

Some Recent Paintings by Ina van Zyl

Upon entering Ina van Zyl's studio, my gaze was immediately struck by several paintings hanging together on the wall. Each work represents an enlarged and cropped view of human body parts, plant stems or flower buds. One painting depicts the sliver of a man's body with an erect penis, its purplish muscular curve extending the full length of the canvas. Another displays a woman's foot squeezed into an elegant sandal, and just beneath it, a small canvas reveals a close-up view of a woman's crotch, the labial folds distinctly visible beneath the undergarment. There's a painting of a branch with suggestively swollen buds, and another painting representing what appears to be a strangely ominous flower, poised on its thick stem and awash in greyed out shades of greenish blue. There's also a square canvas, larger than the others, of a woman's feet in high-heeled shoes seen from behind; one foot is slightly raised as if she is about to walk away. Another painting, perhaps the most enigmatic of them all, depicts a single pine needle enlarged to the point of no longer being recognizable. Set on the floor, leaning against the wall beneath the hung paintings, is a portrait of the artist's mother; her kind and slightly worried expression fills the entire canvas.

Standing before these paintings, taking in their disquieting beauty, I feel as though I'm being led down a path of seduction and desire towards some dark and unknown place where the outcome may be quite different from the longed-for fantasy that's hinted at in the images. Apprehension lurks somewhere beyond the lushly painted surfaces. Ina van Zyl paints her chosen images – culled from magazines or from the Internet, or from photographs that she's taken herself – with an unabashed and sensual realism. We can feel the warm fleshiness of sexual organs, feet and flower buds alike. What lends her canvases their handsome aura of foreboding is her use of color. In these recent paintings, ochers, browns and lime greens prevail. Fetishized body parts are swathed in earth tones and set against a solidly painted yet mysteriously luminous background. In the large square canvas, aptly titled *Seek Only There*, the woman's ankles and feet, strapped into black high heels, are painted in the same modulated tones of deep ochers and greens as the background, both unifying the pictorial surface and creating a sense of unease. A slightly brighter lime green vibrates beneath the shoes, underscoring their visual power, and leading me to question what truly lies behind the scumbled and shiny surface of this painting.

When describing what she's striving for in her work, Ina van Zyl uses a word from her native Afrikaans, *gril*, for which there's no easy English translation. It can suggest caprice, a fad or a flight of fancy, something freakish, kinky or perverse; or a shiver, a shudder of fear. This is precisely what I'm feeling as I look at her work: fascination, titillation, and an almost physical sensation of revulsion. The artist achieves this emotional impact through her choice of color, but also through the scale of the painted images. The paintings themselves are not large formats, but the depicted fragments of plants or body parts have been enlarged considerably. Ina van Zyl zooms in on her subjects, lending them a palpable sensuousness through her handling of paint. Some of these recent works could be seen as oversized offerings to our erotic imagination, yet they stop short of kindling any fantasies. The acidic earth tones tarnish the expected lure of the images, and their exaggerated scale seems to act as a mirror, uncomfortably reflecting our private thoughts and bringing us face to face with our own desires, fears or inhibitions.

For several years, Ina van Zyl has repeatedly made paintings of fruit, flowers, branches, body parts and sexual organs. As I look at the recent works hanging on the studio wall, I find myself questioning the importance of these images for the artist, and also the relationship of these paintings to one another. While still a student in South Africa, before she began painting, Ina van Zyl drew comic strips for the satirical magazine *Bitterkomix*. Both disturbing and humorous, politically oriented yet steeped in personal experience, these narrative fragments leave the reader with an unsettling imaginative freedom. Drawn in charcoal, the comics feature close-up images: portraits, of course, but also cropped views of the body, or objects from daily surroundings that sometimes recall still life painting. The artist has stated that she "had the most fun"

making these drawings, and when she started to paint, in 1994, she painted isolated scenes from her comics^{*}. In 1995, she came to the Netherlands to work on oil painting at De Ateliers in Amsterdam. Luc Tuymans was a guest tutor at that time, and his observations about light, color and background helped the young artist to develop her highly personal approach to painting[†]. She learned how to tell the whole story in one image, as it were, investing it with a potent emotional charge.

I would also add that as a woman painting from images taken from advertising and pornography, images that correspond to a masculine ideal of feminine seduction, erotic fantasy and even male virility, Ina van Zyl reveals, if not her own discomfort with some of those images, their inherent falseness, their short-livedness. She captures both the immediate rush of sensuality that these images are meant to induce, while imbuing them with a certain visceral repugnance, thus dismantling the stereotypical representation of seduction. There is no feminist message per se, but as viewers we're invited to reconsider these seemingly banal and fetishized images of the body. Paintings such as *Enlarged*, *Breath* and *Seek Only There* lead me to think of Joan Semmel's large-scale paintings from the early 1970's of couples making love: they propose a representation of desire and sexuality from a woman's point of view.

Ina van Zyl's repertoire of images is vast and rich, and while her paintings of food, flowers, or plants on the verge of blossoming have sensual overtones, the artist's interest in them goes far beyond the sexual. It could be that she's questioning the nature of kitsch and of popular imagery. Her hauntingly dark and mysterious paintings of flowers challenge our visual expectations. Yet I also find there to be a certain timeless quality in her work, notably in *At Rest*, the elongated, horizontal canvas depicting a lone pine needle, hanging high on the wall of her studio. Set against a deep, blue-green background, delineated by shadow and sky blue highlights, the pine needle extends across the entire length of the canvas, bisecting it in two as if it were marking the horizon. I have the impression that I'm contemplating a still life, like Chardin's *Pipe and Drinking Pitcher*, or Manet's single *Asparagus*. Yet the scale of the pine needle, lying in a richly colored and undetermined space, lends it a surreal quality. I think of Charley Toorop's small but powerfully graphic painting of *Two Apples in Leaves*: the two green apples appear monumentally large, like symmetrically bulbous mountains towering over a forest of deep green foliage. Gazing upon these two apples, much like the pine needle, I'm not sure of what I'm seeing, and my imagination is given free rein.

Looking again at the paintings hanging in the greyish morning light of the studio, my eye is finally drawn to the canvas leaning against the wall: the portrait of the artist's mother. The solid presence of the sitter, anchored in shades of greenish ochre, is slightly softened by artificially reddened lips, and the proximity of this painting to the others invites a host of associations. While there is no trace of sentimentality in this painting, I feel as though its strength is rooted in the emotional bond between the artist and her model. But the probing intensity that comes through in this portrait is also present in the other paintings. There is a visceral connection between the artist and what she paints, and I suspect that this is partly what she's referring to when she says that her paintings represent things that "imply life or the promise of life."[‡] Ina van Zyl zooms in on the body or on blossoming flowers as a way of expressing her fascination, not only with nature but also with human nature and with the tumult of daily existence all around her. In each of her paintings, she records a momentary fragment of this everyday activity, boldly setting it down in paint as a kind of verification, or reassurance, that life is going on as usual.

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* Ina van Zyl, in conversation with Dominic van den Boogerd, in *Ina van Zyl, Paintings, Watercolours*, Dordrecht Museum, 2006, p. 16.

† *Ibid.*

‡ See the artist's website, <http://www.inavanzyl.com/about/ina-van-zyl/>