

Wieske Wester
double you double you

by Dominic van den Boogerd

The title of Wieske Wester's first solo exhibition at Dürst Britt & Mayhew, 'double you double you' refers not only to the initials of the artist's name, it also alludes to the magical capacity of art to double the way we perceive ourselves. As Louise Bourgeois once put it: art is a way of recognizing oneself. What we can recognize in the paintings and drawings of Wieske Wester is the raw, primordial nature of human existence.

'Claw' (2016) is a good example. What looks like a human hand is in fact the claw of a bonobo, the primate closest to man. It's painted in a gestural manner, with powerful, thick strokes of paint. In his treatise 'Plastik' (1778) German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder made a distinction between sight (*Gesicht*) and feeling (*Gefühl*). To the eye, the world appears as a flat surface, a continuity of one thing alongside another, that is to say, of one facade next to another facade. Through feeling, the world is experienced as a space, a continuity of one thing behind another. The eye is able to acknowledge things only in terms of visual appearances; the hand learns about the form, the hardness, the impenetrability, the weight, the smoothness of things. Infants explore their surroundings by touching things, holding them, and putting them in their mouth. Tactile perception leads to comprehension; it makes you 'grasp something'. As Herder put it: dream resides in sight, truth in touch. Wester's almost haptic painting of a primate's hand underlines the primacy of manual touch.

In Wieske Wester's world, the distinct realms of humans, animals, plants and minerals seem to fold into one another. In a wonderful surreal mutation, a shell turns into flesh, legs become logs. Identities are drifting, capacities start shifting. In an older work, 'Rocks getting physical' (2014), massive stone formations get into a fight, as if the mighty clashes of tectonic plates are translated into a landscape-as-wrestling game.

The most essential expression of life is probably procreation, the prolongation of the species. In the work of Wieske Wester, this powerful force is expressed in pictures that are witty as well as a little unsettling. 'L'Origine d'Original', also from 2014, depicts a bunch of carrots in a pot, seen from above, suggesting an abundance of male genitals. The title is of course a wink to Gustave Courbet's notorious painting 'L'origine du Monde' (1866), displaying a woman's vulva. Courbet rejected the smooth, idealised nudes of academic painting, and advocated a strong realism. The work, once owned by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and nowadays in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay, pushed the limits of what was considered presentable. With a humorous twist, Wester's 'L'Origine d'Original' presents the other organ needed for procreation. Her joyful picture gives the act of penetration the festive look of a children's party.

The fact that in Wester's work beans, corncocks, mushrooms and cabbages appear as genitals cannot come as a surprise. The sexual innuendo of the images is reminiscent of Lee Lozano's so called tool paintings from the 1960s, done in an expressionistic cartoon style and suggestive of rather rude sexual acts. Lozano's tormented works reflect her anxiety about power and gender relations. To Wester's surprise, she found out only after discovering this remarkable body of work that Lozano was not a man but a woman - just like audiences of Wester's work often assume the artist is male. Gender distinction does not make much sense to Wester. Take a look at 'Whatever our noses inhale

(smelly moustache)' from 2015. A bunch of shells, commonly associated with femininity, is combined with a moustache, indicator of masculinity. Male and female merge with one another. All around are noses, breathing, sniffing, smelling. Olfactory perception resides in the genetically oldest areas of the human brain, where long term memory and emotions are located. Often, we are not aware of odours, we have no apt words to describe them. Nevertheless, they play an important role in sexual attraction and response to danger. The sense of smell is as essential to life as is the sense of touch, as is referred to in 'Claw'.

Sexual ambiguity lingers in a series of paintings representing landscapes. 'Clouds' (2015) and 'Puddle' (2015) show clouds, ditches, polders and other elements of a typical Dutch landscape in a peculiar way, almost like bodies from flesh and blood. Looking at 'Untitled' (2015), even those who distrust Freud would find it hard to ignore the fact that the rising rocks very much look like erect penises. What might have sparked these lustful paintings could be anything – a thought, an observation, a fantasy. Fears and desires are involved, I guess, pleasure and aggression, for sure. Especially sensations that give you goose bumps or make your stomach ache.

It is typical for Wester to show us the things we enjoy but which are not necessarily good for us. We love a glass of whisky ('Whisky glass #1', 2015), but are tempted to take one more ('Whisky glass #2', 2015), slowly sipping towards drunkenness. The motif of the glass perfectly matches the proportions of the canvas, occupying the full picture plane. The bold handling of paint is loose, vivid, but focussed at the same time. You can't paint like that when you are drunk. Wester's blurry whisky glasses portray the gradual loss of coherency with great clarity. To the artist herself, the energy in the execution of the work, be it a painting or a drawing, mimics the energy that make things

live, grow, or move: the natural forces of organic life she finds so fascinating. Without doubt, her fast and intense handling of paint stems from intuition and spontaneity, but things never get out of hand. It's this constant flux between let go and control that is characteristic for Wester's way of working. It is a pleasure to look at these paintings, to follow the dynamic marks which the brush has left behind, to enjoy the freshness of colours, the playful movement of lines, and, last but not least, to wonder what these strange images might represent. To me, Wester's work expresses the powerful, pre-lingual experiences we are all familiar with, every experience that momentarily dissolves the division between ourselves and the universe. I am sure it can represent something else to you. That's why the show is called double you, double you.

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