

On February 14, 2009, Joop Polder opened an exhibition of his work in honor of his seventieth birthday. At the exhibition he mainly showed recent paintings, miniatures and watercolors, but his words were a retrospective, a philosophically tinted reflection on his life and his work focused on paintings and drawings since 1985 with which he made a name for himself.

"All my paintings," he said, "have the title to me" the dream "". The titles of the works themselves, however, never speak of dreams or memories. Some specify a single motif of the scene, a station, a gate, a loggia, a high terrace or platform, a single tram. Others only indicate a late afternoon or view. In essence, all works from recent years contain a view, or rather a view. Sometimes it lies far away on the horizon, where the plainly painted deep blue of the sea is answered by the clear blue of the sky or by the brownish blue of an incoming darkness. Then again it is somewhere in the depths where the gaze is pushed downwards, to a coast that unfolds like a map or to an island with miniscule structures, stacks of light and dark blocks.

The views are often introduced by an empty chair in the foreground. There, from that place the spectator can look at the view. There the artist imagined his view. He sees dunes with their undulating lines extending to the horizon, groups of trees and rails, he sees tram towers and the delicate interlacing of their piers, he sees skyscrapers and palaces, galleries and underpasses.

Everything is imaginary and yet recognizable, everything is "dreamed" in Joop's words. Its mirror-smooth sea surface, its clear blue skies have no ripples, no waves or clouds. His buildings have not been affected by decay or resistance. The trams, which are so familiar to Joop as a model builder of trains and trams down to the smallest technical details and which are adapted to movement for everything, are arranged almost like in a display case in his work, just like the toy trains and stations that he collects. They have never been painted over, they exist exclusively in his work and evoke associations with small, wondrous houses, with the privacy of the inner being, rather than with momentum and movement. The chair is empty, living figures do not appear in his work. It is quiet, the movement has withdrawn. Even the traces of the artist's handwriting, the memory of the movement of the painting hand, of brushstrokes and smudges, have sunk in, become invisible in the colors that were applied evenly, layer upon layer.

His performances - Joop's "dreams" - are contained in a play of light and color. The colors are clearly separated from each other. The houses of a canal, for example, show a subtle combination of rectangular color fields; the colors, gradations of ocher yellows, soft brown and pale red umber, cool and warm grays differ in tone depending on whether the light is permitted. They measure themselves against the blue of air and water, from which they are reflected; sometimes they also resound in a delicate yellow and grayish white of a city that appears as a mirage in the horizon. As a counterpoint, there are the deep shadows of pilasters, vaults and trees that cast their shadow over a terrace, a quay. Sometimes the shadows are no more than black-brown and gray, match-thin strips or small rectangles, sharpening the thinness of a tram tower or air station.

But, where is this play of light and color, where did the "dream" begin, what preceded these recent paintings?

The start was Joop Polder's decision to become an artist. Joop was born on February 14, 1939 in Kleine Kazernestraat 5, a narrow side street of Lange Voorhout in The Hague. He grew up in a family of artists. His father, Gerrit Polder (1897-1980), was a well-known Hague painter of still lifes, portraits and landscapes. Averse to innovation, he looked in the tradition of the Hague School for other, completely individual possibilities. Like the painters of the Hague School, he went out to paint "sur le motif". He often went with friends, the painters Pieter Fraterman and Arnold Smith from The Hague, by bicycle to "the little land" in Wassenaar, to the dunes and the sea. After the war, in 1962, Gerrit Polder also became an art dealer; the studio in the Kleine Kazernestraat became Kunstzaal Polder. Many artists came to the Kleine Kazernestraat, artists from The Hague such as Aart van den IJssel, Ferry Slebe, Herman Berserik and Ber Mengels. Joop's eldest brother, Rudi Polder (born 1925) also became a painter.

