

PERENNIALS AND SEMI-NOMADS; a vocabulary of flowers

INGE SWINKELS

The most apparent difference between David Powell's 'Out There' series (2011-2012) and the recent flower series (2012-2013), is the absence of the human figure and the introduction of flowers. The spaces around the flowers have since grown, overgrown, regrouped, they have been reorganised and rebuilt. The focus has shifted from outdoor urbanised colonies of nature to highly constructed and developed semi-natural environments. The way Powell builds spaces in his paintings, a brick by brick approach, is fundamental to surviving this seemingly drastic change.

Perhaps our perceptions are guilty of hastily drawing conclusions. In western culture and society it seems everything is rotating around the human being; environments seem to only exist as backdrops or stages to our lives. When we speak of Gods we assign them human-like features and qualities, like emotions and judgement. But not every society operates this way. To me, Powell's work naturally implements these foreign-like aspects; it depicts occurrences that differ in nature from our own perception, our own experience of the world we live in, very similarly to the way some cultures perceive the world. For them, not the human figure but the environment itself and more specifically nature is of main importance. This same outlook could also be perceived in the new flower series: the absence of a figure symbolizes a world outside of our own, a heterotopia depicting a society that occurs simultaneously to ours yet occupies exactly the same dimension.

The mythological story of Narcissus could be interpreted along much

the same lines (although bearing in mind the symbolic superlatives of myths): a man disrespectful in nature is punished by being transformed into a flower, a 'lower' life form. From being an occupant he suddenly becomes part of his environment, his life reduced to the bare essentials: breathing, being. The flowers seem to inhabit the spaces in the work with a sense of temporality; living alongside the space, in the space, with the space, but not in spite of the space.

The autonomy of the flower has always been a subject of debate throughout the course of art history. Not seldom is the flower stigmatized as a secondary subject, with the primary focus on (the representation of) human figures. Flowers are classically to be divided into two categories: those that play main or minor parts in a still life and those that count as decorative material in living and outdoor environments inhabited by figures – and are thus to be considered secondary subjects. Very rarely we get to see paintings presenting us flowers that operate outside of these historical terms set for them. In his flower paintings, David Powell breaks with all these conventions by showing us flowers as if they were figures, that is to say: as autonomous objects. They inhabit spaces in a similar way figures do, as if they were cultivated to behave as humans do and thus space themselves as humans would space them in botanical gardens, town plazas or on balconies, but never losing their sense of autonomy. The flowers don't play a secondary role in the work, but are the main actors of the play.