

Hieron Pessers – Multiple frames

By Jet van Dam van Isselt

A sturdy peasant couple, carved in relief*, are pulling with all their might at what becomes a real rope on either side of the canvas. On it we see a bizarre, commedia-dell'arte-like crowd partying on a tightrope: voluptuous frilly ballerinas, mischievous clown & dwarf, mock queen spawning a litter of babies; masqued men in animal hides. Their orgy unfolds against the backdrop of an idyllic grove that contrasts sharply with the bleak world of the farmers 'outside'. But for their efforts – we are told – the dancers' phantasy world would collapse. Dressed up behind a veneer of comedy, *La dolce vita* (1990), a key painting in Pessers' later oeuvre, shows the western world on the verge of calamity in the frivolous 80s and 90s. The dialogue between frame and canvas leaves little room for interpretation: 'it's the rich what gets the pleasure and it's the poor what gets the pain', as a popular song has it.

In each of Hieron Pessers' paintings there is an ambiguous relation between the representation on canvas, the frame and the outside world. The early canvases often have multiple panels as in his triptych *Me, myself and I* (1977), which recalls the conventions of a medieval altarpiece. But in *Sunday afternoon* (1979) the frame is absorbed by the rectangular pattern on the canvas and becomes transparent as the eye of a camera: a window on the world. Out there, in a flash, we see a naked woman falling headlong to her doom. There is no context, no human beholder – not even a farmer minding his own business as in Breughel's Icarus. The emotion is in the frame, or rather in the lack of one: the outer world's indifference to individual suffering.

The frames also lend themselves to the light touch or humourous twist that is always around the corner in Hieron Pessers' paintings. In *The follies of a lady* (1978) a small black cat calmly occupies a panel of her own, seeming to comment on the human follies of her mistress in the adjacent pane. Initially these subtext notes are found mainly in the painting itself, within the confines of the frame: the heart-shaped blushes on the cheeks of the protagonist in the self portrait; the parody in the outrageous outfits of the beau monde à la Miss Piggy in *The sorrows of young W.* (1985). Later on playful elements are integrated in the frame, for instance when a host of carved elephants surrounds the new-born babe in the exuberant Pietà *Once upon a time* (1999).

In *Ceci n'est pas un homme* (1986) – the reference to Magritte and the problematic relationship between 'real' and constructed worlds of experience is hard to miss – the melancholy young man who is manipulated still inhabits the same world as his exquisite torturers. But the puppeteers who pull the strings in *J'attendrai* (oil on canvas & wood & music; 1992) literally burst out of the frame. Perched on high, they are not part of the action below. They direct it and they direct us – along with Dalida's haunting song about forsaken love. Increasingly putti and all the paraphernalia of the theatre intervene between the observer and the painting proper. When the curtains open on *In case of dreams* (1987) we already know that little romance is in store for the protagonists in the room beyond. It is precisely in the interplay between his elaborate, almost baroque, frames and the images themselves that Hieron Pessers achieves his peculiar combination of the sacred and the profane, Madonna and Donald Duck, high social comedy – at times bordering on kitsch – and intense personal drama.

The dialogue between frame and canvas culminates in the monumental *Fall of Pompadour* (1996) which picks up again a theme touched upon earlier in *La dolce vita*. We witness the grandeur of the old world falling apart, ablaze. Madame de Pompadour, ornamental in her tilted frame and seemingly impervious to the turmoil around her, becomes part of the catastrophe – not screened off from it as in the early paintings. Canvas and frame have merged but the frame is dominant: a statement almost rather than a painting.

What the artist had in mind was a larger frame, a stage that would provide an elegant and appropriate setting for his paintings. This he found in 1999 when he had an exhibition first in Buenos Aires and later in the Museum of Modern Art in Cordoba (Argentina). He wrote: “I’m all in the clouds to-day. I’ve found a 19th century pink villa, half mansion half palace, situated in a pine grove – appropriately called Chateau Carreras. As I wrote to the director: “My paintings will be very happy in their new environment – in fact it seems they were made for it.” Once more: the emotion is in the frame.

Jet van Dam van Isselt, September 2004

* Antonio Romeu and Nico Nijland made the frames.