

The theater of life as it is, Filip Luycckx

Published in catalog "Aim at the brood", Deweer Gallery, Otegem, Belgium (2006).

Installation by Enrique Marty

THE THEATRE OF LIFE AS IT IS

The Spanish painter Enrique Marty is better able than anyone else to expose the tragedy in the daily lives of ordinary people, and elevates it into art with a chastening effect. He is able to combine numerous extremes in a single installation. With his powers of synthesis, he never loses control over this mass of anecdotes, analyses and references. His exhibition, 'Aim at the Brood', at the Deweer Art Gallery in Otegem, was one of those gems of an international standard that was worth the diversion down the byways of Flanders.

On entering the exhibition area, the visitor is immediately faced with hundreds of paintings of various sizes that completely cover the four walls. This three-dimensional aspect is additionally underpinned by the portrait-figures dotted around the room. Rarely has the visitor seen so much human humiliation in one place. Each detail screams out for attention, while the overall picture has the dignity of a chapel. The visitor must at a certain moment dare to let go of this imposing whole in order to absorb the individual scenes and then to discover the connections (or paradoxes) with other paintings. Although each scene has the status of an independent work of art, they all derive a significant added value from the almost endless networks they form. Through this web of references we are briefly able to cherish the illusion that we are capable of unravelling the artist's storylines. However, he does not confirm whether the connections we find are the work of our own imagination or not. The references are of many kinds: recurring portraits, actions and environments, mental similarities, or even simply an object or texture that turns up sporadically. Spatially speaking, the ramifications are not limited to the surrounding panels but are related equally to the other walls. Wherever we look we come upon corresponding stories. We can compose numerous different subsets in our minds. This makes it hard to delineate fixed modules in the space. Each painting contains the starts of stories that expand when linked to other paintings. These links work only by suggestion; they are unfinished stones whose origin and further development are never revealed to the viewer.

Just like the street and the media, this installation overwhelms us with a huge number of faces, anecdotes and situations. We are in the midst of it, looking at other lives with a harsh eye, and are also watched by others in the same way. Faces, and every aspect of them, are the thread that runs through this exhibition space. They seem to have arrived on the painter's canvas by way of a television soap or photo album. A ramified soap in countless episodes is played out here before us. Or else we are leafing through a family album covering several generations. There is little space to maintain compassion, because we here recognize contemporary society to the full. They are more than just formal portraits. Marty combines psychological insight with a visionary view. It is the story of the man in the street that is being presented, and that means everyone. His first stage is to seek out affectedness, self-importance and eccentricity, which he then punctures. Vain endeavours turn out to be based on illusions. As a photographer, Marty makes rapid use of these moments of triumph, flaring violence and grotesque behaviour. The protagonists briefly loosen the bonds of their ordinary existence to pose for the camera, and are then catapulted back into their usual role. All the figures depicted associate with a role they would naturally assume, with no further questions about its origin or reason. Whether they have agreed to this or are burdened by it seems incidental in the face of the fact that each and every one is predestined to play a role. Education, circumstances and the limited package of information we obtain from the world define the self-image we constantly give to the outside world and in which we are reciprocally confirmed. The installation shows visually how man performs as a tragicomic joke in his own play and searches convulsively for assenting listeners. We only have a short time available, because the curtain will soon fall on our tragicomedy. The conditioning always turns out to be stronger than the time that remains to us to deviate fundamentally from the adopted role. Death looms around all the faces. This suggestion is encouraged by the idea of the short-lived pose for the photo album, in which Roland Barthes saw the notion of death already making its appearance. The transient nature of a television soap, symptomatic of a consumer-society, can only reinforce this. Hundreds of actors are just waiting to stand in for our role, so the show can be continued for many generations and episodes as a self-reproducing media machine. In addition, the dark, subdued colours and the direct painting style refer to the Spanish Baroque, never far from the notion of the vanitas. In its short-lived appearance, each portrait carries a story of past and future. The inevitable scars of the past cast all the shadows of a predictable dénouement forwards.

