

AT SECOND GLANCE

Reflection on Rolina's paintings by Lida Bonnema,
art historian/visual arts reviewer 28 December 2009.



at second glance

There is more to Rolina Nell's painting than first meets the eye. Her visually delightful painting technique does not entirely disguise an intriguing undercurrent in which emotions float freely and vital questions lie dormant. Women of all cultures take centre stage, or are represented by motifs that traditionally belong to women, such as laundry and playgrounds. She denies consciously choosing a feminist line of approach. The theme derives from her womanhood, from her sisterly engagement.

method and painting technique

The method, palette and painting technique are entirely in the service of expressiveness and profundity. The carefully considered choices are in contrast to the ease with which the beautiful images seem to be created.

Rolina Nell begins by selecting and printing a suitable photograph, for which she draws on the archive she has built up through observation. She makes a drawing of this, the same size as the future mural or painting. Initially, she used to incorporate decorative material in the paintings, such as fabrics, wallpaper or flowers and her palette ranged from saturated colours to almost white. The atmosphere changes after 2004. Contrast, depth effect and transparency temporarily allow the works to breathe and give them openness, both literally and figuratively. Since 2007 she first applies a thin, transparent layer of acrylic paint. On top of that comes the painting. For this, she always uses a stencil for the female figures, which are often life-sized, sometimes in a smaller format. Thus, sharply defined fields are created within which structures and carefully applied brushstrokes are visible. Then comes the work with

smaller brushes. For this, she applies details such as jewellery, handbags, or stitching and patterns in the clothing. Finally she adds subtle shadows. This attentive painting technique is crucial, because of its consistency with the content-related aspects of the work.

The painting technique is constantly developing. Nell strives for a loose, apparently effortless style of painting, without hesitation in the brushstroke. This requires extreme concentration, as it has to succeed in one go. The discrepancy between physical, almost abstract brushstrokes and the detailing increases, but the effect of transparency is also examined more closely. Her contrary handling of space and depth are an even more fascinating aspect of her painting technique. The illusion of depth is accentuated in parts of the painting, while in other areas it is in fact subtly counteracted. Nell paints with thin acrylic paint but wishes, in the near future, to explore older materials and techniques. She is particularly interested in painting with tempera on canvas or applying frescos to walls. This is in keeping with her search for painterly interventions that allow



flat, two-dimensional murals to be experienced as three-dimensional.

sources of inspiration

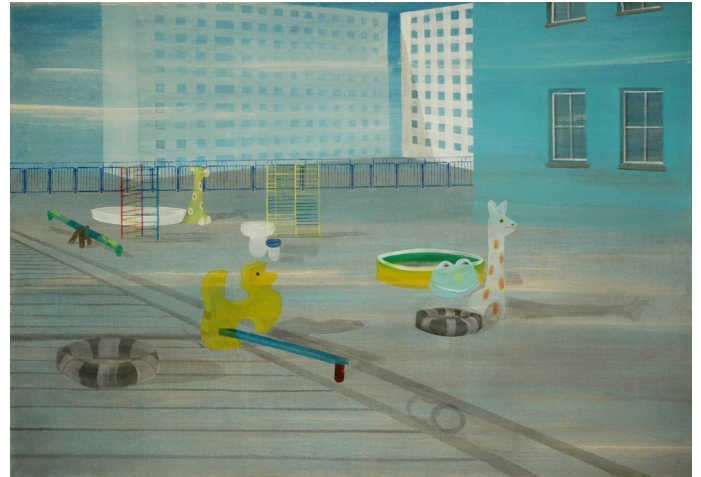
Rolina Nell finds her inspiration in everyday life in the Netherlands and other countries. During her travels she incorporates other customs and social atmospheres like a cultural nomad. She is fascinated by the hidden tensions that she suspects or experiences all around her. This raises questions about the veracity of visual reality. In the past she used apparently idyllic tableaux from newspapers and magazines. These days she makes her own photos on the streets, which she selects according to atmosphere, composition or pose. Ideas will frequently germinate during the photography, which come to the surface later through the meaningful method of painting.

theme and motifs

Rolina Nell isolates women from their everyday environment. The contours of the figures serve as a recognizable visual form. For this, she can devote herself entirely to painterly research, while the subsequent detailing provides the painting pleasure. Both the figurative details and the painting technique offer indications as to the content. The first mysterious, life-sized views of women's backs originated during her travels through Georgia in 2007. The absence of the faces, the clothing and the pose all raise questions. Though very subtly and culturally specific, something of the personality still remains visible. Thus, even the black chador of an Iranian woman in the painting 'Cocoon' reveals something of her identity, through the graceful style of painting.

