



Sleeping Beauty

Suzie Walshe on the work of Mieke Vanmechelen

Mieke Vanmechelen's epic canvases portray atmospheric landscapes sometimes glimpsed beneath washes of hallucinogenic color, at other times through nets of thickly patterned marks. Driven by ideas and process simultaneously, her works are an exploration of materiality through a conceptual framework initially influenced by Modernist Reductionism and Expressionism. The Flanders-born artist approaches her medium in a sculptural manner, expanding the traditional boundaries of the "scenescape." Based in County Kerry, Ireland, Vanmechelen is a painter whose monolithic work unites her Flemish ancestry with atmospheric depictions of her current surroundings.

With a prolific career, spanning over a decade, Vanmechelen grew up on her father's Cahah Mountain sheep farm surrounded by the magical and mystical landscape, an environment that continues to influence her artistic vocabulary. As well as being a full-time painter, Vanmechelen is an active farmer, grazing her own Kerry black herd, and actively breeding Irish sport horses. Such rural aspects of Vanmechelen's life continually inspire her and allow her to utilize the contact and connection she has with the land. These elements are of prime importance to her as a source of inspiration and individuality.

Themes of magical realism—which echo Irish culture and ancestry—stream through Vanmechelen's work, capturing timeless moments of perfect tranquility, where photo-album memory flits in and out of waking dreams. In The Homeland Series Vanmechelen paints scenes with chimerical effect; framing the image to exclude ground or sky, she manages to retain physical orientation and weight, while perfectly capturing and preserving the intangible presence of a fleeting moment.

Vanmechelen's paintings combine elements of gestural abstraction, drawing, and writing in a very personal expression. At once epic and intimate, her work is infused with references to literature and aspects of Old and New worlds. Best known for blurring the line between drawing and painting, many of her paintings hold a strong affinity to 20th-century artists such as Kandinsky, Picasso, Chagall, and De Kooning.

Painting gesturally, non-geometrically, sometimes applying paint with large brushes, even dripping it onto canvas, Vanmechelen makes work that is characterized by a strong dependence on what appears to be accident and chance, but is actually highly planned. Singing Wasteland, for example, is distinguished by a rigorous concern with pictorial structure, spatial illusion, and color relationships.

Some of her large-scale abstractions with thin washes of pigment are reminiscent of watercolors. Her experiments in watercolor (from the Celebrate series, to Attraction) are evidence of an interest in a romantic aesthetic. Many of Vanmechelen's paintings and works on paper move toward this contemporary take on "romantic symbolism." Her resulting abstract paintings had a liquid appearance devoid of any tangible pigment, much

like a watercolor, but more luminous and on a larger scale. As her work matured, Vanmechelen's canvases have elongated into balanced compositions that traverse all modes of technique and color, capturing her thought processes. With an explanation that sums up well her content and technique, Vanmechelen notes, "I instinctively reach for my colors and blend and mix according to what I am feeling and what the canvas is asking for. Before I fall asleep my mind is full of pictures and colors...it is as though I am being shown my future works, ideas, and concepts."

Vanmechelen's compositions are the culmination of the artist's efforts to create a pure painting that provides the same emotional power as she witnesses the landscape firsthand. This feeling provides a contrast that enhances the impact of Wavelengths, a maelstrom of swirling colors and soaring lines. The painting is divided abruptly in the center by two thick, aubergine lines. On the left, a violent motion is expressed through the profusion of a sharp, fiery entanglement of brushstrokes. On the right, all is calm, with cool sweeping forms and warm color harmonies. The artist's intention is that the viewer's initial reaction should be a result of the emotional impact of the pictorial forms and colors. Recently Vanmechelen has reduced representation to pictographic signs in order to obtain the flexibility to express a higher, more cosmic vision.

Concerned with the universe and the place of humanity within it, Vanmechelen sees her works as "a constant voyage in space and time." Her latest series is inspired by dreamlike places that we all search and hope for. Filling the canvas surface with energy and life, these paintings are composed of large, expressive colored masses evaluated independently from forms and lines, which serve no longer to delimit them, but are superimposed and overlap in a free way to form paintings of an extraordinary force. More than anything, Vanmechelen's works should be interpreted as translucent compositions that form a commentary on the human experience, in all its complexity and beauty.