

Generation Inspiration: How Willem Hussem Continues to Resonate

By Yannick Balk

'When you look, you do not yet see', was what Willem Hussem (1900–1974) wrote shortly before his death, 'When you see, it moves you'. His eyesight was already failing, yet his vision remained sharp. More than fifty years later, his work still manages to move. The Dutch modernist painter and poet continues to inspire: from the 1970s to today, from The Hague to Mexico City. This essay aims to explore the idea of 'generation inspiration': being inspired, and passing that feeling on to a different generation. Inspiration as a form of transmission, a way in which the vision of one artist continues to live in the eyes and hands of others. How has Hussem been able to touch researchers, gallerists and artists for so many decades now?

Researchers' Inspiration

I was neither raised with modern art nor educated in it. Until recently, I thought most art after Impressionism to be overwrought. I nevertheless learnt this was a mistake. My first encounter with the work of Willem Hussem happened a few years ago, at a friend's home. He, a collector and connoisseur, showed me a work on paper by Hussem. A curved semicircle surrounded by radiating lines. The black marks on the white surface make it at once austere and exuberant, solemn and joyful. The work struck me deeply, and a long conversation about its maker unfolded. Since then, my curiosity about modern art in general, and Hussem in particular, has only grown. I now spend most of my spare time studying his life and work.

Recently, I travelled, somewhat nervously, to Museum Belvédère in the north of the Netherlands to speak with Han Steenbruggen, the museum's director and one of the foremost Hussem experts. As a student in the 1980s, Steenbruggen had been captivated by a serene, monumental painting, consisting of three red shapes, floating on a foggy grey background, like clouds about to dissolve. That impression led him, among other things, to study Hussem for years to come.

In 1994, the year I was born, Steenbruggen published *Tussen schrift en leegte*, still the definitive work on Hussem. What, I wondered, could I possibly add to that? At the end of our conversation, Steenbruggen smiled and said provocatively: 'People have written about other artists a hundred times too, just in slightly different words.' He emphasised that each generation of researchers brings its own eyes, knowledge and sensibility, and can always shed new light on an artist's qualities. His encouragement inspired me to begin a new study, not only about Hussem's art, but about the man behind it, and the enduring inspiration he evokes. This essay is a first exploration.

Gallerists' Inspiration

Around the time of Hussem's death in 1974, a group of close friends founded the so-called Hussem Committee, dedicated to keeping his legacy alive. Among them were artists Peter Struycken and Rinus van den Bosch, and art historians Hein van Haaren and Wim Beerens. The estate was long managed by The Hague gallery *Nouvelles Images*, first under Ton Berends and later Erik Bos. In 2005, Bos wrote a heartfelt *Letter to Willem Hussem*, an imagined conversation with the artist about his life, doubts, and uncertainties. Reading it, one feels connected to a fellow-thinker from another generation, someone never met yet somehow known. That, in essence, is what generation inspiration can entail.

Since 2019, gallerists Jaring Dürst Britt and Alexander Mayhew have been handling Hussem's estate. They do so with an open and contemporary vision. Not as a historical retrospective, but as a living dialogue between generations, viewed through the lens of the present. They let his work resonate with that of contemporary artists and current themes. Their aim is to reveal the universal expressive power of Hussem's oeuvre in its full scope and to keep his work visible for new audiences. In doing so, they ensure his art remains alive and relevant, as a continuous source of inspiration. From the early custodians to Dürst Britt & Mayhew today, Hussem's work has been reintroduced time and again. Not out of nostalgia, but because it continues to speak to the imagination.

Artists' Inspiration

Generation inspiration can also be found among artists themselves, as in the case of Piet Ouborg (1893-1956). Ouborg and Hussem were not only contemporaries but also kindred spirits, both searching for forms of expression beyond visible reality. In the mid-twentieth century, such ambitions met with little understanding in The Netherlands. The two inspired one another. During his time in what was then the Dutch East Indies, Ouborg encountered Eastern drawing traditions that likely deepened Hussem's fascination for calligraphy. After harsh criticism and a public scandal surrounding his award-winning drawing 'Father and Son' in 1950, Ouborg grew increasingly isolated. Hussem remained one of the few who kept in touch. 'I no longer read reviews (...) They depress me too much', Ouborg wrote to him in 1954. Hussem responded with encouragement, and Ouborg replied that he hoped his work 'might one day still speak of what I tried to put into it. I also hope there will be people who understand my intentions.' In that hope, the two Hague 'experimentalists' found strength and inspiration in each other.

