

Sanne Nies

It's obvious who Sanne Nies got it from: both her father and her mother are visual artists. The artist's blood flows through her veins. During a visit to her studio, she shows me the many drawings, watercolors and paintings that have emerged over the past five years. They are truly gorgeous! Her work clearly has undergone a development, but her distinctive signature and use of color are still present. The new drawings and paintings are still typically Sanne Nies but they have become more open, more transparent, and more poignant.

Where does all this beauty come from? What do these works mean to her, and what can they mean to others? I decide to do some research.

Her favorite format is 180 x 130 cm. This is the format that she herself can just handle and that only just fits through the door of the studio. But it is, above all, the format on which she can work freely. She puts her canvases on the floor when working on the basic idea. Then she lifts the canvas again, looks at it from a vertical position, turns it around, and puts it down again. Each drawing or painting has its origin in nature, her own garden or a photo from her favorite

book on gardens: 'Scheppers van Arcadië'. Gradually, the work becomes more and more abstract. The original image is incorporated in the final composition of lines and color fields. Her paintings and drawings look natural and harmonious: they are completed. But before Sanne achieves the right balance in lines and colors, she has to make the artist's effort: the fight on the white canvas. Is it completed? Is there something I should add? Pondering and thinking. Sometimes she has 'the good hand', as she puts it, which means that the artwork is exactly what she had in mind. But at other times, the process takes much longer and is far more laborious. Sometimes she goes too far, and then the balance is disturbed. On some paintings, traces of this process are still visible in the base layer. This layeredness lends the work an extra dimension.

An important inspirational source for her visual art is the garden. Sanne Nies lives in an idyllic surrounding, right in the Eindhoven town center. She lives in two houses, both of which are located on two parallel streets. One house is the family home, the other one accommodates the art gallery and her studio. Sanne has turned the gardens between the two houses into one single huge paradise. Nature flourishes here; there

is so much humming, buzzing and blooming that you don't even notice the bustling city.

It makes me think of the 'Hortus Conclusus', a concept that dates back to the Middle Ages and serves as a metaphor for the heavenly walled garden which contains all the elements that make life pleasant and responds to a fundamental urge for introspection. This paradise has everything Sanne needs to be able to create: a sense of security, tranquility and inspiration. In the seclusion of this private world, there is nothing to stop her from living close to nature.

In artists' studios there are generally all kinds of clues that refer to sources of inspiration, such as holiday photos, famous works by other artists, and art books. When I ask Sanne for her source of inspiration, she too appears to have a collection of art books. She opens a cabinet door and there they are: books on Matisse, Cy Twombly and Joan Mitchell. There are still more art books in the cabinet, but the lead role is played by 'Scheppers van Arcadië, photos of gardens, stories told by their designers and matching texts and poems. The book lies open on a table. She often leafs through it, takes pages from it to her studio to draw inspiration from and sometimes to use them as the basis for a new artwork.

The gardens book contains a striking text by Andrew Lawson: “A garden is like a piece of music. A garden is an ongoing process. You are aware of entering it, of moving from the one to the other space. But a photo of a garden, no matter how good it is, is merely a single chord.” The garden as a paradisiacal metaphor represents timelessness, eternity. But that garden is always in evolution. The dictum ‘Panta Rhei’, attributed to Heraclitus, describes it as follows: all things perceptible are constantly changing. In a river, new water flows continuously, but nevertheless, the river stays the same. This is the representation of the eternal yet constant change.

In her studio Sanne creates and recreates nature to which she feels so strongly connected. However, as she herself says: it’s not about reproducing or illustrating nature. She sees herself as a link in the chain that passes on essential and timeless values and meanings. Everything is in flux. It was like that before she existed, and it will be like that when she no longer exist.

Another text from ‘Scheppers van Arcadië’ is by Mary Keen: “The feeling of nostalgia when gardening is usually related with a longing for that ancient, deeper relationship between person and place that we rarely achieve in modern life”. Here, a parallel can be drawn

with the ethnographic sculptures and masks abounding in Sanne's house and in the gallery. They form another important source of inspiration for her work. She is an expert in the field of ethnographic art and she keeps surrounding herself over and over again with other beautiful objects from a culture that is different from ours. When I ask her about the meaning of these sculptures, she tells me about their origins. The ethnographic sculptures used to be part of personal or tribal rituals and they are used during special and important events, such as fertility, birth, marriage and funeral rites. They are comprehensive witnesses to this and are therefore charged with meaning. They are from a different culture and perhaps also from another time, but their message is ageless. They touch on the essence of human existence.

These images are imbued with a strength and mystery that undeniably affect Sanne's visual work. The sculptures and masks abound both in the family house and in the gallery. It is their presence that makes the two houses merge into one world. They are only absent in the studio. That's where the serene tranquility of paint, canvas and paper prevails.

The images can bring us in touch with our origins, just as nature can bring us in touch with our origins and

essence. Melancholy, nostalgia for this essence, that's what it's all about, the condition which we all yearn for. Sanne is looking for this essence, she wants to find it, and she feels happy when she succeeds. Just like the sculptures can move one by wordlessly conveying essential values and meanings, so can a good artwork.

Following the text by Andrew Lawson, we continue talking about the importance of music and dance for her work. Sanne is fascinated by body language and body movement. She attended various courses for movement expression and mime and she has made movement performances to music. She has also attended courses at two Japanese teachers. This explains the flowing lines in her artworks: her brush dances on the paper or the canvas. Although there is no direct reference, her work is sometimes reminiscent of Oriental calligraphy, which is especially the case with the elongated formats on which she occasionally works. I tend to associate them with Japanese screen paintings. In her studio she likes to listen to minimal music and jazz. These are the kinds of music that flow and provide the right ambiance for her creative process.

From an art historical point of view, Sanne works in the tradition of Lyrical Abstraction. To the artists from

this period, it is the gesture that is important: the painting is an area of experience whereby the inner movements of the psyche are captured on the canvas in lines and color fields.

Earlier works in oil have given way to acrylic paint and works on paper to India ink and gouache. Sanne likes working with these materials; they allow her more freedom and result in more open and more balanced works without losing anything of her characteristic Sanne Nies signature and color palette. Every now and then, texts pop up in her canvases and occasionally a human figure. Sanne continues to develop. She triggers curiosity in the spectator about the direction her work will go, but for the time being, we as spectators can enjoy the beautiful, paradisiacal world she has created over the past five years. She does not want to decorate, she wants her art to hit home. She wants to show the essence, without words. 'It has to be right', she says. And it sure is.