As a little boy, Joop drew "all day long". Wonderful drawings of a small statue - a nude figure - from this time have been preserved, as has the painting he made with some paint residues of his father's palette, his first still life with two apples, lemon and bottle (235.tif, 210.tif, 216 .tif). He was five years old at the time. Once at school, the spontaneity and pleasure of drawing disappeared.

Just like his father and brother Rudi, Joop Polder wanted to go to the Academy of Visual Arts in The Hague. Against his will, he was enrolled in the Secondary Drawing course of the Academy. His teacher, Henk Munnik, stimulated his work. He has never seen artists like Co Westerik and Jan van Heel as a teacher at the Academy. Joop left the Academy at the age of sixteen. He did, however, go to Westerik on his own initiative in his studio in Parkstraat, around the corner from Kleine Kazernestraat. Perhaps he saw the Fishwoman (1951) or Autobus at night (1952). But Joop wanted to leave; away from home and academy, away from The Hague - "I wanted to be free" -.

In 1956 he left for Brussels; he came into the house of a family friend, the Belgian artist Willem de Pauw (1894-1974) - "Uncle Willem" -. Joop took classes at the Academy of Fine Arts in Uccle. He went to museums, admired the work of Constant Permeke and James Ensor, Gustave van de Woestijne and Léon Spillaert, whom he already knew from books at home. He became fascinated by buildings, the Royal Meteorological Institute, a strange structure with factory-like towers that he saw from the window of Uncle Willen in the distance, the Palace of Justice - "a stone colossus" - the Brussels Stock Exchange. He mainly drew and painted portraits and sometimes a cityscape. In Brussels. Beursplein with Rising Sun (1956) (151.tif, p. 9) densely packed buildings enclose a quiet square with an empty tram. The first sunlight colors a blank wall and here and there the facades of houses that are covered in brown and light gray blues. It mingles with the pale tones of the streets, appears in red-like streaks in the sky. Brussels. Beursplein with the rising sun is in a sense a harbinger of all the later work. It is remarkable that there are no comparable paintings in this and subsequent years. However, the artist has always kept this work himself. Joop Polder stayed with Uncle Willem for three quarters of a year.

In 1957 he went to Paris - "everyone was in Paris". He enrolled in the Académie de Beaux-Arts evening course, which he could afford per lesson, which was often a problem. He did everything to

earn a living: from lugging around in the Hallen, drawing portraits 'commissioned' of passers-by and people in cafes, to pedaling in the street with his folder of drawings for tourists - Notre Dame, a bridge over the Seine, the Ile de la Cité - and, somewhat more hidden in a Tabac of St. Germain des Prés, with its folder of erotic drawings that he sold for ten francs - an idea of the writer Jean Genet, who then met Joop. He was deeply impressed by Genet's books such as Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs and Miracle de la rose, autobiographically inspired novels, which the then convicted Genet wrote in 1942 and 1943 about his experiences in the penal colony of Mery and the prison of Fresnes, about 'all those strange masquerades of crime, about those princes and princesses of the higher shamelessness...' 

After Paris, Joop traveled through Europe and stayed in Italy and Switzerland for quite some time. He lived a little on spec, saw a lot, had all kinds of jobs, including conductor on the night trains of Wagons Lits, of which he has the very best memories.

In 1963 Joop Polder returned to The Hague. He was a salesman in the electricity department of the Bijenkorf for a short while, then he got rid of all side jobs: he was a free artist. He moved into a beautiful attic floor in the house of his piano teacher Lily van Hoek, Sweelinckplein 25 in The Hague. Since then, Joop Polder has lived and worked in this house, which gradually became his property, floor by floor.

The subjects he dealt with in those early years in the Sweelinckplein were still very diverse: he painted and drew portraits and landscapes, cityscapes and especially the human figure. Inspired by Our Lady of the Flowers, the artist imagined in expressionist works his own "princes and princesses" from the underworld of Genet. Some like The Pimp (1965) (206.tif) are depicted with finely drawn lines and evoke a certain tenderness; in others deep black, almost spiky scratches intensify and achieve the distressing appearance of a woman with a flower (1967) (223.tif and 221.tif). Shortly after, in 1968, and closely associated with it, drawings were created that also deal with violence: about the Vietnam war, about battlefields and demonstrations (214.tif and 204.tif).