Another important universal motif in her work is the laundry. Nell has photographed washing lines in various cultural areas but the locations are not immediately recognizable in the paintings. The

washed textiles are so beautifully transparent and physically painted that they lead one to fantasise about the absent person. This beauty of emptiness unleashes a stream of thoughts that give the work an inner life.



The deserted playgrounds were spotted in Mongolia. The paintings evoke the desolation of a ghost town. The transparent method of painting accentuates the dreamlike stillness of the images and uncovers memories of childhood joys and sorrows.

content

The highly accessible, beautiful paintings form vast associative fields that appeal to the observer. During the act of painting, Rolina Nell herself allows her imagination free rein about the woman emerging from the paint. By adding subtle details, accessories and (later) a title or name, she is able to manipulate the identity.

At first glance the observer is so charmed by the beautiful appearance and the skill with which the tableaux are painted that it takes some time before the uneasy questions arise. The mind resists the urge to doubt the veracity of the serene images. The transparency of the ground layer and the brushstrokes, however, has such a spatial effect that feelings of emptiness and solitude prove unavoidable. One penetrating work is entitled 'Days to come'. Two women viewed from behind stare straight into the unfathomable void. Rarely have feelings of unease about the point of our existence been so beautifully and poignantly depicted. Another painting entitled 'Kitty' touches on feelings of freedom versus oppression. The charming cartoon character Hello Kitty on the woman's parasol seems in contradiction to the wall of vertical brushstrokes, which rises up directly in front of her. Nell gives the painted women invented first names. They could be anyone. This causes an itch in the observer's ability





to identify the figures, particularly when one of the back paintings is called Rolina.

between fulfilment and satisfaction

A longing for self-realization and inner peace with life filters through the tranquil, melancholic paintings. Rolina Nell paints women who appear to silently adapt to their living conditions. The watery paint and the gesture of painting are discordant with the beautiful images and lead one to suspect subdued tensions. So the depiction, material and painting technique are in the service of her attention to the quality of life at an emotional level. This touches on collective, subconscious emotions. Every person has numerous expectations to fulfil and must join their culture and social environment. With herself also navigating between fulfilment and satisfaction, Rolina Nell accepts her responsibility as a visual artist. Her honest paintings are important because they make people think about their own position. The intimate images reflect the thinking, feeling and desiring individual. They tell of the possibilities for self-realization that apparently exist, albeit subtly, even in Iran.

position in art history

Rolina Nell's painting is in keeping with traditions of realism and formal painting. In content it appears to have much in common with the feminist body of thought, though on closer inspection the core focus is on more universal, existential questions. A distinguishing feature is that both the depiction and the gesture of painting generate meaning. Her increasingly headstrong game regarding space and depth, which either emphasize or indeed undermine each other, heightens the intensity of the viewing experience. The painted reality appears more penetrating than reality itself. Her use of accessories, clothing and other details follows on from an art-historical convention. In Christian iconography, for instance, the saints are identifiable by their attributes, among other things. Rolina Nell also subtly incorporates typifying accessories. As contemporary attributes, in a general sense, these reveal something about the presumed personality of the women. On a deeper level, the serenity of the life-sized paintings conveys something of the mystical power reminiscent of old frescos and images of saints.

By placing the female identity so centrally in her work, one might suspect a faint echo of feminism. Prescriptive laws from the Islamic world, in which women are barely visible, are indeed indicated briefly, but so too are the unwritten laws of fashion that exist here, within which girls must find their way. It would, however, do Rolina Nell an injustice to simply to leave it at that. Her work is more universal. She paints women because she herself is a woman. Her work encourages all people to think about their own life. With her painting she seeks to investigate how brush and paint can contribute towards the quality of existence. The simple brushstrokes, sensitive imagery and attractive colours carry the observer from an aesthetic, to a human, emotional level. With the idea that every person is what they make of themselves, her women express the effort it costs all people to be themselves.

