

APROPOS OF THE WET WOODSHED

Some Notes on Adriaan Verwée's Recent Work

Therefore I study the diary,
White summer-scratches in the slate,
The tongue formed out of flint and air,
The dark streak and the streak of light,
And want to put my finger there,
Into the flint path of that song
As into a wound, to find what tie
Makes water flint, makes horseshoe ring.

Osip Mandelstam, The Slate Ode (Moscow, 1922)

Photography is the medium that backs Adriaan Verwée's work both internally and externally. It is used in a non-linear manner to generate an independent artistic process and, at the current stage of his practice, often determines the final outcome. The setup is anything but documentary or anecdotal. Likewise, there is rarely an attempt to make an accurate representation of a specific object or activity in the studio on the basis of the photographic image. For example, a sculpture can become the subject of a focused photographic registration, but rarely will be selected that image that is intended to evoke the sculpture itself. The photographic relationship between subject and object is submitted to a detached gaze. The photographic image *defamiliarizes* the original charge of an object or context.

Rendering the image achromatic is a first means used to initiate this 'neutralization process'. Discharging the image of hue and saturation usually involves the inserting of overexposure and contrast. Consequently, the images seem to have undergone a bleaching process, but this is done in favour of the suggestion of spatial depth. The image is neither flat nor faded. The stripping of colour and the digital process of lightening and highlighting gives the photographic image an *alto-relievo*, but also induces the accentuation of texture that is being disconnected from any form or volume.

What is typical of Adriaan Verwée's artistic practice is that the digital or digitized photo file is used as a *matière première* to obtain an (a priori immaterial) image that has reached a form of sculptural sublimation. The meticulous editing and long maturing process foster a conceptual twilight zone. The images vacillate in this zone between the two- and three-dimensional. They seem context-free and devoid of any kind of idiosyncrasy (without feeling generic or homogeneous). They have a timeless character and at times carry the same abstract noiselessness of a photogram.

The focus on material surfaces and the disorienting and/or 'dynamizing' way of framing the image – the second means frequently used to get away from the representative image – draw attention to the tactile and material detail, but it is only when the photo is printed (usually on Japanese Awagami paper) and is provided with a fine, handmade aluminium frame that the image acquires the status of an 'artistic object'. The blank aluminium profiles, and especially the cross-screws fitted on the side that clamp the plexiglass behind which the print is located, give the impression that the image is rather clad in a transparent formwork than that it is enclosed in a frame. It is the subtle compatibility between print and frame that ensures that the image presents itself — not just as a framed photograph, but as a *transposed* image.

For Adriaan Verwée's first exhibition at Valerie Traan Gallery, both sculptural and photo-based work is shown. The first floor of the gallery brings together *places i-xxiv* — a series of 24 relatively small works. In almost every work you can see how the printed image has been inserted as a scaled element in a rudimentary model. The photographically captured intervention plays with the confrontation of 2D and 3D elements in order to evoke a new kind of spaciousness. The presence of represented structural components (whether or not already in a room) and/or interior elements (such as a rustic chair) activates a whitewashed

tableau. The idea of a space within a space (or frame within a frame) is balanced by bringing together an abstract-looking image with a scaled-up snapshot. Indoor or outdoor space, vegetation or close-up of a tattered piece of fabric, fragment of a radiator or Mediterranean-style sun blinds: suddenly these visual elements are introduced as contrasting wall elements in a modelled space as if they were dummies for a future exhibition project. But the visual repercussion is that a 'filled' space is not simply represented. The focus in this series lies in the stimulation of new imaginary spaces by making the tight, visually associative dialogue between spatial scenes on the one hand and inserted images on the other. It is in this context that Verwée's images are being enabled as *translocalizable*.

In the 4-part *Shutterstock* series, this approach has been made more complex by making the submitted images part of a digital photomontage. On a mat representing a wall or corner — which in fact is a rephotographed image from the internet —, elements have been added that both accentuate and counteract the initial quality of the preliminary space. In an accumulative conjunction of enclosed openings and inclusions, this always produces a labyrinthine overall picture that seems to slide apart from different directions. This centrifugal interplay of forces reaches equilibrium after the overall image has been cut into 9 equal (separately framed) parts. The result is a grid that on the one hand structurally rounds off the image and on the other hand introduces itself as one (of a total of four) framework(s) in the large central central space of the gallery where the works are displayed. The scale of the framework and the presence of a human figure (looking at something) in two works makes it tempting to let the gallery visitor become a reflective participant in a kaleidoscopic play of perception.

