

Preface

The Belvédère museum was inaugurated by Her Majesty Queen Beatrix on 24 November 2004. This opening can be seen as the crown on the many years of hard work by all who were involved. Especially the committee led by Ir. J.J. Wezenaar deserve a warm applause. Not only their commitment, but also their close engagement were instrumental in the realisation of this museum project and now we are pleased to present Willem van Althuis as our first exhibitor.

A step back in time.

On a Tuesday afternoon in October 1974 Edy de Wilde, conservator of the 'Stedelijk Museum' in Amsterdam at the time, and his assistant Jan Loenen Martinet walked through Franeker, on their way to the Coopmanshuis, where paintings by the Heerenveen roadworker and artist Willem van Althuis were displayed.

Their visit was certainly not in vain. They were impressed and so much so that in April/May 1975 Willem van Althuis had an exhibition in the 'Stedelijk Museum'.

Thirty years later.

Now his works hang in the Belvédère Museum. Willem and Anke van Althuis live within walking distance from the museum. Jan Mankes (1889-1920), too, and Boele Bregman (1919-1981), two artists permanently on display in the museum, lived within walking distance from the museum site. All three of them had a home game they won on quality and feeling.

We knew about Jan Mankes and Boele Bregman, now we also know about Willem van Althuis.

Thom Mercuur

On a chilly afternoon in spring 2004 we drive towards the open countryside near the Veenhoop, a village five kilometres west of Drachten, Willem van Althuis and I.

He hesitantly agreed to our suggestion to take a few shots of him in that area for the documentary film on Thom Mercuur and the Belvédère Museum.

During the drive he is silent. Probably he would much rather have said 'no' and only came along so he could get it quickly over and done with. If you refuse you only invite fuss and bother, the film makers keep insisting and it costs a lot of time and trouble.

He is sitting across from me, seventy-eight years old, in delicate health. His eyes are dark, his look expresses close attention, mixed with a touch of suspicion. The last time I saw him was at the ceremony last year when the foundation stone of the museum was laid. He said he no longer painted, quite matter-of-fact, as if it was not important. A little later he discussed oil paint with Klaas Gubbels and other, finer points of the profession. In the Veenhoop we have a house with a garden at our disposal. We haven't got much time. Swiftly the artist is led to a spot that could well be characteristic of his work. He avoids a puddle showing the reflection of the grey sky rippled by the wind.

Here he is allowed to stand, not there, a sheep that is given limited freedom with invisible fences. In front the meadow lies, always vast in Friesland and, beyond, far away, a hazy horizon, broken by small groups of trees. From a distance they are nothing but feathers in the wind. There is also the odd farmhouse, and incidental spaces in between the small buildings.

Mercuur told us about this landscape. It still is a bit of a gamble to purposely take an artist back to what may well be the origin of his work. The contours of a tree or a farmhouse, virtually dissolved in light and space. And the horizon, claiming most of our attention, as it does in his not quite abstract paintings.

There he stands, van Althuis, at the bottom of the garden, his back towards us. We intend to ask him a few questions and that is what we do. Whether or not the vast surroundings should be linked to his work, I ask shyly. The Frisian landscape is the central item in this film; Mercuur's museum arose from it, so to speak. It would be nice if van Althuis would respond, just a few sentences; more we should not expect from this remote man.

But he does not speak. The question is rephrased, the standard tactics of an interviewer trying to control his despair. But van Althuis remains silent and one can hear his wide silence embracing the entire countryside. There is no search for words,

really, no, the artist leaves the space as it is. The meadow, the trees, the farmhouses, the clouds and the sky beyond, they do not need him for their existence.

'That windmill, yes'; aha, a sound, he speaks to me. The whole film crew feels extremely tense, it is almost audible, whereas nothing significant is happening.

The windmill, where is it? There, toward the right; now van Althuis will start talking, but no, it is just those few words. By mentioning that windmill he already overdid it.

Another interviewer takes over from me, while they are filming. Maybe he can extract some of the

artist's vocabulary. Indeed, he talks a bit more, responds to a question about the purity of colour. Some time ago he had given his opinion on it. And just when you have him going on a subject, he says that in the meantime he has changed his ideas about it. Which change? He keeps quite about it. Again he turns toward the scenery. We go on filming. Suddenly he turns around to face us and, an amused smile on his face, and he says 'I will not say anything'.

That is all we get. Later we discover he made us a gift of something grand. His refusal to say anything can be woven into the landscape in the editing. Van Althuis did not spoil it with words.

