

## A NATURAL ELEGANCE

By Mischa Andriessen

According to the French writer Guy de Maupassant, elegance is the art of doing everything slightly differently, while giving the impression you are doing everything exactly like everyone else.

Cathalijn Wouters' work is elegant. First of all, because of her brush lines. In their refined gracefulness these sometimes almost become Eastern calligraphy. However, her work is equally elegant in how she tentatively explores her own place in art history. She doesn't react against things. And she certainly doesn't gratuitously imitate either. In referring to, for example, Henry Matisse or Pablo Picasso, she doesn't simply borrow from them, but bravely relates herself to their work. By diverging her influences, Wouters reveals completely who she is. Like framed photographs on the mantelpiece reveal lineage.

In her most recent paintings, the artist's studio takes central stage. It's a remarkable subject. All studios look alike. All studios are different, in their own way. This is because the studio space is pre-eminently ambiguous. On the one hand it is a place where the artist withdraws from the world, where she closes the door to its restless confusion and throws herself back on the most essential and frankly only thing at her disposal: her technique and her personality.

On the other hand, the studio is like a fox-hole, a hidden bivouac from where the artist can meticulously observe what is going on in the world. The windows of the workspace become a magnifying glass. In fact, they shrink the artist's view but at the same time this concentrated focus enhances and intensifies her look.

Wouters' canvases are prime examples of this. Either consciously or not, much of the environment of her studio ends up in her work. In some paintings, stylishly curved lines remind one of the beautiful tree in the inner courtyard she looks out on. Other paintings show colourful but erratic patterns that are strongly reminiscent of the picturesque jumble of alleys, streets, and waters in the neighbourhood of her studio. Together with the above-mentioned quotes from the work of the great, world famous painters they provide a view of what Wouters is concerned with and what also defines her, in a way.

However, that is not the whole story.

No matter how much from the visible and tangible world wafts into her work, Wouters' paintings are, in at least equally important measure, about what is not visible or tangible – feelings, thoughts, longings. Here too, something ambiguous comes to light. In one of her latest paintings a woman looks

at an entangled couple on a table. As the largest figure of the pair is quite reminiscent of a work by Henri Matisse, the woman is probably looking at a reproduction. In this way, Wouters nicely enhances the ambiguity. The longing in the work is evident, but what is this longing aimed at? At the eroticism of the couple and therefore at what is depicted? Or at the sensuality of the forms and therefore at how the couple is depicted? Whatever the woman is looking at, she is probably 'looking' Dutch courage. The courage to take a step herself.

Whether this courage concerns amorous or artistic longing is of little relevance in the end. Probably, the longing of the onlooking woman is aimed at both at the same time. But perhaps (and this view in no way excludes the other) the woman simply sees in the canvas exactly what we as beholders see too: the intimacy of two lovers. This does not make what we see any less ambiguous: do we see a memory or a wish? Are we witnessing something personal that is being cherished or, on the contrary, something of someone else that is envied?

Exactly this brings us to the most remarkable aspect of Wouters' work: it's great honesty.

Wouters' work provides a frank view of what has shaped her and is still shaping her; of what inspires and drives her. This openly confessed respect for what is valuable in the past is however another source of duplicity: how does an artist who takes up such a modest position with regard to her examples still gain a place close to them?

This intriguing paradox is claiming ever more space and attention in Wouters' work. Work that becomes more diffuse, more charged with tension. One characteristic aspect is that in many of the canvases a work table literally takes central stage. Around it, all sorts of things are happening: the beholder sees small portraits here and there, still lifes, worlds in themselves, which, in the wider context of the painting, suddenly relate to each other.

The beholder also sees patterns derived from architecture or from the natural surroundings. And beautiful colour patches in the background. These are often pastel colours that acquire a powder-like fragility on the linen underneath. This at once tender and colourful combination characterises Wouters as the artist she currently is. Someone who is searching, who is gathering courage, is increasingly tasting freedom, the longing to go where others have gone before, but where she has not yet been. This mental space is won on those who preceded her as well as on herself. She does so with modest flair and openly, displaying to everyone what characterises her deeply: an elegance that is for Cathalijn Wouters hard-won, but also, all things considered, in essence completely natural for her.