The iterative process of decoupage and editing is a technique frequently used by Adriaan Verwée to edit his (re)photographed images. The digital (or manual) collages and photomontages that result from this, testify to a pronounced tactility and musicality (with a predilection for syncopation). The notion of improvisation and seriality prevails over the stringent aesthetics of minimalism (which is anything but foreign to Verwée). In the series of works he has put together over the past two years, many images announce themselves as if they were *chords*. The layering of several image components creates a composition of surfaces and openings that evoke architectural connotations, but he is always first concerned with the free juxtaposition of formal elements that capture a specific tonality in the achromatic two-dimensional field of the final print. This aspect finds its external counterpart in the *accrochage*. The disposition of the layered image turns the (exhibition) space into a sounding board. This character is even more noticeable when several works from the same series are exhibited. An undertone and overtone can be experienced. The frontal plane of the initial image is spatially unpacked and invites the visitor to capture a range of mental (sub)spaces, each with its own rhythm and harmony.

With *Peacock/Passe-Partouts*, Adriaan Verwée has pushed the 'frontality' of the layered image to such an extreme that it is now literally reduced to a frame as a result of multiple manipulations. In most cases, by cutting a central window from photographed collages and then mounting them on a black Peacock cutting mat, Verwée here subtly pokes fun at the motif of 'the frame within the frame' that has been used in a whole series of other recent works. The prosaic yet deliberately 'flat' dimension of the title emphasizes this underlying tongue-in-cheek angle.

In the front space of the gallery, *Peacock/Passe-Partouts* is brought into a fascinating relationship with a work that was created in 2017 in a former studio of Verwée. It is a rectangular cast of burlap and gypsum of a floor fragment measuring 2 by 3 m. Frequent transport and the folding of the raw canvas have caused the gypsum side to crackle. For this gallery exhibition, Adriaan Verwée has opted to place a 1:1 scale model of a roof structure on top of the broken side of the carpet. The floorwork, the framework of the flat roof and its recess for a skylight resonate like perimeters with the cut-out window frames in *Peacock/Passe-Partouts*. The centralized visualization of a clustered and 'self-oriented' demarcation in both works accentuates an autonomous zone both horizontally and vertically. This encounter does not seem accidental. Do the cut-out frames announce an absent self-portrait? Does the modeling of a space without walls and its formal presentation include Verwée's vanishing act and disembodied disclosure? Or is the like-minded encounter between *image* and *sculpture/installation* more a figurative zoning between 'the here' and 'an elsewhere'?

Adriaan Verwée has turned the gallery space on the street side into a room that functions as a prelude (and epilogue) to the two large works exhibited in the adjoining central space. Two monumental glass racks made of untreated pine each support two wall structures. They are the four rudimentary reconstructed walls (also on a scale of 1:1) of the studio in which he worked between 2019 and 2022. The work bears the same title as the floor installation in the front room of the gallery: 5.4 m² — the total surface area of Verwée's previous studio and also the overarching title of this exhibition. Whereas in previous sculptural work the

focus was on the formal and poetic balancing of structure and erosion, Verwée here took his own workspace as the subject for a complex architectural dismantling process in order to spatially provoke a set of sculptural challenges in a new context. The parts that are the result of a formalized deconstruction of the studio (and its fragmented transposition and disposition) have found a temporary (re)purpose here. The scaling of the racks emphasizes their transportable and 'nomadic' character. Optically, the wall elements also appear smaller than they really are. Here too, the title of the work (and the exhibition) suddenly strikes an unfolding and beautifully ironic tone.

In the work of Adriaan Verwée, the *heimliche* and the *sächliche* find themselves in a contrapposto relationship to each other. The familiar and the singular are *decanted* into a formal framework and played out both materially and spatially. Architecture is used as a '*cassa di risonanza*' for a continuous intermediary (de- and re-) construction process. The abstract transposition and dissection of elements originating from an internal kitchen are brought into the exhibition context at room temperature as healing fragments of a larger body. Where the dividing line between studio and house is porous in Verwée's work, the relationship between work and exhibition space has a poeticizing common influence. The framework that Valerie Traan Gallery offers — a context where the publicly accessible is intertwined with the private, and the status of the 'object' is constantly questioned artistically and/or curatorially — is certainly more than conducive for the 'fluid' conceptual elucidation of the work of Adriaan Verwée. In *5.4 m²*, as an exhibition, no external discourse is imposed on the spaces of the gallery. Nor does a pretentious premise delineate a domain within which the whole of works must be 'understood'. Nothing is asked of the visitor. The work is there.

- Yves Coussement, 22 January 2023.