

Oversized

New Work by Gerco de Ruijter

Gerco de Ruijter's photography and the Dutch landscape – they appear to be the perfect match. Paging the book with the overview of the photographs De Ruijter shot while flying his camera-kite between 1993 and 2003, one cannot escape being struck by the unique characteristics of the Dutch landscape: all ditches have been dug along a ruler, all trees are geometrically arranged, all groynes and breakwaters are dead straight. The arrangements are Mondrianesque – in this Dutch landscape the world is reduced to mere planes and lines.

What makes these photographs so exciting, what creates their suspense, is their perpetual tumble from figurative to abstract and vice versa not unlike the images popularized by Gestalt-psychology, images that are transformed completely by even the most minimal changes of perspective. In the fresh-green grass the meticulous observer to his surprise will detect a small gathering of sheep, a lonesome horse, a few head of cattle on a dike. A quick movement of the eye, and the figurative features fade, disappear, and instantly make place for an abstract ensemble of divisions, thin and thick lines, fleecy clouds as flattened mosquitoes on the wall. The observer's eye keeps moving between these extremes, from the human standard of detail to the grand scale of structure. In the photographs of De Ruijter the Dutch landscape seems to be created for this Gestalt effect.

Yet in quite a few of De Ruijter's photographs the figurative basis of the tumble is minimized. It is as if De Ruijter wants to put his concept to the test again and again. In the borderline of the Dutch landscape especially (at the sea board and near other wetlands such as sand banks, salt marshes, and mud flats) the kite-camera registers hardly any human standard or cultural reference. This is where not geometry reigns, but geology, Nature – even if a few ripples in a pond, a goose in full flight, or a couple of fenceposts again create a tumble from real landscape to abstract image. Thus the photographs become doubly exciting. They unveil the landscape as an abstraction, make it look like the wildly applied colorful streaks of paint and mud of Art Brut. At the same time there are enough figurative elements for the observer never to forget the photographer's model, which is just a few hundred yards square of the Netherlands. The figurative element, though, often weighs less than a feather.

Good artists strive to explore the extremes of their concepts. This I believe is the background of De Ruijter's decision, of 2003, to shift his attention from the so familiar Dutch landscape to a new landscape and thus put his art to the ultimate test. The high desert of New Mexico, in the American Southwest, has not much in common with the lowlands of the Netherlands. In the expanse of the high desert it is geology that has the final word. The land's cultural history does not date back just a few scores of years or a couple of centuries, no, the land invites to make a journey into time of millions of years. The land is too vast to accept much, or any, human intervention. Even the animals disappear in the endless rock formations, sand flats, volcanic fields, and limestone ridges. One wonders how De Ruijter can find here any of the disruptive uncertainties that create the suspense so evidently present in the photographs from his "Dutch period."

By taking his kites, and now also a helium blimp to carry his camera, to New Mexico, De Ruijter laid himself open to all the risks that are inherent in empty space – a space offering nothing to hold on to. Without standards, no tumble either. At eye level the New Mexico landscape is indeed oversized, even outsized. But when seen from De Ruijter's kite-camera or blimp-camera, the high desert,

surprisingly, is not without Gestalt at all. In De Ruijter's new work a new tension takes over from the tumble between figurative and abstract, a new sensation hits the excited observer: nothing explains what is detail, what is large scale. Doubt accompanies the observer— is he looking at a macro shot of a fossil or a shot of the moon as seen from Earth? The images now are almost fully abstract, and De Ruijter's "White Sands" triptych is practically a homage to Jan Schoonhoven. Again, though, in the pinpoint-sharp images enough real landscape remains to be detected to confuse the observer. They demand from the observer to look even closer, to wonder what's the measure of all things. Large, larger, largest. Or small, smaller, smallest. Nothing is for certain in these photographs. Just as great art should be.

Peter Delpout
cinematographer/writer