

# The Discovery of the Horizon

The greenhouse was my first studio. That warmth, that snug security. My family worked in horticulture and floriculture. It was in those greenhouses that I spent my youth. Ingelmunster, in southern West Flanders, where I was born and bred, was my home for eighteen years. I lived there with my parents, three brothers and one sister.

My first drawings date from when I was three. Many of them have been kept by my parents. In them you see the skiers in Garmisch-Partenkirchen I saw on television on New Year's day. A little later, when I could read, I translated *The Lion of Flanders*, Hendrik Conscience's historical novel about the Battle of the Golden Spurs, into a cartoon. I also loved the medieval chanson de geste of *Karel ende Elegast* (Charles and Elegast, about Charlemagne). Chivalric life appealed to me. Later my interest expanded to include Greek, Roman and Norse mythologies. Myths are the stories of the origin, when people and animals were one; this has always intrigued me. I remember that we bought *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, in nineteenth-century spelling, from an antiquarian in Antwerp. I wrote a summary of some fifty pages and drew historical tableaux full of armoured heroes with plumed helmets.

My interest in literature I inherited from my father – a well-read man, portrait painter and bee-keeper. He combined nature and culture with a profound philosophical interest in life. He was a real DIY man, member of the local artists' circle and a subscriber to the Flemish national heritage journal *Openbaar Kunstbezit Vlaanderen*. He had made his own easel. At some point in the 1950s he managed to get hold of enormous pots of pigment, which he used them to make huge tubes of paint. He still uses them today. He taught me the alchemy of the painter's studio.

As a student in Ghent I began a second life. Although I would dearly have loved to go to art school, my parents wanted me to read art history at university. I learned life drawing at evening classes, but that was of

scant comfort. My graduation thesis was on David Hockney. As part of my research I spent a month in London where I learned about the vicissitudes of the gallery world. I never met Hockney himself, but we did correspond. Some people find his work too easy, but I still get a kick from it. Difficult or easy are not terms that apply to art. Art is like love. It's not about knowledge or reflection, but intuitive understanding. Matisse gives me the same feeling.

I began to paint professionally after I graduated at the beginning of the eighties. I wanted to prove myself, to resist the petit bourgeois reflex that you couldn't survive as a fulltime artist. It was a really good time for artists. In Germany there was the Neo-Expressionist movement with the *Neue Wilde*. We didn't allow ourselves to be led by critics or curators. We made uninhibited, new art. The bigger the better. We were soon invited for exhibitions in New York and Washington. It was the yuppie era. The atmosphere was extraordinary, the friendships affectionate. Even if everyone had different styles and temperaments, we exhibited together and that generated a massive impetus.

Through the *Neue Wilde*, a couple of art prizes and an exhibition in the Ghent Museum of Contemporary Art I came into contact with Mark Deweer, who became my dealer and introduced me to the art circuit. I was lucky. A dream path like that is not granted to everyone.

At the end of the eighties I wanted to go back to basics. At that time I read Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, a wonderful book that influenced me greatly, but unfortunately in a negative way. What struck me most was the theory of the breakthrough: the more mathematically you give shape to something, the stronger the flames of emotion kindled in the creation. The theory related to music in the first place. I am not a great expert on music, but Mann had me in his spell and I tried to represent this theory in my work. Through that book I began to work more abstractly in ensembles, triptychs and on a monumental scale. I used different materials, began to work in a more alchemical, constructivist and mathematical way. What vanished, however, was my emotional

involvement: I had stopped loving my own work. As a consequence I had to accept the fact that I am unable to paint from theory. Or, as Goethe put it, 'Observation is far more intense than reflection.'

In 1997, my uncle, the gardener I spent my childhood with, died. It was to become a crucial year for me. His death and the emotions that came with it had a Proustian effect on me. Through this experience I returned to figuration and began to paint the first gardens from memory.

1997 was also the year in which I happened to end up in Dungeness on the south coast of England. The filmmaker Derek Jarman, one of the most famous victims of AIDS in England, built a garden there where he spent the last few years of his life. This surreal location is comparable in atmosphere to Doel near Antwerp: twentieth-century industrialization on a salty plane scattered with indestructible poppies. Jarman had bought a fisherman's hut on the Kent coast and built a garden around it, set among innumerable, colourful fishing boats and two lighthouses, the old and the new one. The symbolism of a dying man living in a joyful garden on a piece of infertile silt ground moved me deeply. This is where I discovered the horizon. It seems banal, but for the artist in me, the horizon line was an important revelation. Going towards the horizon became for me the symbol of Romanticism in nature and of Realism in painting. This was the beginning of the third period in my work.

I work like a racing cyclist. Some periods in the year I am in top form, at other times I have to battle with deep slumps, but the cogs keep on turning. Once I'm working I am highly disciplined. I work all day long on four or five canvases at a time.

I usually begin in my old, accustomed way with rough brushes and numerous layers until a colour plane emerges. I then add clearly defined lines, usually with white paint, to the coloured ground. I have two chairs from which to view my work. One close by, the other at a distance. I never used to sit on the furthest, but I do so increasingly often these days. Sometimes I sit there just for a moment, sometimes for an hour or two, looking at the work and completing it with my eyes.

