

Nothing in excess

The idea underlying the series of exhibitions at Els Hanappe Underground, which presented the work of three female artists, Hayley Tompkins, Katja Strunz and Valerie Mannaerts, was not the ambition to articulate some overarching statement about “women’s art” - something to be cautioned against, and by all measures, virtually impossible nowadays. Rather, the aim of the three exhibitions was to generate an artistic confrontation between three women artists of the same generation, from different geographical locations, who all are asserting their own highly individual positions, and whose work refuses easy categorisation. Though all three artists are women, neither is particularly concerned with female “sensibility” or any ideas that homogenise women’s artwork on the basis of gender. Simply put, these exhibitions were conceived as a platform on which to discuss the art being made by young women artists today. By staging the exhibitions consecutively, the intention was to create the conditions that allow for a closer and more critical perception of the works of the artists in relationship to each other and to prompt associations between their works. A process such as this provides an interesting opportunity to consider an artist’s work outside the confines of the ‘solo’ show.

Hayley Tompkins’ small-scale, delicate watercolours sometimes look as though they might at any moment dissolve or fade away, so subtle is her handling, so sparse and minimal her language. They are executed quickly and may seem to possess a sense of spontaneity but, in fact, are the result of well-thought out, meaningful decisions. Conciseness, economy of means, and lightness of hand, are all characteristics of her work and Tompkins stays away from the unessential, the effusive as well as the obvious. Her

imagery, which references art history but also the daily and the inconsequential, is mostly abstract. Her working process consists primarily of small, suggestive and deliberately unspectacular gestures, which require close inspection, time and effort on the part of the viewer and, even then, defy facile interpretation. Whether it is an abstract composition in stripes or a seemingly chance arrangement of dots or marks, what is striking is Tompkins’ finesse and understatement, and the abstract lyrical quality that permeates her work. Though it is very difficult to pinpoint what these drawings are actually about - there is always an underlying elusiveness to almost everything she does - they are strangely evocative and enticing in that hard to decipher way. Tompkins uses drawing and watercolour, perhaps the most immediate forms of art making, in order to express states of mind. One could indeed say her work is a kind of ‘visual poetry’, a series of mental maps that do not try to explain a specific situation, often remaining mysterious and dense, but always challenging and open to interpretation.

Valerie Mannaerts’ drawings and photo-collages are also, in their own way, hermetic, esoteric and mysterious but with a penchant for the representational and a tendency to the bizarre, uncanny and, at times, the perverse. Most of her work is figurative and body-centric. Though the female form often recurs, Mannaerts’ work is not particularly concerned with feminist issues or gender politics but, like Tompkins, mostly with evoking states of mind and being. Her imagery is tinged with a dark, brooding Gothic sensibility and sense of Romantic angst or unease. There is often a theatrical, mannerist, wickedly playful, Halloween-like element, to be found

in her work, coupled with a characteristic, child-like malevolence. Her drawings and collages are populated by weird, often nightmarish figures, characters whose bodies or faces have been deformed, distorted, or transformed, by the addition of uncanny interventions with a surreal twist. Figures may often be faceless, their features cut out; bodies may be incomplete, fragmented; gender or identity may be confused. Mannaerts' iconography is ambiguous and layered, often contradictory, possessing on the one hand, a tenderness and child-like playfulness, on the other, a disquieting, sense of trauma or angst and an often-violent sub-text. In her work innocence and experience are thus interwoven. At the same time, Mannaerts poignantly explores the darker sides of beauty, fragility, sexuality. Though small in scale, her compositions are clearly articulated and visually striking. This, too, is an eye that looks inwards rather than outwards. Again, one will find no clear narrative but rather the suggestion of moods or states of being. Meaning remains suspended, dense and opaque, and that is precisely the intriguing quality in her work; that sense of the secretive, the undiscovered, and the hint of the thrilling, often dangerous promise of what is about to occur when one crosses the threshold. Katja Strunz, on the other hand, works in the domain of the three-dimensional and the physical. Her dynamic, angular, rhomboid sculptural reliefs appear as though they are ready to fly off the walls to which they are attached. Though at first sight, her work may seem to reference Minimal art, Strunz's sculptures possess nothing of that mechanical perfection, of those hard, resilient and cool surfaces but rather, bears signs of vulnerability, erosion, and imperfection. While her language is indeed minimal, rooted in geometric shapes and structures and a constructivist aesthetic, Strunz uses 'lesser', more lo-tech materials, such as objects found at flea markets or wood and metal. She then re-works, or rather brings back to life the remains of what already had some other function or life, and whose surfaces are often marked with the patina of time. Despite the initial impression of austerity that her sculptures make, upon closer inspection, they possess a distinctive tangibility, a subtle roughness that renders them altogether more sensual, more graspable, and more fallible. Works such as the wooden painted, jagged, thrusting, reliefs, which were on view at Els Hanappe Underground, are indeed concerned with process and form and with reinventing the possibilities of sculpture, but at the same time seem to intimate ideas that transcend the pure formal qualities of the work. While drawing on the tradition of Modernism, they also

hint at its drawbacks. At the same time, they seem to challenge the idea of utopian space or place, suggesting a more dystopian worldview. In Strunz' work there is always an implicit tension and suspension, between past and present, old and new, but also an allusion to the inevitable decay of art and life. Hayley Tompkins, Valerie Mannaerts and Katja Strunz have all managed to articulate their own meticulously personalised artistic visions, creating each in their distinct way, a self-contained world which does not reveal itself at first sight. Despite their obvious differences what they do share is an often esoteric, subtle yet intense approach to their art making that relies on suggestion, and is never obvious or transparent. Their work is, more-often-than-not, based on insinuation, or nuance and an introspective, subtle language where nothing appears to be in excess. Each artist articulates, in her own way, a sense of purism, precision, and formal cohesion and all are advocates of simplicity and conciseness in their practice. All steer clear of the hi-tech, the glossy, the hyper-optical, and the over-finished and instead favour a working method that is lo-tech and does not conceal the artist's hand. As a result, all the works, in one way or another, possess a characteristic tactile quality and are not averse to allowing imperfection. Mannaerts and Tompkins deliver their art as encoded messages that resonate with personal, subjective and universal experiences, while Strunz's work is more tied to the physical world and its surrounding space. All work shares an underlying hermetic quality that urges closer thought and resists facile reading. As women artists, they demonstrate their freedom to define themselves at will, beyond classifications of sex and gender. Indeed, there are no female or feminist stereotypes to be found here. Rather, their work demonstrates the polymorphous capacity of women artists to now assert their practice beyond any confining stereotypes. Above all, however, they testify to the fact that today some of the most interesting art is indeed being made by women artists.