

Hospitaaltyd

Realism as Memento Mori

By Lize van Robbroeck

The dismissal of realism, sustained since the late 19th century, has become so deeply entrenched that it is seldom critically challenged. This theoretical dead-end is peculiar, given the continued prevalence of realism in both literature and art, the critical acclaim earned by many contemporary realist writers and (more seldom) artists, and its wide and evident popular appeal. Despite arguments about its reiterative and conservative nature, and the pervasive critique of all that it is philosophically alleged to represent, realism continues to exert a compulsive fascination over artist and viewer alike.

The by now orthodox dismissal of realism has led to its almost total expulsion from the exclusive club of *Avant Garde* art (an ironic misnomer used to describe the 'anti-establishment' art that languishes comfortably in the elite and self-enclosed cube of the 'cutting edge' gallery) so that it is now largely banished to the highbrow realm of expensive commercial venues. The unfortunate fact is, of course, that there is a lot of bad realist painting around, most of them quaint genre scenes or trite landscapes for middle class consumption, yet serious and talented artists, most of them condemned as *Arrière Garde*, continue to produce excellent realist art that grips the imagination and engage the intellect. Adriaan van Zyl's dedicated commitment to the contemplative potential of realism, his life-long refinement of representational skills to mine the material world of its philosophical gold, makes him such an artist.

In the face of ever more sophisticated technologies that enable seamless production of simulated reality or fantasy, the laborious re-presentation of photographic scenes in oil or watercolour is derided as an anachronistic adherence to a sterile tradition. With all the means at our disposal to achieve absolute simulacra, it is reasoned, realist art has become completely redundant. It is argued that realism belongs to a Western epistemological tradition that displays a naïve trust in language as a neutral instrument of objective description. It participates, it is said, in the impossible Enlightenment quest for absolute epistemological grounds, and perversely posits a solid and knowable reality with stable and universal laws in a modern world characterized by radical uncertainty, discontinuity and fragmentation.

But these arguments are predicated on a misunderstanding of the aims of realism. The aim of the serious realist is not simulation, nor is it pompous didacticism or naïve materialism. Van Zyl is not intent on deceiving the eye or seducing the mind with platitudes and easy securities. His aim (the difficulty of which must not be underestimated) is to create a good *painting*, with the understanding that a good realist painting will arrest the gaze of the spectator, and will never exhaust that gaze, but will engage and challenge it over and over again.

Contrary to John Berger's¹ suggestion that the viewpoint of the realist indicates a fallacious and egocentric humanism in so far as it "...makes the single eye the centre of the visible world... arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God", there is an element of self-effacement to van Zyl's realism. The mark of his individual consciousness does not reside in the vulgar expressiveness of the gesture, or the presence of a Great Concept, but in the layered saturation resulting from hours and hours of mindful application.

The felt presence of the artist is the product of gradual accrual; the painting is permeated with this subtle presence, as clothes worn frequently absorb the smell and shape of their owner. This kind of painstakingly rendered realism, each mark carefully weighed and considered and (if necessary) erased and re-rendered, eschews the histrionic drama of gesture and the pomposity of abstraction and all its attendant grandiose utopian schemes. Likewise the often facile and ephemeral cleverness of conceptualism is here mocked by the lightness and intelligence of pure observation.

But the lightness is deceptive - there is a gravitas to the bare, stripped gaze – a gravitas that recognizes our existence as a succession of sensual awarenesses of the here and now; that acknowledges the material world as the launching pad of all contemplative journeys.

With a Buddhist bare awareness, the artist strips the scenes of Tygerberg Hospital of sentiment. The squalid banality of the hospital is exposed in all its bare functionality. The institutional tension between bureaucratic order and human messiness is revealed in suggestive details – the imprint of a body on the plastic mattress of an abandoned trolley-bed, an open piece of luggage and a small bouquet of flowers in the limbo of an empty hospital ward.

Thus these paintings, glazed with the unmistakable patina of hours and hours of meditative contemplation, become instruments of empathy and compassion. The unedifying space of

¹ Berger, J. 1973. *Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p. 16.

the hospital becomes the subject of poetry as the artist infuses the gaze of the viewer with all the hapless immobility and sporadic movement of the patient awaiting surgery. There is a last minute clinging to the material surface of things - the dull civil service-grey of a Formica covered wall, the cold glint of light on stainless steel - before the frightening plunge into the mysterious depths of surgical oblivion. The route from waiting room to ward to pre-surgery is transmuted, through the eyes of the artist/patient, into a subtle and understated *Stations of the Cross*.

It is clear that Van Zyl is not promoting any philosophical *ideas* about the nature of reality as such, but that he is evoking an *experience* of a reality that must necessarily be subjective and personal, fragmented and partial. Despite the narrative unfolding before the viewer – a narrative structured around the spaces in which the drama of serious illness takes place – *Hospitaaltd* is not so much a continuous story as a sequence of startlingly present moments. From the first external views of the monstrous colossus of Tygerberg hospital, to the final ominous glimpse of the operating theatre at the heart of the building, the narrative structures our experience of time as an encounter with and movement through successive spaces.

For the viewer this experience elicits, in Bertrand Russel's terms, "knowledge by description" rather than "knowledge by direct acquaintance"². Van Zyl made no claim to capturing raw, unprocessed reality, but was conscious of these paintings as mediations – their aim is to translate his experience of the hospital to viewers every one of whom will, sooner or later, go through a similar passion of suffering, hope, fear and awareness of impending death. There is no naïve positivism here, no masking of reality with simulacra. Instead, these scenes may be regarded as singularly effective *memento mori*.

