

## INTRODUCTION

by Michaël Braun Alexander

In the beginning there was the girl. Alice, the protagonist of several early works by Miriam Vlaming, is named after Lewis Carroll's world-famous girlie, who accidentally slips into a fairy tale underworld, filled to the brim with whimsical characters. Similarly, Vlaming's brightly coloured Alice seems like she's about to venture into a miracle world. She is pert and fierce, with youthful hard-headedness - a temperamental teen. Does the young lady just want to play? Or instead to rouse attention, be turned on, to throw stink bombs? We can only speculate. Vlaming's *Alice* wanders through a children's world that is only half-intact. "I am still young", one could have her echo Matthias Claudius' words, "get your hands off me!" Or else...

In her work, Miriam Vlaming proves to be a narrator more than anything else. Her pieces are fantastic, double-edged, and full of pitfalls. They provide space for interpretation and multi-layered readings, which makes them gripping: art that merits reflection, which does not become insipid even after years, but instead gains timbre and depth. Several early works - not in the least those featuring Alice as the lead character - carry a frivolous yet dynamic, even dramatic air. Escapism and transcendence are at stake from the start. Vlaming's girl seems to seek a way out, from a bleak, brown-beige area on the left side of the painting, into a radiant, vivid blood red on the right. Later on, we encounter her blown up to gigantic proportions, like a biblical Goliath in renewed physical control over his surroundings: a transformation that may be regarded as a maturing process, as a coming of age. Such metamorphoses constitute one of the key motifs of Vlaming's artistic practice. This is no different in her newest cycle of work, mainly executed in her studio in Berlin-Pankow in 2015 and 2016, which can be loosely grouped together under the title Eden.

By now (in her middle forties, Vlaming looks back at a twenty-year-long practice) the oeuvre of the German-Dutch artist encompasses numerous phases, which can be distinguished fairly clearly. These 'clusters' of works are hardly defined by technical or stylistic breaks. Vlaming's approach has remained largely the same after the turn of the millennium - a consistency that has its merits. She mainly works using photographic examples, which are torn up, alienated and read accordingly - 'upside down' if you will. Also technically, Vlaming opts for the tried and tested. Egg tempera, above all, with its milky-pale, washed-out features, is used to the full in her countless outbursts of work. Splatters of colour structure her images, lend them depth, without resorting to gaudy showmanship.

This stylistic continuity is paired with virtuoso creativity in her choice of motifs. Vlaming's work is characterised by subjects that are neatly distinguishable from another, as well as by cycles in which thematic strands are elaborated in simultaneously conceived image series. At the end of each is a cluster of paintings that, from different angles, cast their light upon her chosen theme. Thus, in a first phase at the turn of the millennium, Vlaming, in her *Alice-cosmos*, connects childlike motifs to a symbolism that spells impending doom. The artist describes this episode as 'exercises in composition' and colour play, nonetheless tackling highly dramatic subject matter at times. *Leda and the Swan* (1998) brings together a girl and a black, amorphous creature in a tension-laden composition. A hint of eroticism, of an imminent surge into horizontal spheres, permeates the painting.

In the following years, Vlaming presents herself as having matured artistically: a period that can be roughly brought together under the title "Friends & Family". Unlike with Alice, photographic elements now consistently appear as points of departure for artistic interpretation, like in *Nothing as sad as time* (2002). This greyish, even pallid-looking work with three figures (the artist herself, her brother, her grandfather) revolves around the figure that remains out of sight: the then recently deceased grandmother of the artist, who had taken the picture that the painting is based on. Vlaming's stay in Africa also dates to this period, which inspired some half dozen images. These works remain in the viewer's memory mainly by virtue of their "African" faces and their frenzied pink and purple colours. What stirs till this day: even in Eden, Vlaming's depiction of paradise, the viewer is being watched, held captive by the gaze of other things.

The reappearance of the human element in the Eden-cycle is not self-evident. Vlaming, as many works show, can manage really well without living subject matter when she wants to. From 2002, the artist has committedly painted figureless homes that exude an unsettling middle class drabness, a creative phase that one could crudely term "real estate painting". That is not to say they are lightweights in her body of work, on the contrary. At a first glance, this series depicts pleasantly silent, slightly desolate views of villages and suburbs; upon closer inspection, however, something seems to lurk behind the scenes. Not unlike with Alice one feels that the silence is deceptive and that somehow behind closed doors and in decaying buildings, intrigue and murder might be rampant. Although a dramatis personae is missing, a story is told by the paintings' very immobility, their motionlessness - possibly an ugly one, which gives them their special allure. We actually only see buildings, as we know them from small German cities. (Many of them seem peculiarly recognisable, even typically German, as hackneyed as that might sound.) Even so, they seem like places of horror due to their faded, often dark colours and menacingly hazy surroundings. One would not be surprised if a building such as Haus Daheim (2009) would be home to Norman Bates from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* or Jack Torrance from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, psychologically singular characters to say the least.