Eight years after Hussem's death, in 1982, *Nouvelles Images* organised the exhibition *Artists buy Hussem*, in which younger artists showed their own work alongside a Hussem from their private collections. The accompanying publication noted that while Hussem had been known mainly within a small The Hague

circle during his lifetime, his work gained new appreciation after his death. What had once been dismissed as ‘too aesthetic’ or ‘typically The Hague’ was now recognised as free, profound, and powerful. With just a few lines or planes, Hussem could evoke an entire space. That quality also resonated with a younger generation. Artist Eric de Nie (1944) compared Hussem to jazz musician Thelonious Monk: ‘A similar blend of intensely personal tone and unusually clear style – so unique that you want to show or play it for others.’

Artists’ Inspiration now

Decades later, that description still rings true: new generations continue to be moved by Hussem. For the exhibition at Dürst Britt & Mayhew, I asked the four participating artists about their views on him.

Mexican artist Alejandra Venegas (1986) sees in Hussem ‘a painter who doesn’t name the things in the world, but sings them.’ What moves her is the musicality of his brushstrokes and the way he uses colour to evoke everyday sensations, like the experience of looking at a flower. In his pursuit of simplicity, she sees a desire to connect inner and outer worlds, the extraordinary with the ordinary. His loose brushstrokes, to her, are acts of attention and devotion. Precisely because of that, his work transcends time and breathes life, nature, and emotion. Although she does not know his intentions, Venegas recognises something of herself in his art: ‘I suppose that is precisely the power of art that never grows old.’

Dutch artist Wieske Wester (1985) describes Hussem as a painter pur sang, constantly searching for essence and simplicity. In his work, she senses the physicality of painting itself: ‘You feel the wind and the landscape in his works; you follow his gestures through paint.’ That immediacy moves her, it speaks of necessity. ‘I love work that conveys urgency; it had to be made.’ Wester sees in Hussem an invitation to new generations of artists to slow down, to doubt, and to work with dedication. ‘Looking at his work gives me a sense of reassurance,’ she says. ‘Motifs can be found close by, “small”, in a way, and close to oneself.’ The challenge, she adds, is ‘to perceive the depth within apparent simplicity.’

Austrian artist David Roth (1985) sees in Hussem a painter who finds poetry in simplicity, both literally and figuratively. That Hussem worked in different styles throughout his life, Roth finds admirable; he recognises this in his own practice. He is especially moved by Hussem’s gouaches in vivid signal colours: ‘with just a few strokes he was able to make such magnificent work.’ What fascinates Roth is the intuitive movement, the gesture without a visible plan, as if Hussem painted in a trance. ‘The hardest,’ he says, ‘is to make something truly good and have it look effortless.’ In him, Roth sees a like-minded painter in the pursuit of the seemingly simple.

For Dutch artist Paul Beumer (1982), Hussem's strength lies in his restless search and his sense of freedom. Beumer admires how he never repeated himself but kept experimenting, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. That very honesty, Beumer says, makes him vivid and timeless. 'Some of the works could have been painted yesterday.' He also admires Hussem's freedom in making: the confidence to look at a painting consisting of just a few lines or patches and say, 'this is enough.' Many artists (and viewers) are insecure about that, believing a work must always be labour-intensive. But as Beumer puts it, this can 'smear the freedom out of the work', and thus 'drive out the poetry.' Hussem shows that renewal arises not from certainty, but from doubt and daring.

Seeing, Being Moved, Passing it on

What unites these four reflections is a shared core: Hussem as an artist of simplicity, freedom, and honesty. Venegas hears him sing in colour; Wester feels the wind and the landscape; Roth sees him paint as if in a trance; and Beumer praises his courage to dare. The same words keep returning: poetry, searching, simplicity. All four recognise in Hussem an ongoing quest, a striving for balance between doubt and conviction, between control and surrender.

Although each has their own autonomous practice, they give voice to something that resonates more widely among artists of their generation: an admiration for what is open, experimental, and sincere. Their reflections make tangible that Hussem's work is not a closed past, but a living conversation about what art can be. In doing so, the four artists embody what this essay seeks to show: inspiration as a current that connects generations.

How is it that one artist continues to move others across so many decades? There are no definitive answers, yet it is clear that Hussem's universal insights, his lucid visual language, and his sincere artistic quest all play an undeniable role. Anyone who engages with him experiences *generation inspiration* at work. A transmission of vision and feeling that never ceases. Inspiration does not end, it continually changes shape, finding ever new eyes and hands. This essay began with Hussem's lines about looking and seeing. They remind us that those who truly see, are moved. And those who are moved, wish to pass it on. In that sharing, Hussem's gaze lives on, passed from eye to eye, hand to hand, generation to generation.

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