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Jan de Quelery: Internet Sea

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Schoeners op de wester schelde

What happens when a visit to a gallery occurs via the internet and the viewer, expecting something a bit more unusual in this medium, instead finds the visual vocabulary of the work on display less than new? Jan de Quelery paints classical, dramatic scenes of ships at sea. For one nearly computer illiterate hunter of edge cutting art, the tables had suddenly turned.

Having become accustomed to quickly establishing an impression upon entering any exhibition, my first visit to Jan de Quelery's virtual gallery at www.quelery.nl provided an altogether different sensation. In the traditional gallery setting the presentation of paintings usually follows a linear path frequently animated by the occasional doubling of small-scale work or through thematic groupings that convey a sense of rhythm or may be read as milestones along a momentous visual journey. But wading through page after page of thumbnail images made it difficult to relate to the work. The overall effect could be described as viewing something stranded between a Minimalist-inspired photo installation and an extensive collection of slides. Though the program lacks the systematic arrangement normally associated with the grid, the images can be read much more easily than 35mm slides.

In a parallel to the traditional gallery experience, an altogether different impression unfolds when examining the works up close. Enlargements just a click away, enabling closer scrutiny and showing that a number of the scenes have been executed in watercolors, a medium particularly well suited to capturing the diaphanous qualities of clouds and sea. What quickly becomes clear is that de Quelery lays down robust colors that remind us of the beauty of reflected and refracted light both on the water in the air. And by allowing the washes to overlap and bleed into each other he evokes the inherent instability of both spheres. Amidst this natural spectacle he places portraits of individual ships, majestic crafts whose bows crash through churning waves. Carefully detailed, no rope or sail appears to be misplaced. In select views of steamers or battleships, angled perspectives of smokestacks, guns, and masts create a sense of drama. Rounding out the compilation are a few lively sunsets and harbor views. In the latter works, crane towers form a terrestrial complement to the ropes and masts rising from ships' decks.

But how are we to read these works? Are they to be interpreted as technological studies, examples of man's struggle against nature, or poetic evocations of the past in which the worlds of exploration, commerce and colonialism all merge? Artists as diverse as Turner, Manet, Dufy and Diebenkorn have produced marine paintings, but de Quelery has not invested his views with either radical technical innovation or a particular critical stance. A stand-out piece is *On the Beach*, an ironic image full of foreboding that depicts a schooner propped up against logs at rest on the sand. Silhouetted against a turbulent sky, the vessel's monumental scale emphasises its potentially perilous state. In *Avond Rood*, we see the bow of a ship almost engulfed in flames and smoke, the poignancy of the emergency intensified by the use of intense colors and the close-up view. Leaning toward the abstract, this clearly horrific depiction stands out from the crowd. Slashes of intense color give it a forceful and emotional charge.

De Quelery's panorama of ships references the evolution of shipbuilding and reveals his love of maritime life. Though energetically rendered, seeing dozens of small images depletes the effect and the nature of the subject matter; repeated so vehemently, they call genre scenes to mind. The virtual gallery presentation, while offering easy access to a large number of paintings, clearly disappoints. With so many pages, it's easy to become confused, and the random arrangement of images suggests a catalogue of marine illustrations rather than a portfolio that provides a good showcase for the work. The paintings also suffer from what characterises all reproductions. They relay the compositional structure and pictorial details, but not the correct material qualities, scale or color, thus simultaneously illuminating and misrepresenting the artist's work. The paucity of background information available on the site also raises questions about the artist's pictorial sources and motivation. One might assume that a Dutchman like de Quelery draws his inspiration from his country's close and historic relationship to the sea. Though his exhortations of the dynamics of maritime life focus on capturing its highest moments, reorganization of the gallery's format would provide a better showcase.