I use all colours but I have particular preferences within each hue: among the greens I love moss green and sap green most, tints that are close to nature. Among the yellows I love lemon and orange is one of my favourite colours of all. Orange is abstract and has a mystical aura. The orange, for instance, is the symbol of paradise in Matisse's work.

Painting is a solitary activity. Moreover, my studio is completely shut off from the world. I have my mechanisms to get going: music and books. I listen to Bach and Mozart to relax after I've finished, but during the act of painting I prefer to put on pop music for its rousing rhythms. Everything I like to listen to is here. Sometimes I feel like listening to the complete recordings of Van Morrison, Bob Dylan or David Sylvian. That can take two or three days.

Before I begin to paint I usually read for an hour or so. Call it my journey in the traffic jam on my way to work. I need literature to concentrate, to feel harmony. Sometimes it influences my work too. My taste is extremely eclectic. I don't just read great works by Kafka or Céline, but also thrillers and contemporary literature like Donna Tartt or the encyclopaedic novels of Thomas Pynchon. I have also been a fervent fan of Tolkien since my youth.

I read and reread. I have read everything by Samuel Beckett. The theme of the walker and the evocation of nature in his work has influenced me greatly. Even though he has the reputation of being a pessimistic Existentialist, for me he is primarily a sensuous writer who allows the atmosphere of the Irish landscape to seep through his books. His absurdist play *Waiting for Godot* was inspired by a painting by Caspar David Friedrich, who has been my favourite painter for several years. Beckett must have seen his work in around 1930 in Hamburg. A strange coincidence that such an Existentialist as Beckett should be inspired by a Romantic like Friedrich. Friedrich's two figures beside a tree contemplating the moon has become the epitome of Godot and twentieth-century humankind. A couple of years ago a friend told me that the atmosphere in my work reminded him of the films of Andrei Tarkovsky. That fascinated

me, so I went in search of work by this Russian filmmaker. He is famous for making films that are hard to penetrate and in which the characters go in search of the meaning of their lives or spiritual understanding. His work is marked by highly poetic artistic direction, full of symbolism and metaphor, and a singular style of filming and editing. His most famous film is *Andrei Rublev*, a three-hour epic based on the life of a Russian icon painter entirely consisting of tableaux. I remember the first time I saw it during the film afternoons at school. I was fourteen and didn't get any of it. Now, so many years later, it is one of my favourite films. The dream scene in *Stalker*, another Tarkovsky film, has made a deep impression on me. It features a mythological-type figure who guides two people through a deserted area, the 'Zone'. At a certain point the figure lies down in the water and is approached, in slow motion, by a black dog. This riveting image merged in my mind with my earliest childhood memory of the painting *St Jerome in the Desert* in the Ghent Museum of Fine Arts. In that picture St Jerome is lying in prayer while a vision is revealed to him. The painter's attribute, the lion, has turned out rather small, which is hardly surprising for it is unlikely that Bosch had ever seen one. I turned the animal into a dog. The merging of the film scene with the painting led to my exhibition 'Stalking Hieronymus'.

I use anything that interests me, consciously or unconsciously. You build up your personality through the things that grip you. Van Gogh had to travel to Provence to see the things he wanted to paint. Now Provence comes to us in films, books, documentaries or the Internet. Apart from these sources I also take digital photos which I rework on the computer – great fun – and sometimes use for my paintings.

I often go away to walk. Nomadic travelling is a release from the sedentary life of the studio. Walking is personal expansion in the direction of the horizon. You discover the world between you and it. In my studio I try to internalize the world. Compare it with a Viewmaster. You shut yourself off from the outside world in order to look inside, but at the same time you look into the distance. Walking is like that too. Walking is

movement, being at one with yourself and the outside world. Wales, Scotland, Cornwall, Ireland – these are all wonderful landscapes to walk in. I love the British expression ‘the re-enchantment of the world.’ This is what I experience when I’m out walking.

I am lucky, I don’t have to walk alone. My wife is my companion, my conversation partner and my primary critic. I trust her judgement. She follows my work from its inception to its completion. We have an intense working relationship. She also takes care of the business side of my life and that brings me peace. I have colleagues whose creativity suffers because they ignore the business side of things, or don’t take care of them properly. I don’t want to go through that. Let me just go on working the way I am.

Our two children have now left home and I can once again do what I like. I dream of painting mountains. That’s something I have never done. So now we are going to explore mountains. For two years I’ve been looking for a mountain greenhouse, but I haven’t found one yet. It keeps me busy. Searching, giving the sensuous shape in my studio. My paintings determine where I travel to or whom I want to see. I find it much more interesting to paint my own daughter than to want to say something about women in general. I’ve learned that particular lesson. The reflexive approach goes by the board. Some curators and critics in today’s art world think the reflexive approach is very important, I don’t at all. You reach the core of being better through selfless – disinterested – observation than reflection. In that sense I feel much better now, happier.

I turn fifty this year, but my drive is greater than ever. Thomas Mann wrote every day, but complained that he had no life. Many artists I know can see themselves in this. The advantage I have is that I use my life in my work. I live to work and that makes me feel good.

Friedl’ Lesage

*January 2007*