

Eefje Van den Brande, moving between water and fire.

Saturday 17 September 2022 / 20h

Centre for Young Arts

Claeys-Bouüaert Castle / Kasteeldreef 2 / Ghent Mariakerke

The Bible is the world's best-selling book, ahead of Mao's Little Red Book and ahead of the Koran. Whether the Bible is the most read book in the world, I would not dare to claim. As we know, the Bible is a collection of books. In any case, whoever reads to the end comes across the last book: 'The Revelation' by John of Patmos, or in Greek, 'The Apocalypse'. It deals with the revelation of Jesus to this John. I quote (12:1-4):

"And there was seen a great sign in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a wreath of twelve stars on her head; and she was pregnant and cried out in her labor and in her pain to give birth. And there was seen another sign in heaven, and behold, a great ruddy dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven crowns. And his tail dragged along a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth."

It is not my intention to convert anyone here, but I would like to point out that there are as many dragons, lions, leopards and bears in the Apocalypse as there are in the works of Eefje Van den Brande. Incidentally, you can also see this on the right-hand side panel of Hans Memling's triptych 'The Apocalypse of John', on display in Bruges.

These existing or fabulous animals are metaphors for dangers and fears as well as desires and outpourings. Just how colourful and imaginative they can be is found in animal fables by Jean de La Fontaine or in 'The Book of Imaginary Orphans' by Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine writer and poet. Borges writes about the eight-headed snake of Koshi from Japan. Eight heads and eight tails. Eyes as dark red as cherries. When it crawled, its body reached eight hills far; its belly always stained with blood. Or the Chinese dragon, the lung, is one of the four magical beasts, terrifying, divine. In the I Ching, Dragon means the sage. The popular imagination links dragon to clouds, rain, what peasants long for. And to great rivers. "The earth mates with the Dragon," they say. A way of saying it rains.

It is in this universe that we also end up in Eefje Van den Brande's visual art. Namely strange creatures hatched by the human imagination. The dragon is a mythical creature, an archetype Jung would say, found in both Western and Eastern traditions. Incidentally, a gilded red copper dragon adorns the Belfry here in Ghent, spitting fire during the Ghent festivities (the people of Bruges still say that the people of Ghent stole it from them in the 14th century).

We are invited to give free rein to our wild interpretations in Eefje's varied colour palette and vibrant compositions. Her images give the benefit of the doubt. What comes across as abstract at first glance hides a multi-layered biotope similar to a variegated, undersea coral reef. An ecosystem of sea anemones with flexible tentacles in which molluscs, sponges and crustaceans feel at home. The sensory opulence of flora and fauna, which appears in it as if in a kind of *écriture automatique*, stimulates our own fantasies. Eefje's art experiments with the psychological phenomenon of pareidolia, the diffuse perceptions of recognizable things in cloud formations, for instance. For instance, some people detect human faces in the rocks on Mars. We simply make quick connections between stimuli that come at us. We can easily be caught off guard by the intertwining of dragons,

spiders or bird's heads in paintings and just as easily look for their symbolism. Like a bird's head suggesting freedom, for example. Or the Chinese dragon that brings good luck. Eefje herself readily admits how these symbolisations best with her own unconscious traces, how the stylised animal and flower motifs bubble up from her dream world. But without subjecting us to some kind of Rorschach test here, the artist is primarily striving plastically to create a unified image. In one moment of looking, such a pareidolic association can emerge, but it is more than ephemeral. The unity between both her kaleidoscopic colours and vegetal forms arises from entanglements, twists, crisscrossings, overlaps, interweaves. It is a type of updated Jugendstil of plant and animal motifs that Klimt would envy.

By working more and more with variegated colours, Eefje wants to convey a positive philosophy of life. Her colours are so expressive from themselves that we don't quite know how to name them. They seem to blend together. Contours also curve inwards, making curves, strings, garlands seem to swim. There is often a ribbon holding the swirl together, like a compositional hold. This garland reminds me of a banding on medieval works of art, but without the pronunciation that appears on it. In any case, this is how the mesh is held together.

Eefje always starts from a stain, which she will pour over after a drying process, then literally blindly fanning strips of paint. Through several reworkings, a final version emerges in which she can find herself. It is a mixed-media process using ecoline, acrylic oil paint and varnish. Her formats are vertical, ascending. It is a movement from bottom to top.

For this occasion, she will also show the rainbow series, where one colour appears per canvas: yellow, blue, orange, purple, red. Also a video where the cinematic shot zooms in on the dynamic colour palette. Also in addition, she ventured into a 3D clay work called 'Challenge'. The pink lamp that illuminates it originally served to stimulate plant growth, just as sunlight brings the coral reef to life.

This artist's multifarious weaving makes people happy. The joy of painting splashes from the work. It is a delight to the eye. In Dutch, we use the word 'muizenissen' for brooding, pondering. It is known in various languages, including German: "Mausennester im Kopf haben". It then refers to a whole nest of mice. But this goes back to old folk beliefs that witches and demons nestle in the brain in the guise of small animals and cause psychic mischief there. In the case of Eefje Van den Brande, I would like to allow a play on words: not 'muizenissen', but 'dragonissen'. In her work, the dragons hug, embrace. I hope they may embrace you too, like the tentacles of a squid.

Joannes Késenne

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