

A conversation with Noori Lee and Nikola Dietrich, curator at MGK Basel

Nikola Dietrich: In your works you mainly resort to lifestyle and architecture magazines like Wallpaper. The two-dimensional photo that dominates in the journals you transform once again via your own painting style. What in your opinion can you add to this two-dimensional image as an expression of individualist prestige?

Noori Lee: I used to collect and totally absorb these so-called lifestyle magazines. Wallpaper, among others, was at the time a kind of hype, so that it was often mentioned in connection with my work, even when it was not at all important to me. Also it wasn't just glossy magazines that I studied, but different media and specialist journals. In the beginning I tried to experiment with the image per se, without individualist elements like, say, a characteristic style. I just copied it. I thought, that's enough. What interested me was that the motif already had something in it that I didn't need to add any more to, but which I discovered and made visible. Painting is in itself already a media effect. Bill Viola, for instance, added a slow-motion effect to his videos, in order, as he said, to "make the invisible visible". And painting is just as much medium as it is effect. If you implement something by hand, you transform it. Like in the remake of Cronberg's film "The Fly", where there is a machine that is supposed to transport a body from A to B, but a fly arrives in the middle of things and what emerges is a mixture of man and insect. When I see a motif and paint it by hand, it is transformed on canvas. Even when I try to depict it one-on-one, it won't work. There is always something that gets added.

ND: Your motifs mainly were and are modernist architecture. Representative architecture that also embodies a certain ideal. What was it that attracted you?

NL: At the beginning I was not absolutely interested in architecture per se. That

actually first came about from my occupation with glossy magazines and from talks with architects who complained that these photographs were completely useless and didn't supply any usable information about who lived in these houses or how they were constructed. They existed only for this superficial glossy aesthetic to be paged through. And it was exactly this superficiality that attracted me. Similar to the figures I was working on at the time.

ND: Yet when one looks at your works, it is architecture that is very much foregrounded. A clear, restrictive image of modernist architecture, which you, in this clarity that is innate to it, repeat. But – coming back to the characteristic style or *fattura* – now combined with a great painterly variety. We see expressive formulations, drip technique, semi-blurred lines, an overkill of signs, hazy contours... How do you view this relationship between the purist motif and the painting technique you apply in the background?

NL: It is in fact true that I have recently become more consciously occupied with "painting". I have developed a certain feeling of responsibility towards my medium. I still have difficulty with the pathos of the painter as a "master" – in contrast, e.g., to the conceptual artist. Interesting to me is what Luc Tuymans said about drawing and about painting, namely that having a style would be an extreme disadvantage. Because a style limits your freedom, hinders you from expressing your thoughts. Whether that is true or not... I try not to depict but to associate different styles. When I paint a picture, I am then occupied with each level differently. Although I do look at a picture as a whole, I treat each corner separately, so that a different technique always results.

ND: Is then the deployment of these different techniques in fact the expression of your aversion to "style"?

NL: It's now been over 10 years that I've worked with painting. Perhaps that's not very long, but it's at least something. You easily get hooked on a kind of mannerism if you make a style into a common practice, since it quickly becomes very arbitrary.

This danger exists everywhere, when you land in a system and just reproduce it. It would be fatal to my work if I saw a motif and already knew how I would transpose it. It helps me when I am called on to adapt myself to a picture in a new way.

Namely, the fact that it remains a challenge so as not to fall back on a mannerism.

ND: Let's go back again to the choice of subjects, namely the portrayal of these very prestige-like buildings, which we can in the meantime read as icons of architectural history. Is this choice of depicting idealized spaces also in some way for you a reflection of the current social state of affairs? Or why this choice?

NL: Naturally I am also occupied with architecture but I don't want to turn it into a critical discourse on the subject. There is certainly social sensitivity, which I express, even when I wouldn't really want to call it social criticism. What interests me is more the ideal of a house, if one can say that. Something "ideal" that you are precisely not occupied with objectively and at a distance. It's more an affinity. When you see this modernist architecture in lifestyle or architectural magazines and also take in the chic interior decoration, then you don't think so much about what it would feel like to actually live in this house, but you stick to the surface because it just looks so good. Maybe you think: some day I would like to build a house like this, but that would be all. With a fashion magazine, you may much more easily develop a contrary feeling that you don't want to have anything to do with this whole lifestyle, but a house in itself still somehow has another meaning. It is something more elementary.

ND: Is that the reason you always portray the house empty in order to communicate the feel that it primarily functions as an idealized picture?

NL: There were different reasons for that. In the beginning, the issue was the house itself; I consciously wanted to delete anything narrative. It may look like a film set, but strictly speaking it is not a film still. It's more a psychological moment. The protagonist is the house itself.