At first glance, other works from those early years on Sweelinckplein do not correspond to drawings such as De pooier and The protest. The IJssel view and Avenue Tervueren - a reminder of Uccle - and, even more pronounced, the beautiful city views at night or at the last moments of the day show a completely different artist. In Huizen in de Nacht (1972) (184.tif, p. 11) Joop Polder painted his view over the roofs of the square or of the large house further down that is in the setting sun in his Sweelinckplein (1974) (181.tif, p. 10) gets something of a fairytale palace. Perhaps both paintings are intertwined with his view of Uncle Willem on the Meteorological Institute in Uccle or even with the former in the Kleine Kazernestraat, where he looked out in his small room on the tower of the Kloosterkerk. The deep blue, ochre and red yellow hues from Brussels. Beursplein with the rising sun return in these paintings, as in Hollands Spoor (1973) (174.tif, p. 10), one of the first stations in the artist's oeuvre.

The latter subject is closely related to his fascination with toy trains and stations that he started collecting in 1963, a collection that probably also has to do with his childhood years when he still 'played tram' and ran with whizzing noises over the Voorhout - 'I am the tram' - when he owned a beautiful Märklin train and a steam locomotive belonging to his grandfather.

Hollands Spoor is also related to his discovery, initially in books, of the Belgian painter Paul Delvaux at a time when Joop as an artist was looking for something else and did not know exactly what the other was. He recognized Delvaux as a beacon, as an artist with whom he felt a connection. Joop shared his preference for performances at the time

At night or late in the evening as in *Nachtelijk stationnetje* (1959) or *Avondtreinen* (1957). Delvaux's statement about this last painting - "I painted a quiet, peaceful scene" - would certainly have endorsed Joop for his own *Hollands Spoor*. Delvaux's 1973 retrospective at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen confirmed his discovery. A yellowed exhibition poster still hangs between his trains and trams.

Years later, Joop Polder met Delvaux. At a miniature train fair in Rheinhausen, Germany, Joop Polder gave two Belgian collectors, friends of Delvaux, a toy semaphore "for an admirer's artist". Delvaux invited him to Brussels for a visit. Joop not only looked at the painter's drawings and paintings but also his collection, "shelves on the wall full of model trains of all sizes, toys, porcelain insulating buttons, railway souvenirs ...".

Joop Polder, just like Delvaux, is a breed collector. His work, like Delvaux's oeuvre, is figurative. After all, however different their art may be, something of the passion of collecting has seeped into both works.

From then on, the work of Joop Polder gradually changed. His palette became lighter, the azure blue - "Mediterranean" - shades appeared in his work. Cityscapes and landscapes, mostly dune views and the sea, remained the main subjects. The tram definitely got a place in his art. Trams of our own invention or as an airplane fuselage complete with small balcony in *Fantasy on a Sikorsky IV* (1990) (219.tif, p. 12) in which his tram got wings and could lift off the ground, just like Igor Sikorsky's famous biplane. In *42nd. Street, New York*, a cityscape from 1989, the tram is incorporated in a rhythmic arrangement of geometric shapes and surfaces, of facades, galleries, blank walls with huge advertisements (cfo 12200, cover image). Sometimes the theme is nothing more than a single chair by the sea, when there are only colors and the distance is dissolved in a diffused light (p. 24). Occasionally, the artist takes place in the tram, as it were, at the seat of the tram driver; there he shows his view over the dunes, the representation of his dream world, where the spectator, passenger or child, can look over the driver's shoulder. In *7 km. Groveld* (1997) (p. 29) all of this evokes - for a moment - the memory of the Joop Polder from long ago, of his play "I am the tram".

Mariette Josephus Jitta

* Jean Genet, *Wonder van de roos*, Amsterdam 1968, p.239.

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