

Between the lines of Eliza Pepermans

'Drawing is still basically the same as it has been since prehistoric times. It brings together man and the world. It lives through magic.' Keith Haring

"It's not about the lobsters," Eliza Pepermans points to a scene that, bathed in muted colours and with thick lines, dishes up two oversized specimens of this surrealist mascot (Dinner is served, 2021). For Pepermans, it is not the extravagance, sensual insinuation, or astrological allusion of the armoured animal with its sharp claws that fill the plate, but a deep fascination with form. She voraciously ruminates the abundance of edges, surfaces, boundaries, and lines that we continuously collide with. With childlike imagination, Eliza greets the things in the morning in her inexhaustible attempt at spatial planning. Seemingly uninhibited, she unleashes her imagination on the ever-evolving geometry of everyday life. However, the artists Giorgio Morandi and Salvador Dali will join us at the table. And they are just the first guests at this generous binge.

It should not be surprising that behind the oil on canvas is a gifted draftsman. Paper and pencil, marker, charcoal, or other affordable and quick-to-grab materials have been challenging artist to display freedom and experiment for centuries. Drawing, and certainly sketching, asks questions. It is curious and playful. It is an intimate gesture that straightforward feels and experiences. Paul Klee described a drawing as 'simply a line going for a walk'. Pepermans is taking lines for a walk daily. Sometimes they are the thick contours of a colouring book, other times they shade wafer-thin. Sometimes the line takes an invisible road and tiles become surfaces grouted with empty space. The lines can radiate, dam, and intertwine into fringes. They enlarge, expand, and fade away. They curve until the perspective precariously balances. They dance and cut in their inspired pursuit to embrace all things into a whole. In both drawing and painting they reveal that sketching is Pepermans fundamental way of connecting with the world around her. With a background in illustration, drawing serves as her first great love that can never be completely forgotten. Klee emphasizes that a drawing does not reproduce what we see, rather, it makes us look. The draftsman is the ultimate observer. According to Matt Groening, the father of The Simpsons, the passion is born when you're bored in the back of a classroom and a drawing of the teacher pops up in the margins of a book. Drawing is a spontaneous expression that helps you discover what you really want to say. Edgard Degas compares it to a species of writing that reveals, better than does painting, the true personality of the artist.

Pepermans' artistic language unmistakably has authentic graphic power. It is surprising that through her extensive formal and technical research, all that groping and tilting, she emerges as a true graphologist. In her interplay of lines, a range of knowledge of artists' handwriting can be read. The colour palette: bright yellow like Vincent Van Gogh or saturated grey like Morandi; David Hockney's tablecloth, Paul Cézanne's fruit bowl and the movement of Henri Matisse's dancers, they are just the most obvious examples of the avalanche of associations that appear. The still lifes unfold like archaeological excavations of art history. The choice for that classical genre is neither naive nor without obligation. The cheerfully laid tables and flower vases, like in a typical pronkstilleven, expose the guests who came by. Their fingerprints settle in shape, technique, perspective, and colour. While having fun, they leave behind paint brushes, wall clocks, oil lamps, skulls, and palettes. Long-gone objects that inevitably recall metaphors. Pepermans does not resuscitate their forgotten symbolism. She uses the lost objects to connect with artistic questions she poses and to which these predecessors have already formulated their own answers. Romanticism, and a certain humour, arises from the detachment of the objects. Though they are faded prototypes today, we still understand them nostalgically. Sculptural details of a head or a foot evoke the rich Hellenistic tradition, but also the abstracted women of Amadeo Modigliani or Constantin Brancusi. The contemporary gaze at woman mainly honoured as muses throughout art history is a perfect illustration of how Pepermans merges the past and present into a meta-conceptual story.

In that sense the artworks can be viewed as a mischievous response to what Philip Guston said when he found himself increasingly surrounded by abstraction: 'I do not see why the loss of faith in the known image and symbol in our time should be celebrated as a freedom. It is a loss from which we suffer, and this pathos motivates modern painting at its heart'. Peperman's promenade with lines shows a deep respect for the traditional image. Her recognizable forms boldly outline the confrontation that images are not only for consuming and selling but can bind us powerfully with our intellect and our humanity. At the mean time she cherishes the fact that lines are not meant to be toed, but to be redrawn and to colour outside. Because ultimately these are her own lines, and she does as she pleases with them. Without brushing aside her guests. Because you're mine, I walk the line.