

THE ART OF JEROEN KRABBÉ

It is a commonplace of art criticism but none the less true for that, that all abstract painting is a kind of landscape painting, for the space and light with which it must inevitably make play, if only within that purely imaginary pictorial space within and beyond the surface of the canvas. What is perhaps less often considered is the counter proposition, that in landscape painting there is always a significant quality of the abstract, both in the formal organisation of the image upon the canvas, and in the material handling that resolves the stuff of the paint itself into suggestion, evocation and description.

So it has always been. There was ever too much in nature for any exact and literal transcription. Choices have to be made, consciously simplifying, reducing, abstracting what is seen into a manageable and comprehensible order. After all, it is never the thing itself but rather its suggestive equivalent which must be contrived, by each stroke and trick of the brush, to conjure tree and mountain, sea and sky, onto the canvas. But where before such business was largely subsumed within the conventions of apparent topographical description, it has been throughout the modern period, that is to say since Turner and the impressionists, of open and direct concern. To look at the work of Cezanne or Mondrian, Monet or Bonnard, Van Gogh or Matisse, is directly to address the problem and its resolution into paint.

It is in this sense that Jeroen Krabbé, a Dutch painter now well established in his mid-career, is a true landscape painter within the tradition and disciplines of modernism. He travels the world, returning to familiar places and trying new, which restlessness is reflected in this exhibition, in paintings of Russia, New Mexico, Missouri, Saint Louis and the Far East. For a Dutchman the old Dutch East Indies have as resonant and ambiguous a fascination as is ours for India and the Empire, and the group of paintings he is showing that has come out of his visits to Bali, Java and Lombok is the largest and most substantial.

That is not at all to say that it stands apart. Particular differences of imagery and colour declare themselves, of course, but yet the several groups of work sit happily together, all of a piece. The quietest and subtlest of the images of the house in the woods, at home in Holland, sits quite at ease with the hottest and richest of the Javanese temple paintings. The paint itself is often quite thick in its application yet the touch remains light and active, the surface never clogged and heavy with pigment. There is an open acceptance of pattern seen for its own sake, as it is suggested by the landscape, and certain motifs and emphases naturally recur, but nothing is rigidly repetitive nor in the least formulaic.

And just as we find in Mondrian that eternal complementary play of horizontal against vertical, manifest even in the earliest paintings of trees, canals and church façades, so here in the work of his compatriot we find a similar consistency emerging. Here is the strong, insistent horizontal element on which almost every composition depends, and the confident reduction of landscape and architecture alike to a simple silhouette and abutment of one block or mass of colour to another.

But what truly marks him out is something more particular and idiosyncratic, a recurring formal motif that takes on many roles, yet remains ever the same – now the cupola of church or temple, now the high arch of a modern bridge or monument, now a distant hill or mountain on the farther shore, now a cloud in the sky. We may think of Matisse in the decorative and emblematic registering of trees and fields, sun, sea and mountain, of Mondrian in the formal structuring of the imagery, of Klee or Poliakoff in the intricacies of line and pattern, but yet Krabbé remains distinctive, unmistakably his own man.