

PAINTING in recent decades has often taken the form of dry reduction to the bare minimum. A few stripes, a simple contrast of colour, perhaps the ultimate sobriety of all-white, or all-black canvases. This trend established, in the minimalist movement of the '60s, what one might call a norm of visual under-nourishment. Clearly, however, such austerities are not for the Dutch artist Jeroen Krabbé – who began his training as a painter precisely in the '60s, and returned to art in the even drabber '70s.

KRABBÉ is a man for all seasons, pigments and climates. His Malaysian landscapes are filled with the supersaturated hues of the tropics – a palette that reminds one of the Tahitian Gauguin, or Bonnard in the South of France – Madonna blue, gold, scarlet. These are pictures made up, very frequently, of big, simple stretches of colour – dark seas, burnished skies – set against writhing, spikey vegetation. The results put one in mind of brocade, or oriental metal work. At the same time, as is common in his work, the pictures come very close to complete abstraction while remaining quite definitely landscapes – and highly exuberant, accessible ones, at that.

THE PAINTINGS of Tuscany are a series of variations on the theme of harvest: ripe wheat, meadow grass, oatmeal, nut-brown. Krabbé, in addition to being a lover of colour, is also obviously a painter who loves a rich variety of texture. And in some of these Tuscan pictures he pulls out all the stops, dabbing on thick juicy gouts of paint, scratching with the handle of his brush, striping jazzily, scraping thinly, smearing softly, in one case leaving the grain of the wooden support to show through as dry Italian earth. All of these textures and patterns work together both to produce a powerful decorative effect, and to evoke the patchwork of Summer fields.

WHEN he comes to paint the area around his studio in level, watery Holland, Krabbé employs a third colour register – cool greeny-blue-grey and greyish-green-blue. There too he favours a different type of surface, made up of larger, more even zones of paint. On occasion in these he uses the palette knife, producing a satisfyingly thick, smooth slab of pigment that sits nicely on the flat canvas, and at the same time evokes an area of grass or water. This is an effect that reminds one of the French painter of the '50s, Nicolas de Staël.

ONE suspects that such resemblances are no accident. Krabbé is an individualist, but he has plainly looked hard at many other artists. There are passages of strident brushwork that suggest another Dutchman, Vincent Van Gogh. On the other hand, the vigorous stripes that stand for the furrows of a Tuscan field or the ripples of a Malaysian lake put one in mind of a more contemporary artist – indeed an almost exact contemporary of Krabbé's – Sean Scully.

THUS, Krabbé draws on many strands in the art of the last century and more – his aim being, I think, to explore the borderland between pure abstraction and landscape painting – a territory that remains fascinating to many artists whose interests are directed towards the wide world beyond their studios – who are, in other words, not minimalists but maximalists.

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