I did not know that when, later that week in Friesland, we were shooting film footage and visited his colleagues Sjoerd de Vries, Jan Snijder and Christiaan Kuitwaard. In between the sequences I continue to look at the Frisian landscape. Van Althuis revealed it again to me, precisely by not responding to our questions.

I look at his works, at picture postcards and browse through a couple of catalogues as if I see them for the first time. Now I can link them to the Frisian light and the vastness as we drive through it every day.

Ever since the early seventies his work shows little concrete matter. Once he wrote to me saying

he had a distinct aversion of embellishments and was more or less afraid of fantastic imagination. He began to see the picturesque as a cancerous growth.

Look, he paints a slender bridge, a railway station, a sauerkraut warehouse and even that is too much for him. An adjoining painting shows the translation, horizontal and/or vertical stripes in which the bridge, the station and the warehouse are scarcely recognizable.

We drive to Oranjewoud. That is where Thom Mercuur's museum will arise, a kaleidoscope of 104 by 13 metres. From the car the horizon can be seen everywhere. As if once upon a time someone

somewhere in Friesland decided it should remain uncovered as much as possible.

Mercuur tells us that in the old days he used to collect stamps together with van Althuis and that at that time his friend started to take up painting. He was already in his forties and tried, almost from the start, to let a subject such as the bridge be concealed in the translation.

'I will not say anything'; it has to do with the film crew, no doubt about that. Our group must have spoiled the environment for him. No matter how we kept asking about the essence of the scenery, he persisted in his silence. The merest blade of grass may be damaged by an inadvertent word.

A landscape with farmhouse from 1977, the roof shows a streak of speed, as if one passes the painting in a car. It is not an attempt to register a structure; it is rather as if he would like to get away from it. Not a tribute, in all those shades of blue a slight irritation is hidden. You may try and interact with the landscape, but never successfully. Through the car window I look out. A misty horizon. In his later paintings the same horizon can be seen, always in different colours, often blue, usually in deep shades of grey. This is what I feel, but at a closer look the differences between the horizon outside and van Althuis' horizon get bigger and bigger.

His work is not just a report on what he discovered in the Frisian countryside. Something else has been smuggled in, but what is it? Maybe it has to do with the reproductions in my lap. They often differ slightly from the original work; they intensify the colours in the wrong spots.

Mercuur drives to the annex of his museum, in Gorredijk. There we film a number of paintings. It is an experimental setting which gives the public an impression of what they may expect in the Belvédère Museum.

Sjoerd de Vries, with his impressions of the Deelen, a frugal landscape, peat and reeds, close to the 'Trippemaal', where Mercuur lives. The canals

by Jan Snijder, the chairs and plates by Christiaan Kuitwaard. The plates he eats from first before he paints them. And next Willem van Althuis's works. A landscape in de Deelen, receding in white. Receding it is, he does not want to lay it down, he tries the most difficult way, get an even score with the variable nature. With the horizon which, with the various moods of the light, always looks different.

It is all too clear. 'I will not say anything'. We drive on and the reproductions will have to do. Outside the grey light is full of action: a junk shop of intermediate shades, not a single corner of Frisian grey is omitted, it is all there.

Van Althuis did not paint those differences. Hundreds of paintings would not reflect all the credit they deserve. A card with a horizon I move towards me to have a closer look, then keep it at a greater distance, then closer again, how do I get the sharpest image? And in those movements it happens, the line changes as I look at it, again and again. At first small fluffs of grey hamper the view and, next, it seems they are blown away and you are face to face with the wide vistas broken by the flimsiest of lines.

I ask Mercuur if he could stop here briefly, in a landscape as it can only be created here. In a puddle the whole of Friesland is reflected, grey clouds

with hardly a notion of a contour above the hard dark green. The light switches to a different tone, you can see it fade and it takes some time to get used to that new difference.

Something different happens to the horizon in my hand. Slowly I move it towards me and now the Frisian light bends. This is not a reflection. The painted horizon absorbs the immense grey. How he did it, you will never know. Depending on the angle at which you hold the horizon in your hand, different tones of grey are released, it is all motion. Outside it takes many hours, here, on a small card, it all happens in a few seconds.

I burst out laughing. There is something amusing

in his work, a parody on the transparent distance, as if in the sky they made hotchpotch of it with light and grey. Van Althuis demonstrates it can be done more quickly and differently.

In the montage one sees the colour of Van Althuis and of the Frisian landscape. It is impossible to give them separate names; they coincide at the horizon, highly diffuse, perhaps because in the open countryside near the Veenhoop he did not want to say anything.

K. Schippers