Marty's degrading analysis of the facts goes beyond his photographic starting point. In his case, the depiction of skin is also a psychological unravelment in which the whole of an individual's life is measured. In his typology, it is not only the eyes that occupy a prominent position, but also the nose and mouth, including the lips, tongue and teeth. It is usual to know the function of the eyes, but the deliberate accentuation of the nose, mouth and above all the oral cavity as psychological channels is quite unusual. In many of the paintings, the artist expands his mental penetration to the limbs, hands and feet, and naked torso. Most portraitists add a vision to the formal rendering of a face, even though they swear by highly realistic depiction in accordance with conventional ways of representation. They reveal the spirit of their protagonist, and on the basis of the picture enable us to sense something about the personality and background of their subject. We can imagine a few thoughts about the past and probable future of the person in question and from this learn something about their fellows who will never have their portrait painted. Enrique Marty employs the whole body, the movements and even the background as the psychological spokesperson for the subject portrayed. We can pick up intuitive information about the person we are looking at from every centimetre of canvas. Not only are we given an insight into a particular individual, but each fellow is also incorporated into the artist's overall view. Around every corner of the theatre of life man embraces his transitory role, a role that is overtaken by death. But this by no means signifies that the figures portrayed lose their identity. Each one's personal tragedy is taken utterly seriously. Empathy and understanding prevail. We see how each fellow watches fearfully over the sovereignty of his role and social territory. Universal theatre can exist only by grace of a wide range of roles. One wishes to distinguish oneself and stand out in one way or another. Those who fall out of the net of social success receive plentiful compensation in pubs, living rooms and care homes. It is precisely these unguarded moments of indulgence that Marty is particularly interested in. These are the vicissitudes of the man in the street that crop up once again in the television soap or the photo album. At the times when people think they are purely themselves, they are fulfilling to the full the role in life with which they identify. They put on an act for half-imaginary listeners. Who should actually play the part of the audience? Are poses not struck for a sort of omnipresent god who should, day in day out, be taking a close look at the quirks of our lives? Family, friends and acquaintances ultimately alternate with each other and take turns to die. Who keeps a close watch on our lives? Why put so much effort into putting on this act for the outside world? After all, in the eyes of the spectators we are only playing one of the minor roles in the theatre landscape. We simply want someone or something that constantly keeps an eye on us, pays us attention and stores us in an external memory. Has this not been a constant need throughout history? Are photography, television and surveillance cameras not gradually taking over the task from this all-embracing memory? It was likewise with painting, and the illusion of its short-lived suggestion that every moment might be captured perfectly in paint. It was mainly the direct way of painting found in the Baroque, Romanticism, Impressionism and Expressionism that were able to give occasion for this. (Marty's pictures constantly evoke memories of a mixture of these pictorial periods.) Looking at that one perfect scene creates the illusion that every fragment of time can be caught in a perfect image. Is it not here that the ultimate reassurance is to be found: that we leave traces everywhere which may one day be able to be reconstructed? Isn't this the great illusion held by actors anxiously in search of an audience? That the imminent subsidence into oblivion becomes an illusion of power when we watch and judge others from a comfortable position. The identification with recognisable theatre and television characters briefly shifts the fear of fundamental solitude into the background. Marty puts the spectator into a position comparable to the television viewer, but then turns the tables. The distinction between viewer and viewed blurs. The question of forgetting is taken to extremes instead of temporarily anaesthetising it as on television.

Sets and props are an inseparable part of every theatre. Across the range of Marty's paintings the protagonists appear in the surroundings that typify them. Some lives become intimately entangled with an infusion or a wheelchair. People's preference for flowery wallpaper or a graffiti motif as their setting provides information about their lifestyle. Other figures are so much associated with their kitchen, sofa or hospital bed that no further comment is necessary. Yet others find their biotope in the public space of an airport, a park or a swimming pool. The empty settings in which people leave their traces also tell a story. The psychological excavation in the faces extends into the surroundings, which are both the coproducers and the product of human roles. The location is the real life of every day. In Marty's hands the faces degenerate into a grimace of what they feign. Anyone who wants to obtain a place on stage risks being made to look a fool in public. In the place where we want to show ourselves off to an omnipresent god, we become the butt of the mockery of rival onlookers. All attempts to obscure the view of the soul transform into the opposite. Posing and unmasking go hand in hand. Putting on a mask or sunglasses reveals more than it conceals. In Marty's work every face bears the traces of both a past history and the way they are seen by the people around them. So, his analytical view not only delves into people's insides, but also shows how their facades are moulded. We help build people's images to the extent that we expect role-playing from them. Each of us determines how the rehearsals for future role-playing will be. The spectator imitates the actors, who in their turn endeavour to please us. Like children we are forced onto the stage in a play that has already started. We help determine the programme in institutions, living rooms and cafés. We also end up in performances whose rehearsals have taken place with no reference to ourselves. They are the product of the collective responsibility. The way people are presented on a stage, on the television and in art has an after-effect on behaviour patterns. Television soaps are inspired by reality. In their turn, the viewers imitate what they see in the media. An element of interpretation is added at every stage – analogous to a play which, in the hands of another director, other actors and in another time and place will deviate from its original connotations. A reconstruction is never the original, but it is thoroughly moulded by it.