ND: Key word: film set. Let's perhaps go on to the theme of fiction and reality,

terms that you use yourself and that I have often read or heard about from you or in your context. How do you stand in relation to both these terms?

NL: Just yesterday I read an interview in the NZZ with Paul Auster. Referring to his new novel, he spoke of the existence of different realities. Actually a thought is already a reality. Naturally we could discuss this more fully, but your thoughts and ideas also exist in fact and influence you so much that they are actually already reality, aren't they? I was interested in this ambivalence from the beginning. The fact that people try to judge what is good or bad, and how difficult it is to carry this opinion over into real life. In just the same way you can as little separate definitively what is reality from what is fiction.

ND: In our last discussion you mentioned the novel "American Psycho" by Bret Easton Ellis, about a snobbish Wall Street yuppie who is swimming in money and tries to fill his inner vacuum by committing murderous and bloody acts. During the course of the story, it becomes increasingly less clear for the reader and for the protagonist himself whether he is moving in a real or already in a fantasy world. You said that this was exactly the interface where the real takes on fictive moments and the fictive approaches reality. Would you class your work at the crossroads where the real and the fictive meet and merge?

NL: Yes, that has surely somehow remained at the core. But you could also see it this way, namely that the character Patrick Bateman in this novel was not really trying to fill a vacuum but trying to get a feeling for reality. When you live constantly within a routine, you lose your sense for the psychological – emotionality or also pain. I think it is also about sensitivity. Like someone who inflicts pain on himself so as to feel something, anything. It gives you the feeling of still being alive because you sense a physical limit. I can sometimes mentally re-enact these feelings. When you're stuck in the monotony of everyday life, the moral yardstick for how reality gets to be perceived is shaken. In "American Psycho" the point is that Patrick Bateman tries to find out whether he's still alive and where his

boundaries are, and with time he develops the feeling that everything is actually unreal. In the end, you don't know anymore whether everything is true or perhaps only a fantasy. I was always interested in this paranoid state. In a society you are often too little occupied with what boundaries there are and who it is who set these boundaries, whether they were made for a political system or for society, or whether these boundaries are also meant for you yourself. It scares me sometimes that people, whether in Switzerland or in Korea, believe they are good people only because they keep to the rules, but don't ever question these.

ND: And how do you transpose these two ideas in your work? For one, by orienting yourself according to these guidelines and simultaneously calling them into question?

NL: There are two levels in my work: one the content and then the painting process itself. The level of content is what we spoke of at the beginning – the fact that a thought is already a reality. In my paintings I try to portray this optically. The painting process takes place by bringing in abstract elements. Whereby I try not to get to a surrealist level. Although there is something hallucinational about it, I experiment more with the material. At the beginning I used to apply these abstract elements to destroy an image. In the meantime it is less about destruction and more about the fracture of the three-dimensional illusion. The picture is drawn back to the flat plane. I am interested in observing motifs that have a certain superficiality, no matter whether it is a house or a figure from a fashion magazine. It may perhaps be a cliché but when superficiality is an important element in today's society, I feel the need to express the fact.

ND: And you aren't afraid that by the recurring expression of this superficiality, your work runs the risk of being exposed to an it's-all-the-same principle.

NL: Naturally this is a danger that always exists and I also play on it. I am also aware that I partly use certain colours that should better not be used, and that I often overdo this colourfulness. That can also get real bad. But in the painting process I try to establish a balance. It is a balancing act, a moment of swaying on

the tight rope that could tilt in either direction. And it is exactly this moment that I look for.

ND: And what about the title of the exhibition? "Fountain" naturally triggers certain associations; I don't think, however, that you were thinking of Duchamp... but more of concepts like "source" or "origin"?

NL: Exactly. With each exhibition you wrestle with your own position and try to redefine where you stand at the moment. The last four years I have worked mainly in Korea; there I tried to break into an existing process and start something new. I limited my choice of subjects to house, architecture and interiors. I limited my freedom so as to dig deeper and work out something. This process is now over and there's another new beginning. I have also taken up new themes, like, for instance, completely abstract paintings. These were what also finally led to the exhibition title. The word as a working title has still another meaning, but as an exhibition title, I associate it with a positive idea: back to where everything began.

Concentration on what is important.

ND: Would it be at all interesting to you to look at houses on the spot, like going to L.A. to study Schindler and Neutra.

NL: One can't say that it doesn't play a role. I do feel responsible for the motif that I work on. In L.A. I did actually study the houses by Schindler and Lautner. Through my occupation with architecture, a new point of view has opened up, but in principle I am interested in working with a two-dimensional medium, the picture in magazines and specialist books. I am interested in the "image" (and that is not meant negatively). Especially at the beginning, when I began with painting, that was very much the thing. That was the time when very many "images" – read pictures – were produced. The basic idea was: Can we even manage to digest this image overkill and what are the subsequent consequences?

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