As in most of van Zyl's oeuvre, the human figure is absent from this series, but where the lack of human presence underscores the melancholy solitude of graveyards, disused factories and abandoned houses in many of his other works, it acquires additional resonances in *Hospitaaltd*. Human frailty and helplessness in the brutal face of modern health 'care' is the *leitmotif* of these paintings, which makes the absence of the human body a powerful statement. The shape of the human body is evoked by its imprint on sheets, pillows and mattresses, by a light left burning above a deserted bed, by rows of empty chairs in waiting rooms.

The absence of the actual human body conjures the patient's sense of hapless loneliness, and can be read as a damning indictment of the dehumanizing impersonality of the modern

² Bertrand Russel in Tallis, R. 1988. In *Defense of Realism*. London: Edward Arnold, p. 23.

hospital. In these haunted spaces ringing with the silence of utter abandonment, we confront the disturbing fact of our own mortality.

In defiance of the orthodox view that realism problematically assumes the existence of a knowable and stable material world, *Hospitaaltyd* consciously engages the complex discontinuity, transitoriness and multiplicity of human experience (which, contrary to popular belief, is not a peculiarity of postmodernism, but has always been a phenomenological fact). To take the time needed to contemplate this series is to see intersubjectively through the eyes of the terminal patient. The experience of the patient awaiting surgery is relayed as a heightened sense of tactile awareness. The rapt attention to the texture of glass, plastic and steel gives us a sense of time momentarily suspended in space.

For Berger “What distinguishes oil painting from any other form of painting is its special ability to render the tangibility, the texture, the luster, the solidity of what it depicts. It defines the real as that which you can put your hands on”³. But the real that is evoked here is more than the sensory reality of tactile materiality - it includes the still, alert consciousness that is situated behind the artist’s eye. One is reminded of Vermeer’s clarity and stillness. Indeed, van Zyl’s respect for this artist, and the close study he has made of his work, emerges as an ode to (as opposed to a quote of) Vermeer. Vermeer-like, in particular, is van Zyl’s exceptional command of light. Light becomes a medium, a tangible yet evanescent substance in which objects are suspended. Cupboards, steel implements, sheets, curtains and plastic chairs are all caught in solid blocks of translucent atmosphere, like insects in amber. This is an arresting quality that photography could never hope to capture. This contemplative stillness cannot be arrived at instantly – it is the product of the patient and painstakingly conscious application of myriad brush marks.

Some of the paintings are arranged in diptychs and triptychs that juxtapose the stark hospital scenes with beautifully rendered seascapes – rare glimpses of redemptive infinity among so much ugly and care-less functionality and transitoriness. In a discussion with van Zyl about *Hospitaaltyd*, he told how pre-medication gave him the sensation that his bed was gently rocking, which conjured in his mind’s eye vivid images of waves and foam. He proposed various metaphors to describe the bed: a boat upon the horizonless sea of cyclic existence; a cradle that rocks us from birth to death; a stage upon which life’s major dramas unfold.

³ Berger, J. 1973. *Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p. 88.

The discrepancy between the enormity of life and death, and the banality of the surroundings in which these momentous events take place, is the topic of not only *Hospitaaltd*, but of much of van Zyl's previous work. The ephemeral and the transient is a continuous thread linking *Hospitaaltd* with his Namibian scenes of disused factories and his cemetery paintings. These paintings all mock our grandiose schemes, and serve as a visual reminder that our busy plans and distracting activities are so much dust. Like his lighthouse series, *Hospitaaltd* also reveals a fascination with liminal spaces, spaces in which parallel worlds converge and cross. We are painfully reminded of the loneliness of the psyche when confronted with pain and mortality, and consequently have to confront aloneness as the essential human condition.

In *Memorandum*, a collaborative book between the acclaimed writer Marlene van Niekerk (*Triomf* and *Agaat*) and van Zyl, van Niekerk articulates a scathing critique of the insufficiency and heartlessness of contemporary health care which regards death as a form of "consumer resistance": "they care for you in the smallest details, but they do not care the least about your cares". This concern is echoed in van Zyl's *Waiting Room*, in which the bare functional structure of the room, with its rows of fixed plastic chairs, disables the organic formation of nuclei of sympathetic solidarity among family or other support groups. This scene of brooding boredom and suspense is illuminated by one stark metal window (significantly no other interior from the series contains windows) that emanates light so blinding that it completely obliterates any glimpse of life outside the hospital. In other scenes, the glass-fronted cupboards in which outlandish surgical implements (the function of which must remain incomprehensible) are arrayed, reinforce this sense of the hospital as a self-enclosed and alien world.

The glimpse of the surgery through the half-open door of the anaesthesia room reveals a dark and foreboding realm operated by robots and machines. The 'bed' in the surgery is far less bed than space-ship or instrument of torture, the theatre light a cluster of glaring and menacing eyes - a composite eye, as alien as the eye of a spider. Exterior scenes of the hospital, with its stark horizontals and rows of identical steel windows set in drab orange-brown brickwork, likewise exposes the hospital as a patient-processing factory – an impression that is strengthened by the ubiquitous wheels attached to beds and trolleys. These exterior scenes fill the entire picture plane, and only rarely offer a glimpse of sky or earth.

The cumulative effect of this series is to awaken in the viewer a sense of melancholy and resignation. It can be argued that such a strong and discomfiting empathetic response could have only have been stirred by van Zyl's particular devotion to the persuasive power of realism.

References

1 Berger, J. 1973. *Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p16.

2 Bertrand Russel in Tallis, R. 1988. *In Defence of Realism*. London: Edward Arnold, p. 23.

3 Berger, J. 1973. *Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p88.