Shortly before Eden, there is death. In 2014 and 2015, Vlaming addressed this complex of themes in dark and eerie paintings, rendered strikingly by the chalklike, diffuse quality of the egg tempera. The artist, as she puts it, 'fell into a black hole' around this time. As a result, in her works she probed into the abyss of the human condition, the finitude of being, its vanity (in the Solomonian-Biblical sense). Works came to being that found their origin in bewilderment and loss, which is precisely what lends them astonishing power. They are distinct in their informality, some of them even in their abandoning the use of photographic examples, atypical for Vlaming. And like so often in the making of art in all times and cultures, the critical and creative preoccupation with death is a catalyst, in Vlaming's case for a chastening and maturing process that reaches into the depths of being human:

- The photographic original of *Die Überfahrt* showed a good-humoured boat trip on a lake in Brandenburger: a joyful, merry occasion. The painting, however, depicts a dark world, in which one feels hemmed in. This trip may remind some of the Hades (much like Alice years before, a flight in the underworld). The lake becomes the Styx, the leisurely joke a metaphor for death and hell.

- In *Wanderung*, colour intensity has made place for chiaroscuro. The work evokes unintentional associations to Hieronymus Bosch' tunnel of light (the ascension to paradise in heaven), in his time an overwhelmingly modern, even avant-gardist subject. Metamorphosis takes place here too: at night one wanders through a very different space, perhaps in a different state of being.

- Conclusively, a sitting death figure, dim, without any photorealistic elements, not given a name, as if the voice of the artist had failed in the face of death's finality. We observe the grim reaper without his scythe, who simply sits there, waiting perhaps, or spent after all his great deeds. He is a soft figure, not "a crazy man of bones" like Claudius with his skeleton grimace, but rather a mild old man, sitting in the benign, hopeful green that defines the background. The astonishingly contemplative painting offers a view of death as a friend, or at least does not forcibly portray him as an enemy.

And now - finally! - Vlaming's mourning has made place for a relief that expresses itself in an explosion of colours and figures. In an intoxicating tempo, we are transported out of the underworld, into friendly territory, back into humanity, "the full impact of life", according to Vlaming. The black hole in which the artist had descended is replaced by a lush garden, a paradise (old-fashioned: ancient Persian). Only in the face of death does one experience "how incredibly valuable life is", comments the painter on this resurrection, which marks a new phase in her artistic development: "A door had opened." To be more precise: the door to an extravagant garden.

Long before, Vlaming had taken trees and forests as a subject, stylistically close to the abovementioned real estate paintings. These paintings equally seem deceptive, dark and double-edged in their familiar atmosphere. In Eden the artist goes a step further, as she takes poetic licence over geography and paints a scene of rich vegetation from all kinds of tropical, 'exotic' climates: Africa, Australia, the Amazon. The flora of this paradisiac cosmos consist of Philodendrons and lianas, water lilies, rain forest and blossom, which in their throbbing abundance seem to stem from magic worlds - a "thicket" as Vlaming describes her intention. The fauna are men in half-camouflage, who become part of their environment, symbiotically connect to it. "Man grows out of nature, returns to it, is part of it."

No less important is what we fail to see in Vlaming's Eden. It might grow and flower beautifully, but it seems to lack the buzzing hummingbirds, constrictor snakes, birds of paradise and other animals that fill with life the traditional stage designs of paradise. The supernatural also lacks; irrespective of biblical records, no God seems to reign in this garden. Instead, we observe culture and nature in a dialogue relatively free of friction. No eating-or-being-eaten, no survival of the fittest is at stake here, but the harmonious enveloping of man in the green around him.

We encounter a seated, enthroned woman (*Mama Blue*, 2016). Her facial features suggest this queen of flowers could be a Khoisan-Lady, a Brazilian or a Balinese woman. Either way, origin does not play much of a role; the power of mimicry speaks for itself (and fits the faces from Vlaming's Africa-phase seamlessly). In the midst of her flower-power empire, adorned in grand style in lilac, moss green, and

brown tones, the flower lady seems to blossom herself. In the Amazon jungle we observe figures in loincloths, with bows and quivers – probably Indians – in a “dream landscape” (Vlaming) of water and greens (Bird Watcher, 2016). In a third full-size work, *The other village* (2016), a dozen seated men are looking at the viewer – a group portrait without a lady, which forms a remarkable counterpoint to *Die Sippschaft* (2008). Eight years before, Vlaming had depicted a group of uniformly clad, template-like figures in rigid sitting order that stare at the viewer warily, joylessly, and gloomily. In *Eden*, by contrast, her people seem individual, warm and wonderfully composed, notwithstanding the very similar sitting order.

At any case, it would be a mistake to interpret Vlaming’s *Eden* as an otherworldly gesture of glorification. Her garden may be a place of desire; it is no naively idealised Arcadia. The trauma of the fall from grace is by no means shown in the foreground, but is felt from behind the figures, as it were. “They are all pretty from the outside” according to the artist; each of her characters has to come to terms with Mother Earth as good as he or she can muster.

Alice in Wonderland and the equally wonderful Garden of Eden are worlds apart. Vlaming has a long journey with fascinating behind her with fascinating stops along the way. Although ‘Eden’ is an anagram of ‘Ende’, it would probably go too far to suspect a subtle signal of the artist. The atmosphere of renewed freedom in her newest phase of her oeuvre, after the dark paintings of nearing death, is too intense for such a reading. As in the Christian tradition, the expulsion from paradise marks the beginning of a grand story, not its end – and even beyond *Eden* there will be stories that want to be told and banished onto the canvas.

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