

# BENITI CORNELIS

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A medicine man in Malines

'I'm not an apostel, I have no message', says the Mechelen-born painter and graphic artist Beniti Cornelis (b. 1946); 'My greatest wish is that the art-lover will be moved by the relationship of forms and colours in my work.' And, 'Words are not my language. I seldom give my paintings a title.' The work of Cornelis is at once recognizable. In the middle, earth-colours and graphic elements predominate; around this is a quieter zone. The lyrical quality of colour is approached, delimited, cleaved, and each time made more intensely alive through a repeated use of the graphic intervention. Tension and contrasts between the colours are restrained; they shimmer and flow with the musical mystery of water.

'You might be surprised to hear', Cornelis says, 'that one of the painters I most admire is Klimt, for his use of colour.'

Cornelis considers painting as a search for equilibrium between the graphic and the painterly: 'I have the impression that the two reinforce each other, and that they lend more coherence to the whole. That's why I constantly try to set them in harmony with one another.'

'For me, painting is a ritual occurrence. I have only one concern: how and in what way will the various flecks of colour incorporate with each other, or how they resist each other and, thus, myself - for I'm the one that sees it.' In an interview Cornelis has stated that in his eyes it is not the finished work, but rather the process of creation leading to it that is 'art'.

Beniti Cornelis trained at the Academy in Mechelen. During the 1970's he painted 'metaphysical', and later 'hyper-realistic' canvases. He then came to see a 'lie' in this perspective: 'It's nonsense to represent three dimensions on a plane that has only two'. For a year-and-a-half, Cornelis made children's drawings in order to regain an uninhibited vision. From 1980 on, he starts painting in a completely different way.

The making of a film about his work brought Cornelis to reflect upon the sources of his art. He discovered these layers in his youth. Already as a child, Cornelis was fascinated by the arrangement of everyday objects and the 'structure' so created. Schoolroom didactic plates illustrating the development of beetles and insects much impressed his imagination. These beetles were to pop up again in his paintings.

'My point was not illustrate beetles. They are graphic element in my work. Signs. They form part of my vocabulary. I don't represent reality, I find my images there. Reality - that's found graphics. From that I make a lyrical translation. Creativity is the reorganization of material gathered through intuition.' For years the beetles lay dormant in a convolution of Cornelis' brain. They - as all memory - come to be distorted, until 'surfacing' one day in a painting, in itself a further distortion. The wish is only father to the deed, like memory is only father to the image. In the image's realization, playing each its role are hand, eye, and intention.

Cornelis was struck by new visual influences. For instance, noticing the particular way that a truck's tarpaulin-cover was attached, brought him to use lines, which he had first crossed out, as an element adopted in his canvases. 'Many constituents came to my works this way. Things that struck me - also because at that moment I saw them, I heard or smelt something, or because it caused me to recall an earlier impression. Such interferences are small explosions in your head; things fall together and suddenly show some unexpected connection.'

For Cornelis art is not geometry, but rather a dialectical process, where emotion and reason, technique and temperament, all mutually interact. The painter creates an inventory of sunken memories, listens to associations in his head. Cornelis literally gives form to his feel for life: how he, in his inalienably

own way, experiences himself in the world. This is (still) no science, even no philosophy. But it is more than passive experience. Here, between analysis and a sense of incomprehension, is situated the rich terrain that art can uniquely explore. Cornelis is not a conceptual artist, but he is also no 'real' expressionist. His method is too subtle and too complicated to speak of pure expression. Cornelis himself says: 'lyrical translation'.

Cornelis makes silk-screen prints, often of large format. 'You can pull a black line on a white sheet of paper or you can print two white surfaces on a black sheet, where you leave some black in between. In both cases the result is a black line. The difference lies in the power with which that line meets the eye. That's graphic art.' Cornelis' graphic art nourishes his painting, and vice versa. He doesn't use graphic means in order to reproduce his canvases. Usually, he concludes a particular period of his painting with a series of prints that forms a synthesis. His prints are autonomous works of art. Cornelis prints them himself - and a single print may have sixteen or more runs through the press.

'There are repetitive elements in my work', says Beniti Cornelis. 'It's a history in images. I master the forms that I experimented with in earlier work. I re-use and reorganize them intuitively. Each painting is the 'mother' of one or more that follow: they flow from one another. With each canvas, new insights and possibilities bubble to the surface. You could call it a story in serial form, an autobiography. The recurring elements are symbols - the bundling of emotions.'

In 1982, Cornelis' children unearthed an old, rusty toy-revolver in the garden. This form grew into a source of inspiration, and is seen in several paintings. Cornelis also 'investigated' reminiscences of rock-drawings. The triangles with which he experimented in 1985, were more slender, more decorative forms, which he named 'scepters'. Opposing painting-on-the-wall brought Cornelis to works consisting of a painting and an object, like a painted stick; that belongs to it and is placed somewhere else in the room. 'The space between the two comprises a part of the work. I always have trouble with limitations.' In 1995 Cornelis made work with 'installation allures'. He placed paintings on pedestals which formed an integral part of the work. Irony is not far off.

One day Cornelis saw someone pull his wallet out. On the wallet was a sticker. This was a bit shifted from its original spot, but you could still make out the original outline from the traces of glue left behind. In Cornelis' work twin-forms appear. The image in front is like an upper-layer to the other, the image behind is loosened and shifted. Or the form in back is a cut-away blank, wherein the front form, if one could capture it, would seem to fit.

On recent canvases we are presented with handles, props and wedges. A wedge is a small instrument with which one can accomplish much. Splitting trees, for instance. A wedge stands for: disruption, displacement.' I think that these elements say something about my urge to intervene in my work, in my plastic world. To intervene, tout court.'

Tools, and the operations they are used to carry out, remain obsessions for Cornelis. In a ceramics class he saw a pot - pot-forms turn up in his work (they flow forth from triangles, tents, torches, scepters, shards, etc.). At first the pot did not much inspire him, though the idea of the relationship of container to contents was dear to him. Then he noticed that in the pot stood the tools used to fashion it. The artist photographed these, also for their graphic rhythmicity, and used the photo in a painting with a potform.

Since 1996 Cornelis works with photos which he cuts into pieces, employing them as graphic elements in his paintings. The gray-scale of the barite-photographs comprise a new, surprising element. The same can also be said for the forms he introduces here. One and the other go together with an austere and imposed disposition. From a purely painting point of view, Cornelis is also treading new paths. Since 1997, the colour bordeaux has been appearing in his work. For him, this colour symbolizes the sacred. He bestows this with autonomy by applying it to small surfaces which are hung next to a larger canvas. This process extends the painting and sets a self-willed rhetoric into motion. The works where the artist uses photos, show the same tendency of becoming broader, even serial. They connect with the painting with panels, but also with the installation and the environment.