

Pilgrim discovering another world

A conversation between
Paul Beumer and Merel van Tilburg

Merel van Tilburg: Your exhibition at Dürst Britt & Mayhew presents an overview of works from the past nine years. It is the first time that you will show works from different series together, so one important effect of this will be to see how the different works relate to each other. All of the works are textile-based; they are all related to your travels in Borneo (Malaysia), Madeira, Nigeria, India, Sri Lanka and Taiwan; and they have a strong relationship to painting. The exhibition title, *Pilgrim discovering another world*, is derived from an engraving by Camille Flammarion (1888). This image shows a day being 'drawn open' like a curtain, and a tiny figure crawling underneath the 'curtain', from night to day, or in other words, from one world into another world. The engraving holds a textile metaphor and an allusion to traveling. You are a traveling painter, literally and metaphorically: you once said that 'a carefully composed composition is able to transfer you to another world.'

You have often stated that your main attraction to textiles is that they are easily transportable and pliable. But it seems that your interest in textile as a material has expanded considerably over time: you use textiles you find on your travels, or you make the textiles yourself, and sometimes the focus is on the dyeing process. There is even a series of works where the prime material is the kapok fruit, the pod that releases a soft, cotton-like fiber used for stuffing mattresses and pillows. So here, you turn to the natural materials that precede textile. Could you walk us through the expansion of your working with textiles over the past years?

Paul Beumer: The moment I decided that a studio practice was not for me (which was quite soon after my residency at the Rijksakademie), I started working with textiles. That indeed began with the idea of lightness and easiness to carry. But it also opened up a world in which paintings look like pieces of textile and vice versa. And that is also the game I play in my own work. Various aspects of painting are reflected in my textile works. When weaving, I look for ways to manipulate colour (when your warp is red and your weft is yellow you are weaving orange). Works made from found textiles are more about composition. Sometimes I literally paint on the textiles, but then leave them free to hang pinned to the wall. But they are still loose pieces of textile, although other works are stretched like a painting, or framed.

MVT: You once described how your working process consists of three steps. Material research is the second step. For the first step, you have used a fascinating term: *ecstasy*. When I read about this, I wondered whether 'epiphany' might also be a good word. Could you tell us more about this step, and explain its relation to materiality, and how it flows into the next two steps?

PB: I used the word *ecstasy* because it has something to do with longing and desire. It's about the excitement of a taste never before tasted, or of a landscape or a beautiful smile seen for the first time. Those are moments when you feel alive. And when I come across a certain technique that I didn't know before, or an unexpected

colour combination, I get that same feeling. And just like when you want to photograph the landscape to capture it and perhaps kiss that beautiful smile, I want to make the technique my own, and try to understand a colour combination. So this understanding, of technique but also of meaning and history, is the next step. This is followed by a process in which I try to let go of all knowledge of symbolism and meaning, and in which I redirect and give new life to what I have found.

Sometimes though, I see a textile that is so beautiful in itself, that it has to remain pure and I won't do anything with it. This happened with a patterned cloth I saw in a small village in the Philippines, woven by a woman who had four looms. The pattern was somewhat reminiscent of Op Art, it seemed to move, but it was a few hundred years old. People would drape this cloth over their beds to ward off spirits – when they would see the moveable pattern, they would leave. This patterned cloth could also be used on sailing boats, as protection against spirits of the sea.

MVT: With your background training in painting, your works, through their formal qualities such as geometry and use of colour, lines and pattern, raise the question of abstraction. You seem to have a very open-minded relationship to the rather strict modernist view of abstraction in its western development. How do you see, and make use of abstraction in your work?

