

A picture, Maurice Denis once famously remarked, is '*in essence a plane surface covered with colours put together in a certain order*'. That makes it all sound disarmingly simple, both in practice and as a concept. Moreover, the statement has the advantage of being undeniably true - on a certain level. But you need only look at Jeroen Krabbé's latest work to see just how far it is true and how much it leaves out.

To an extent a Krabbé painting looks like a perfect demonstration of Denis's dictum. There, as a rule, are the colours laid out in a certain order, sometimes so that at a glance they look like a patchwork of small colour-fields. A plane surface, certainly, divided up almost like a stained glass window, with, on occasion, even the lines of leading left in. But if we assume that means the interest is all on the surface, in a two-dimensional pattern, the evidence of our eyes and minds immediately contradicts this. Krabbé's paintings are all, one way or another, landscapes. The view may be confined to details of a garden hard by where he lives in Holland, or it may be a sweeping, apparently aerial view which takes in miles of territory, as in the striking image of St Michael's Mount in the far, far distance, or the even more God's-eye view of Masada. But whichever it is, we have a strong illusion of pictorial space, delving deep and drawing us into the canvas.

It is true that in his recent painting trips to Bali, Cornwall, Israel and elsewhere, Krabbé seems to have been pushing further and further towards abstraction. Or rather, perhaps, he feints and parries with it: the extraordinary shapes of the *Chemin de la Sainte Croix* in Southern France push him almost over the brink, retaining the merest foothold in observable reality. But then, later the same year, the sober skies and relatively gentle rotundities and declivities of a cloudy Cornwall soothe him into a more immediately representational frame of mind. And even at his most abstract, Krabbé is still sufficiently turned on by the theatre of landscape (he is not an actor for nothing) that he is bound to see it as a stage upon which some elemental drama, tragical-comical-lyrical-pastoral, is always waiting to be played out.

It is a thing of threads and patches, an upheaval of shapes. But it is always, first and foremost, a field upon which colours combine and contend. Krabbé is a brilliant colourist. That is to say, sometimes he deals in brilliant colours - and he is one of the rare modern painters who handle hot colours without thinking for a moment that all the hot colours in the catalogue, thrown together at random, will make a colourist out of the colour-blind. Even when colour excitement is at its peak, as in the vibrant canvases inspired by Bali, there is always underlying it a sense of order, discretion, discipline.

And so, when he wants to, he can also paint expressively with very muted colours, reduce impasto to the most delicate of washes. Some of the square garden pictures are most magical in this regard, suggesting occasionally (as in *Aelshorst Garden III* and *VI*, for instance) a visual equivalent to the haunting 'night music' of Ravel's opera *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*.

From the perfumed night of Ravel to the wide open spaces of John Adams is not so far - not at least in the art of Jeroen Krabbé. How many more can one think of who move into close-up of a flower one minute and the next push the sides of the screen way, way back to encompass the whole of the South African veldt? One image, like one bar of music, can speak more forcefully than a thousand words. Faced with a Krabbé, the mere writer cannot help wondering what is the point of working with words at all.