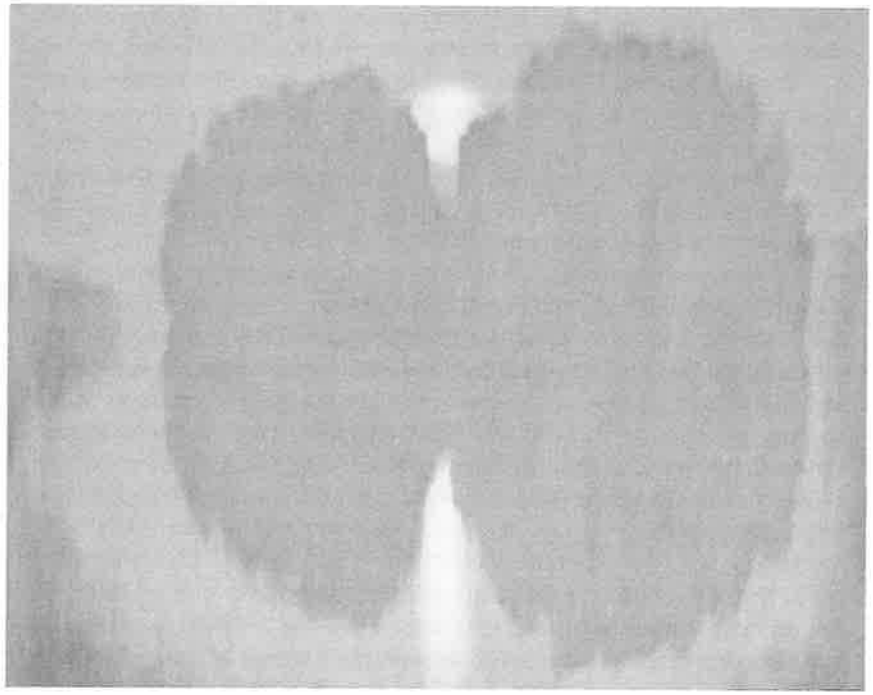


LE JARDIN XI, 2021
egg tempera on linen, 35 ⅜ x 31 ½ inches (90 x 80 cm)

Aurora

I was born in the countryside of Friesland, in the north of the Netherlands. When I was young, every morning we biked to school, and I remember the foggy autumn sunrises. The horizon dissolves; the ditch side and the reflection of trees disappear into indefinable grays.

A watery sun looms over the grove, pales the shreds of mist.



GRIIS, 2020
egg tempera on linen, 83 ⅞ x 106 ¼ inches (213 x 270 cm)

A DIALOGUE ABOUT PAINTING

INVAR-TORRE HOLLAUS IN CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT ZANDVLIET

Robert Zandvliet: In the nineties, I went to Italy to study the early Renaissance frescoes. As an art student, I was grabbed by the directness of the fresco technique of painting, with pigments on freshly applied plaster. Traveling from Milan to Rome, I saw all the Piero della Francesca, Giotto, and Masaccio frescoes firsthand. I stopped at every small city to discover the local murals, and I remembered being so surprised that you still could see that the artists had been influenced by their immediate surroundings. I was greatly impressed by Simone Martini's panoramic rolling hills at Siena's city hall. Wandering through the city, I realized these strangely shaped hills haven't changed in seven hundred years.

During the same trip, I had a revelation. In the Uffizi gallery, after seeing an overwhelming number of Renaissance paintings, I entered one of the last rooms, with only Dutch and Flemish masters. My gaze was drawn to a Hercules Seghers painting as if I was struck by lightning, this landscape felt so familiar. The gray clouds, the rock wall at the right, the undergrowth at the foreground and the contrast of the backlight that creates the nocturnal atmosphere. I could live in this painting. Every single detail felt known, and I simply understood how it had been painted. It was as familiar as if I had painted it myself.

Invar-Torre Hollaus: Was this a moment of recognition? The moment you became aware that the origins that shaped you—by which I mean the rich and historical artistic, humanistic, and cultural heritage of Dutch art—have been a source of inspiration for generations of artists up through the present day? And that you realized the importance of the surroundings in which you grew up and that shaped your awareness of the world? I mean the special Dutch light, which is often mentioned in art-related writings, the flat topography, the sometimes fast-changing weather and therefore also light conditions! Light is a key component when it comes to painting, and so it is for your own art! And if I'm right, you mainly work with daylight.

