

Raouel De Keyser: Less Is More

A retrospective at S.M.A.K., Ghent, explores the origins of the artist's reduced visual language



It's been ten years since Raphael Rubinstein's essay 'Provisional Painting' (2009) defined a long-smouldering painterly ethos. Depending on your sympathies, this style of dislocated and often hesitant brush-marks, deployed without concern for any recognizable standard of composition, represented either an incongruous punk-asceticism or a cynical daubing in the sad residue of painting. Within the diversifying landscape of contemporary art, painting seemed of its authority, but Rubinstein's articulation of a 'tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling' aesthetic suggested a way to keep touching brush to canvas while eliding the medium's conservatism. In the intervening years, memory of this approach and its spirit has become muddied. A kind of mannered, off-handed painting – variously derided as 'crapstraction' or 'zombie formalism' – took over, its conveyor-belt production fed by the blue-chip market.



Raoul De Keyser, 'Oeuvre', 2018, exhibition view. Courtesy: S.M.A.K., Ghent; photograph: Dirk Pauwels

Hence the pertinence of Raoul De Keyser's retrospective, 'Oeuvre'. The late Belgian painter was Rubinstein's opening case study, and S.M.A.K.'s capacious presentation – spanning 1964 to the artist's death in 2012 – reminds us what the painting that inspired the essay really felt like. From the vantage point of 2018, De Keyser's concerns – the painterly flickering between flatness and depth; the elusive presence of the grid; the flowing of cracks and shadows – might seem familiar. But here, through the deceptive texture of De Keyser's project, it is affect that sounds, with moments of perceptible strangeness jarring like pitch changes or unexpected turns of phrase.

This reduced language has vibrant origins. Many works from the late 1960s and '70s see canvases wrapped around stretchers and slim rectangular boxes and painted in opaque arrangements of green, yellow, blue and black. De Keyser's inspiration for these pieces – *Homage to Brusselmans* (1969–70), for example – was a football pitch, visible through the artist's window, which he transmuted through a slightly depressive interpretation of pop painting. At points, this self-referential approach risks navel-gazing. In another room dedicated to De Keyser's early works, many green and black paintings, gridded or overlaid with white stripes, read like a pensive breath – more for him than us. But, invariably, the mark-making and palette loosen up and diligent improvisation reigns. One floating crescendo of small canvases echo our stained, ripped, blotted visual reality. *Z.T.* (2012) is a thin drag of red paint on diluted white, descending from a protruding nail; *Overflow* (2012) is a rough yellow and green grid inscribed in chalky pink, like a game of tic-tac-toe lingering on a pavement.



Raoul De Keyser, *Grenier 14*, 1992, oil on canvas, 82 × 67 cm. Courtesy: Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp & David Zwirner, New York / London / Hong Kong © Family Raoul De Keyser | SABAM Belgium 2018; photograph: Dirk Pauwels

As De Keyser gets older, a psychedelic melancholia sets in, articulating a way of seeing the world that has less to do with signs, symbols and scenes than with the elusive colours and aspects which comprise them. In *Replay* (2002), raspberry and peppermint jots fall upon a translucent white ground. A long, string-like orange brush-stroke frames these notes, but is also transformed by them: from a functional, drafted outline into a container for curiously beautiful scraps. In *Grenier 14* (1992), emerald boughs set within a pink fog collapse into an arcane neurological schematic. Canvas after canvas house similarly uncanny shapes made from discreet, looping and faltering lines, as if suspended in peripheral vision.

An accompanying text states that De Keyser liked to paint a *Monkey Puzzle* tree near his Deinze studio. I'm sure he did. But, with the exception of a smattering of drawings depicting landscapes or architectural spaces, his interpretive translations always scramble the semiotic link. In one room, false walls have been constructed from unpainted Gyprock and an exposed wooden framework, forming a kind of stage for many canvases hung and leant in a staggering rhythm. Designed by Belgian architects Robbrecht en Daem, the structure mediates between the quivering 'just-enough-ness' of De Keyser's paintings and the looming 'fixed-ness' of the host museum. And, while obvious, it is a strategy that works, highlighting the latent counter-institutional potential of this careful erosion of seeing.

Raouel De Keyser, 'Oeuvre' runs at S.M.A.K., Ghent, until 27 January 2018.