At the same time, Marty also brings out the unsavoury aspects of existence. His paintings swarm with characters from the seamy side of society, failures and clinical cases who unhesitatingly mingle with the rest of humanity. These are people whom the artist knows intimately, seeks out or meets by chance. In his view, it is hard to draw a line between the regular world and its underbelly. At some point in their lives, every individual behaves in a way that can be called eccentric, has a potential for irrationality and, under pressure from unforeseen circumstances, may end up on the fringes of society. Who is to say whether the person we see in the painting is a marginal figure or someone quite reasonable, just letting themselves go to amuse their friends? Where is the narrow line between soap and tragedy? It may be theatre, but it is deadly serious. Marty does not try to avoid illness, drunkenness, violence and self-mutilation. Naked bodies display their physical and psychological wounds. People start raving and lose the thread of cold reality. They fall prey to an epileptic fit. They become obsessed with violence and often harm themselves most. The ugliness of the body is shown frequently: swollen bellies, wounds torn open and such distasteful excretions as pus, phlegm, saliva, blood and sweat. However, even when reduced to flesh and blood, man stubbornly persists in his role-playing. The body bears the scars of injuries sustained throughout a life. In one painting we see someone's back being written on, in another writing in blood on someone's forehead. A child wears a shirt covered in writing. People sign their names on each other. The body becomes the bearer of and surface on which life stories are written. In addition to a stigmatisation of the past, this also implies warding off future calamity. It acts simultaneously as stigma and talisman. The extreme experience of physicality can accompany mystical transmission. Isn't stigmatisation a form of mystical self-mutilation? The display of wounds may be followed by catharsis, and great flights of mysticism by a lapse into physicality. The individual paintings present harrowing scenes, but the overall view has a chastening effect. They are not all suffering and misery. When so many characters are exposed, their life-force and sense of friendship also come to the surface. Powerless as they are, they still try to make the best of each situation. A group of four male figures in pyjamas and socks are covered in blood stains and bandages and have holes in their heads. They nevertheless valiantly look to the future and take care of a child. This accumulation of so much misery evokes in the viewer a respect for their fate. In this play our role will always just be thrown into our lap. When there are no longer any secrets, we need no longer hide our misery from anyone. On the contrary, we can chasten each other. The shock of the broad view puts one's own and one's neighbour's misery into perspective. In the face of time and art every role becomes equal. Marty integrates prominent people into the mass of normal people, while together they are all part of the same aesthetic movement and counter-movement.

Marty's virtuosity plays a part both in each individual panel and in their assembly in an installation. In pictorial terms, he employs abundant visual options that refer to various classical and pre-modern periods. Apart from Tintoretto and the Spanish Baroque (El Greco, Velazquez, Zurbaran, Munillo), we also sense the after-effect of painters who later carried on in the same direction, such as Goya and Manet. Marty's direct painting style would be inconceivable if there had been no Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Courbet, Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec, to name but three examples. And such pre-Expressionists as Lovis Corinth, Max Liebermann and Edvard Munch in particular reverberate in certain portrayals. Then again, the grotesque scenes and the bodily fluids can be linked to Mike Kelly and Paul McCarthy. It should be emphasised that these paintings would be unthinkable without the contribution of popular photography and the existence of television. Their direct painting style is as indebted to snapshots and film's 24 images per second as to the painting tradition. The legacy of the Baroque plays a significant part,

but it is mainly the Spanish variant, in which the emphasis is on the mystical experience and genuine realism. Subdued colours and shadows dominate. We are a long way from the pomp and circumstance of Italian and Flemish baroque. What is more, we should not be misled by the religious content of many 17th-century paintings. Once you cease to take the subject literally, it is precisely in this religious art that a wider range of life experiences waits to be discovered. Kings, plague, executions, philanthropy, maternal love and mystical experiences all formed an integral part of the reality of the era. The painters picked their models up on the street. In the Bible and the veneration of the saints they found sufficient alibi for the inclusion of the most varied subjects. A secular interpretation of religious painting substantially expands its importance. Elements taken from it can be transferred to the totally different context of contemporary art. We come upon such universal themes as suffering and ecstasy, humiliation and purification. Marty secularises the entire historical legacy of the Baroque by switching over to everyday life. This is his counter-movement against aesthetics. Anyone who examines the scenes one by one will encounter an agony of suffering and impotence. In advertising and the media we are fed a false image of perfectly formed models whose rational behaviour no one can equal. Marty portrays the irrationality of mutilated people. But the picture is anything but unequivocally harrowing. It also pays tribute to the unlucky ones who, with the courage born out of despair, still try to make something of their lives. The aesthetic side of the installation sees to it that the analyses do not become sensational, obscene or humiliating. The chastening effect comes to the fore.

Even after an analysis of its various aspects, Marty's work remains stubbornly individual. He operates in the border area between various poles and anti-poles. His paradoxical attitude means that the spectator is confronted with everything at the same time. The analysis of one single aspect soon leads to the neglect of other, equally important aspects. The depiction of the fleeting moment is countered by the historical range. The highly personal anecdotes that form the basis of the photos are given a universal dimension. It no longer matters who is portrayed, since the effect of their recognizability lasts through time and space. The characteristic legacy of Spain has long had its universality, but here becomes mixed with outside influences. Art history, here taken off its pedestal, goes hand in hand with the celebration of popular culture. We stare at painting, but theatre, photography and television never seem far away. It is even less possible to draw a clear line dividing what is real and what is invented. Ordinary people are constantly doing their act as best they can, and there are no fills to be seen here. Where does the stage production end and where does it become deadly serious? Where do we draw the line between carnivalesque spectacle and real violence? Every product of the imagination influences reality but can never be entirely outside it.

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