RZ: You are right that I always work by daylight, but that's just for a practical reason. All artificial light, even of the best quality, changes the color scheme. I have always been disappointed seeing paintings the next morning after working at night with artificial light. My experience is that when a painting is finished and has been made in daylight, it can stand any kind of light after. Concerning the DNA of Dutch art, I believe that it's not the typical Dutch light or the flat topography that makes it recognizable but more how Svetlana Alpers characterized it: "seeing and knowing." The northern art is that of the camera obscura and the lens, which, as it were, makes the world visible without the intervention of the author. So that's always the reason I say that I want to paint myself out of the image. Because my personal anecdote or meaning is not important for the image itself. I thoroughly believe that in the end, the image doesn't need its creator: it has to stand on its own.

ITH: Landscape has remained your favorite subject. But what does landscape mean to you?

RZ: In general for me it has to do with the position of mankind in the world. Maybe you would expect an answer that painting landscape opens the idea of light and space, but to be honest, I never think about that when I'm making my small landscape paintings and works on paper. It's more that I'm trying to create an idealistic surrounding to feel comfortable in. That sounds romantic! I'm creating my own world, my inner space, which of course reflects images you might know but never refers to existing places or places that are connected with my personal memories. So that's the reason that I've always said that I have been searching for the archetype. Maybe that sounds like a paradox—that I'm trying to paint my own inner world without being personal—but I believe that's the way it works for me. I'm finding the archetypes of my inner world.

ITH: What do you expect from this classic motif, which probably also generates classic expectations on the part of most viewers?

RZ: On one hand, I use the knowledge of art history and of the landscape genre in particular to make my own landscape paintings. Consider, for example, how Van Gogh makes a zigzag road through the wheatfield toward the horizon. Or how I use the principle of the coulisse landscape or the opposite of that, how Monet painted his water-lily paintings, using the whole canvas as a flat field lacking perspective. The painting no longer a window but rather a screen, reflecting modern ideas. In my "Highway" paintings from around 2000–2002, I used this same principle to avoid perspective in a different way, to paint a network of intersecting highways seen from above. And by changing the perspective of a work, you shift the viewer's perception of it.

ITH: During the entirety of your artistic career, you've shown a remarkable range of different motifs—both constant and new ones—as well as an open-mindedness in exploring new painting devices, which have a decisive impact on your painterly gesture, your signature, so to speak. I think there you show a daring attitude, confronting yourself with new constraints and obstacles, when things during the painting process maybe start to run too smoothly? And despite the diversity of motifs, despite surprising the viewer constantly with new painterly gestures and traces, your work never looks indifferent. How would you describe your style or signature?

RZ: My paintings always have a figurative motif as a starting point, even when I paint sort of abstract structures that can refer, for example, to rippling water or budding branches. Most of the time, the subject is placed in the center of the image. And because I was raised with figurative as well as abstract art, the different qualities of both views have the same weight. There's a nice German word, *Kippfigur*. This is what is happening in most of my paintings: they balance between the figurative and abstract, flipping from one side to the other and back.

My work is non-narrative, and I'm greatly interested in how to paint the image. I try to discover the opportunities of the material. So the brushstroke can be an expressive gesture, just as the paint roller, half dipped in paint, leaves a repetitive trail on the canvas. It's these forms the material provides that I use to construct my images. And I think that the viewer recognizes this awareness about how I use my paint and brushes. I believe that somewhere between the sum of these ingredients you can recognize my personal handwriting.

ITH: In your seminal publication *I Owe You the Truth in Painting* from 2012, you show plenty of references that are decisive for you. But probably surprising for readers/onlookers, it's a quite heterogenous selection of artists. And your own work can't be labeled or reduced to a specific style either; it does not even look romantic, I would say. Can you explain how you look at these issues?

