

THE ART OF JEROEN KRABBE

YOU MIGHT EXPECT that an artist who travels as often and as far as Jeroen Krabbé would be interested in topography. Indeed, what sound like quite specific motifs are identified in the titles of many of his paintings. *The Bay at Kiwayu*, *The Alhambra*, *La Combe and its Vineyards* and *Mrs van der Pot's Garden* make you think that if you were to visit these places, you would easily be able to find the exact spots they were painted from.

BUT MANY MORE of Krabbé's titles – *Spanish Landscape*, *Palm Tree and Indian Ocean*, *In the Woods* – are more approximate and representative. In their generality they give a more accurate idea of the artist's intentions. For the paintings make it clear that Krabbé is not a topographer at all. He is not concerned with recording the precise appearance of his locations, nor with documenting the differences between the geology, vegetation, architecture and inhabitants of one locale and another. He is obviously not someone who works on the spot. As far as I know, he does not even base his paintings on drawings or watercolour sketches. They are all made from memory in his Dutch studio.

YET KRABBE'S landscapes do convey an entirely convincing sense not only of place but also season and climate. They do so not by itemizing the particular in an accumulation of closely scrutinized details but, exploring the narrow border between abstraction and figuration, they rather distill from what has been seen, experienced and then sharply recalled, the concentrated essence of physical features, atmosphere and mood.

THE PAINTINGS in this exhibition are the result of travels to France, Spain, Kenya and the Maldives, as well as lengthy periods much closer to home in that wooded part of the Netherlands where Krabbé has his studio. In spite of the obvious affinities between them, each series of works has a distinct character and personality. Each has its own unique colour register and set of marks, patterns and textures.

MANY OF THE DUTCH landscapes, for example, consist of tightly organised arrangements of flat, interlocking planes

interrupted by descriptive details. In contrast to such cool, often shadowy compositions, the Spanish canvases are mostly constructed from harder-edged forms distinguished by a quite different palette, one dominated by blazing yellows, blood reds, blacks and mauves.

THE REASON for these differences is not as obvious as it might seem. True, the varying pictorial language reflects variations between the motifs themselves, but it can sometimes seem surprisingly out of character nevertheless. Although *French landscape with Ruin* gives a powerful sense of that almost unbearable intensity of sunlight with which Provence is conventionally associated, other paintings of the same region employ cool blue, lavenders and greenish yellows in evocations of silence, stillness and mystery. We may not usually think about that part of France in this way, but it is as true as the conventional view and more memorable because unexpected.

THE MOOD and personality of each painting are always quite distinct. Initially dependent on a particular colour register, they then become increasingly specific during the process of painting itself. The creative process does not so much begin with clear allusions to the ultimate motif as end with them. And what the painting comes to resemble is not so much a specific place as the artist's recollection of a multiplicity of experiences connected with it, not all of them visual. In Krabbé's memory, the incidental becomes elemental and the particular general. Fleeting sensations are given permanence.

THIS IS ONE REASON why Krabbé's work is so satisfying to look at and think about. But there is another, and it has to do with the way the identity of each painting seems repeatedly to shift. A self-sufficient object with its own identity, it also evokes and describes a world outside itself. It is therefore given life by that tension between abstraction and representation on which so much good painting depends.