PB: There is a lot of meaning and symbolism to be found in textiles. But I have never been interested in adopting symbols to give meaning to my work. So, what remains is colour, shape and technique. And within this limitation I look for magic. When there is no symbolic entrance allowing for a 'reading' of the work, you are called to experience it on a different level. As a viewer, I can have this experience when looking at abstract works by painters like Agnes Martin, Sayed Haider Raza or Gotthard Graubner. It is as if I have started revaluing painting since I make textile works: I no longer feel the need to necessarily relate to paintings as a painter. Rather than trying to understand how a painting is made, I feel free to open myself up to its concept, idea, emotion, and to enter the world that the composition opens. This letting go is not something I have access to when looking at abstract weavings by Sheila Hicks or Anni Albers, for example. But in my work, this kind of experience is what I want to make possible. Another aspect of abstraction and patterns that I am interested in is the concept of the fractal. The patterns of fractal geometry can be found in swirling computer graphics and are modeling tools for high-tech science, but I encountered them in a book on patterns in traditional African design and architecture. These patterns differ from the Western grid, because they grow organically, repeating a similar pattern in ever smaller scales. In architecture for example, first you would build a large hall, then later add a smaller kitchen in a similar shape, adding ever more spaces where people do things. Similarly, my work grows like a fractal, with one theme or series reacting to something else, and with ideas interacting with each other. Weaving is somewhat related to this model, because it is also a growing process: with the use of two threads (weft and warp), a repetitive pattern emerges.

MVT: In painting, there is most always the direct trace of the artist's hand, whereas in textile weaving for example, gesture is less visible. But it seems to me that you often incorporate traces of the making process in your works. What place does gesture have in your textile works?

PB: I usually find objects that strive for perfection very boring. And I feel more at home in a cheerful chaos than in order. There is something more exciting lurking in nonchalance, something ruffled, cut or uncombed. It doesn't lie. That is why my work is never finished to perfection. The loose threads and stitching, or when something is not cut completely straight, are all traces of the human hand. These elements make the pieces come to life.

MVT: In your working travels, you have mainly explored places in Asia, where you have immersed yourself in age-old textile making practices. What, for you, are the affordances of engaging with ancient practices?

PB: Some techniques are indeed centuries old and terribly refined and labour-intensive and therefore often expensive and slowly disappearing. Bark-cloth predates weaving. And I came across it in Borneo. There they make some weird looking tourist's things out of it. And I don't understand that, because it is such a special material! I don't know if there is really an advantage to working with a specific material. I see it, become fascinated and have to do something with it. I really like history though, and am also very interested in old forms of religion. So I do believe that my fascinations with materials and ways of making more likely foster traveling into the past, than if I were to do something with a 3D printer or if I would be working with a futuristic glow-in-the-dark kind of wool, for example.

MVT: What are some of the ways in which you bring together the different 'fragments' of worlds that you encounter in your research, travels and practice as a Western artist? I am referring for example to your choice to use denim in your indigo works, by which you brought together a material you delved in Nigeria, and the typical fabric washed with indigo in the Western world.

PB: I think because I always relate my work back to painting, a Western image always emerges, but with unexpected techniques or colours that come from elsewhere. Without becoming exotic - because that is a danger that I am wary of. Traveling to me is like wandering, it makes me feel happy to lose a sense of control and to feel more open. I feel a desire to share in my work what I encounter and experience, and what I make together with other people. I do not claim ownership of the designs made with others. I never work with a sketch, but the design emerges in the making process. For example, working with weaver Dilhani Iresha in Sri Lanka, I would stop by every day and would make small adjustments during the weaving process, adding a coloured thread here and there. She had not worked with such a colour gradient before, so perhaps this was a fruitful exchange for her too.

MVT: For the exhibition design, you have chosen shades of brown and gray for the gallery walls. You chose this background to make the works appear 'like waterlilies from a pool of mud', with a reference to vivid colours of textiles standing out against a landscape of mud, as you have seen during your travels especially in India. Is there a link with Hinduism in this choice as well?

PB: When I decided to present my works on brown and dull grayish walls, I was indeed thinking about lotuses emerging from mud pools, which is a strong symbol for purity

and the mind in Hinduism and Buddhism. But I don't see my works as divine lotuses. It's more an aesthetic choice, looking for the right contradiction to turn up the volume.

MVT: It is not uncommon to value paintings in terms of immediacy, contemplation, stillness; in other words, in meditative terms. You are intimately familiar with the practice of meditation. Is there a relationship between your works and meditation?

PB: My meditations mainly consist of long walks during which I clear my head and often get lost or miss a turn. In India, I go to the Hindu temple everyday where I worship an idol through ritual. I have learned about the gods and am able to read the philosophy through the idol, and meditating on the idol in the temple gives me much soul. You can also find a meditative experience in discovering an image that brings order to your life (similar to an epiphany). Yet the act of making such an image is often accompanied with lots of doubts and hesitation.

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