RZ: When I was a young artist, I believed in the idea of style, and I searched for it. But over the years, this quest changed. Now I believe that content does not necessarily need a recognizable style. Labeling and context reduce the space in which to experience the true picture. Of course I'm aware of the fact that it's almost impossible to avoid context. Even when the viewer first sees an artwork, there's already subconscious context. The artist must be aware of these kinds of mechanisms so he can steer the gaze.

ITH: When I look at your paintings, I have the impression that each brushstroke is effortlessly put next to the other to form a coherent and dynamic kind of painting. Your paintings might sometimes appear quickly, spontaneously made, and some of them even are quickly painted, but they hardly seem made according to random decisions. Your paintings are not just about colors or gesture; there is a structure/construction/concept underneath, interlocking everything together.

RZ: Of course it takes years to know what you want and why. But in most cases, the topic dictates the choices. That's how I made a painting about the color incarnadine, and it makes sense that this image has a soft and round character. No sharp edges or expressive brushstrokes but gently layered peach and greenish overlapping colors, so soft and alive that you want to touch the surface of the canvas as if it were the skin itself.

ITH: Now, talking about colors, respectively the motif and/or gesture they signify and the basic structure underneath, I would like to ask you, if the ground of the image has the same importance for you as the figure? As you know, the figure-ground relationship is a key component in art and art history. Nevertheless, several artists seem to focus solely on the figure. Maria Lassnig once said: "I just want to paint the figure; that's what interests me." Or think of several of Picasso's mature periods from the 1930s onward and especially his late work. He seems to be interested in the figure only. Or Francis Bacon, who often decisively separated the figure from the ground. Nevertheless, the ground works toward a more intense effect of the figure. Willem de Kooning's series "Women" (1950–53) is probably the contrary, each work embodying a total interlocking of figure and ground. Or Frank Auerbach's work! But this leads probably too far.

RZ: No, in contrast to Maria Lassnig, I would never underestimate the role of the background in the painting. I believe that the background provides context for the figure. Already in the Middle Ages when the landscape appears in portrait paintings, it said something about how mankind discovers a profane world image. But also when, as happens in many of my paintings, the background is just one monochrome color, the color itself can support the content of the image.

I remember painting a yellow bus shelter in my early career, and I wanted only an empty background. White should be most appropriate. But just titanium white wasn't right; it took me many layers to figure out that the white had to be a sort of colorful pearl white—it needed a little

green, purple, and light blue cast. This white puts the object in the right light and evokes the right emptiness.

ITH: In your previous exhibitions from 2021, "Le Corps de la Couleur" at Galerie Onrust, Amsterdam, and "The Anatomy of Color" at Peter Blum, New York, you showed specific colors as images of themselves! Of course, still in connection with specific subjects, but not in a descriptive way. You articulate several fundamentally important questions. Colors become visible because of light.

RZ: It's not only light that makes color visible; you need a subject to make the color real. Without this body, the color stays just an idea.

ITH: Do you think colors have bodies, their own realities that go beyond symbolic and metaphorical meaning?

RZ: I think they don't have abstract bodies, not unambiguous bodies of their own. I strongly believe that color only exists in connection to reality. And of course, every color has its own quality, appearance, and connection to symbolic and metaphorical meaning. Context and etymology help me in finding the right image for each color. That's the reason the titles of the paintings are more important for me now.

ITH: Can you give an example?

RZ: I wanted to make a painting about the color gray. But I didn't want to make a depressive, gloomy painting. The gray must be uplifting and energetic. I've chosen to paint the foggy sunrise with disappearing shapes of trees in a range of different grays. Greenish gray, gray with an ultramarine violet undertone and a watery, pale-yellow sun. It recalls the sunrises I remember from my childhood in the Frisian countryside. Gray as a word sounds too cold and colorless, so I have chosen the warmer and more poetic Frisian translation: *Griis*.

ITH: Apart from a few paintings, you always preferred to work in egg tempera, which is rather unusual in modern and contemporary art. And you seem to use a huge variety of different brushes and devices too! Because you are a technically blessed artist, you can influence how prominently these tools leave their figurative or abstract traces. But the fluidity and the semi-transparence of the paint, the resistance of the devices on the

sometimes unprimed canvas or linen have an effect on your gesture and on the final painting and the motif, of course. Do you have a strategy, a plan, a selection of devices in mind before you start a painting?

