

SEAS / TILES and SEAS / SEAS, Petra Blaisse, Amsterdam (1996)

As I came into the sunlit attic of a typical Dutch house in this typical Dutch town of Delft - a town situated near the North Sea, on a sea clay and sand soil and famous for its "Delft Blue" ceramic tiles and pottery - I entered the studio of a young and lively Dutch painter I had never met before and whose work I had never seen.

Though this studio was embedded in what seemed to be a young family life, it was extremely well organized, clean and full of space to move and work. It was quiet. There was both natural and artificial light. A storage-space under the diagonal wooden roof showed a row of canvasses, carefully wrapped, marked and protected. A clean easel and work-tables served, for this occasion, as support for paintings shown - one by one or in series of two, three or more.

Thinly applied layers of oilpaint in small regular strokes cover rectangular or square canvasses (leaving bare white canvas sometimes), create an organized rhythm of identical tiles and various seascapes. Each canvas shows one subject - a composition of tiles or a seascape; each work is a composition of canvasses assembled vertically, horizontally or as a checkerboard pattern.

The tiles are Portuguese ceramic tiles (not the Dutch "Delft Blue" tiles), traditionally used to cover walls, not only on the inside of buildings and houses but also - and more typical for Portugal - outside, covering parts of façades or framing doors, windows: openings.

Each series of square tiles shows a different pattern, with, mostly, different shades of BLUE - the only colour - combined with WHITE, in different shades...

(...though I saw one or two examples where blue is used with yellow/gold; when the golden sky of the framed seascape seems to take over all existing white of the tiled space).

The sea is the Portuguese sea, the Atlantic Ocean (not the Dutch North Sea), traditionally giving - but also taking - life with its fierce salty blue water.

Each series of square/rectangular seascapes shows a different pattern, with mainly different shades of BLUE, sometimes yellow, combined with WHITE...

(...though all colours are used when the sea is not framed or divided by tiles).

Sea and Tiles seem to be treated equally: both graphic, rhythmic (yet soundless), both in what seem to be predefined colour-combinations and compositions, on each canvas mathematically divided - organized - composed - positioned, thus dividing the canvas itself into halves, squares, slices.

Each canvas may in itself show only one of these subjects - but the painter combines them: they are integrated, positioned side by side or framed, divided or connected. In this manner each composition is itself recombined and recomposed to become a bigger whole, a more complex story, an actual site showing both physical and visual layers, (framed) space, depth, perspective.

At the same time there is a tangible restraint in each of these combined canvasses... for in each work one has the impression of being positioned - as a viewer - on one particular spot.

From this spot, one can only see a small slice of seascape through a vertical or square hole in a tiled wall or invisible screen; one can only see a fragment of a tiled wall or undefined space.

But not just a limited piece of the ocean, the horizon and the sky, through or past a limited piece of wall or screen:

the limitation extends to that particular time of day, evening or night;
and then only in particularly chosen weather-conditions:
(namely NOT when it rains, NOT when there's a storm... just when it is peaceful and the sun sets or mist is lit by the bleak sun, or the sun has left a cool blue world with only the silver glitter of the moon).

And thus, with all these moves and actions and limitations combined,
sea and sky are dismantled, fragmented, reassembled,
decontextualized, reorganized, domesticated in a frame of gridded tiled walls
or blocks of voided sections or angular undefined spaces,
which again are dismantled, fragmented, reassembled, decontextualized, organized,
leading finally to the viewers view and emotion that are then organized, framed, tempered, tampered,
kept at a distance - by the painter.

The painter, I think, must have pre-meditated her compositions and methodical colour-choices to symbolise the difference between this Northern European culture of the Netherlands and the Southern-European Portuguese culture: what we see here, after all, behind this impressive technique, these well-balanced compositions, colourschemes and a refined play with perspective, (what is in front and what is behind? are we looking through something or are these reflections? etc.),
...are in fact some of the most beautiful and typical national features of Portugal.
(These objects and elements are usually drenched with this country's culture of grief, melancholy and pride; they symbolise its wealthy, heroic past, its downfall, its injured pride, its physical and economic saviour, its persistence - all of this expressed or visualized so well in their architecture, literature and music.)

But here it seems, we look through the eyes of a Dutch artist who, although she has obvious emotional and physical ties to the Portuguese culture, has (subconsciously or consciously) clearly inherited a tradition through which she lives and looks into the world: a tradition that cherishes beauty and harmony, proclaims sobriety and 'honest emotions'; but also a tradition where the reason (the brain) dominates the heart.

The viewer realizes that what he or she sees are beautiful images or image-series communicating harmony of colour, composition and space - but also, seconds later, that there is a contradiction that creates a strong tension.

These paintings don't really give any of the suggested - NOT wholeheartedly; they also demand and try to teach the viewer to accept this beauty within a strict structure of restrictions and order, and a denial of emotions that we Dutch know so well.

But then again, I could be mistaken completely: maybe this artist wants to show us - apart from her skills and eye as an artist and her own experiences of beauty - not our mutual contradictions but our similarities...

(for there are some I could think of: like our relation to the sea; our history of conquering and trading; our primitive eating habits; our mind-limiting beliefs and superstitions; our skills as craftsmen of which pottery is an example).

And this could very well be done as we see here, by literally blocking our view both close by and far away, thus symbolizing effectively the limited frames from which we both experience this limitless and beautiful world...

Seen from all perspectives, Karenina Reis Borges succeeds in not only pleasing and inspiring us with interesting paintings but also in confronting us and putting us off-balance with at least one important message... with not ONE shocking image.