RZ: Yes, for the large paintings there's always a plan. I will give you a very recent example. For the "Le Corps de la Couleur" series, I have painted an ultramarine blue screen, which refers to my earlier blue cinema painting and the blue *Stage of Being* painting. But I wanted to open the blue monochrome field. I thought it would make sense to make it look like a starry sky. I figured out that the structure of the raw, unprepared canvas has small irregularities, small knots through the weaving. Before painting the ultramarine blue, I covered all these knots with pieces of masking tape. With my fingers I scanned the fabric and discovered the firmament of celestial bodies.

When I removed the tape, the raw, unpainted linen stars were colored yellow; it almost looked like you could see golden flakes floating in the night blue. Because the stars are surrounded by so much blue, it brings out the yellow of the linen. This idea of the light coming out of the material itself I used already in the painting *Moonlight* from 2011. So sometimes I used the knowledge of previous experiences to take another step.

ITH: A simple question, just out of curiosity, because for some series you do a lot of drawings and sketches beforehand before you start working on a canvas. Did you make drawings or sketches for "Le Corps de la Couleur" or your new series called "Le Jardin," or did you make all decisions right in front of the canvas, during the ongoing process of painting?

RZ: For me, drawing is a way of thinking, of figuring things out, imagining the problems that I will face during the whole process of the painting from the first idea till the last final details. It can also be helpful to appropriate the core of the image. To immerse oneself in the image, to see it from all different angles, to know it inside out, to be completely comfortable with it. But for the "Le Jardin" works, I did not make a single sketch on paper. Actually, these works themselves are sketches.

ITH: The "Le Jardin" series comprises smaller paintings with a significant predominance of a variety of greens. Despite the fact that most of your works can be labeled—at least loosely—landscape paintings, this preeminence of the probably most logical color when it comes to nature and landscape painting is a new issue.

Green might provoke the association with nature or landscape in a perhaps already literal way, and in some of these works, the viewer might easily imagine grass, a meadow, reeds, plants, or something like that. But these paintings do not work within the range of classic, academic nature or landscape paintings. It's difficult to figure out a given work's exact size and scale: am I standing close or far away from it, is it a macro- or a microcosm, and most of all, how do I determine space and perspective! There is no horizon line helping the viewer to scale the depicted motif.

Despite their rather modest size, these paintings evoke an infinite space. Apprehending them is like looking (and thinking) with different eyes: those of humans, insects, different animals. I don't want to get too esoteric, but to me it's almost a kind of pantheistic vision/kind of seeing and perceiving your surroundings. Am I stretching this too far?

RZ: The "Le Jardin" works are really research material on the way to a larger newer series, "Paradaidha," which I'm working on in my studio lately. In the "Le Jardin" series I am trying to gain insight into the structure and appearance of all kinds of different vegetation. Imagine a large field filled with endless varieties of grasses, blooming flowers, weeds, and other types of plants, all with their own structures, colors, shapes, and presences. It's an allover tableau where everything is interwoven and connected. Because the whole is too large to understand, fathom and paint all at once, I have focused on the various individual parts. Now, it is not that I lie in the grass to study and paint this.

While painting, I imagine what a plant looks like, how the veins of a leaf grow or how the rhythm of waving reeds move. I search for a painted equivalent of reality. The imprint of a brush can represent a blade of grass; a dot of oil paint squeezed straight from the tube can suggest a small ground flower. I deliberately avoided the horizon because then you immediately talk about a landscape. The absence of the horizon ensures that there is no relation to the size of what is depicted.

ITH: How do we correspond with our surroundings? Do we see what we know, or do we see what and how we see?

RZ: Art is important to question this philosophical issue. There's not one truth. Reality is given, but the perspective is only chosen.

ROBERT ZANDVLIET
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EXHIBITIONS WITH
PETER BLUM GALLERY

The Varick Series, 2000
Recent Paintings, 2004
Inner Landscapes, 2008
Pier and Ocean, 2011
Shades, 2016
Anatomy of Color, 2021
Florilegium: Overview 1998–2023, 2024

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