

# Wetterling Gallery

## Marjolein Rothman And so it Stays

In Marjolein Rothman's paintings, reality slips right through your fingers. Take the Zeno series, several paintings from which are included in her exhibition at Wetterling Gallery. Each one shows a mother and child standing by the sea. The boy, who is about two years old, is about to walk into the water, but his mother stops him just in time. The way she does that is both graceful and familiar: she sweeps her left arm over his chest in what appears to be a warm embrace, even as her arm forms an insurmountable barrier. At the same time, she lays her head on his shoulder to leave no doubt of her love for him. The ambivalence of her position will strike a chord with any parent: you want to protect your child against the consequences of recklessness, but you don't want to give the impression that you're imposing your own will too much and taking away the child's freedom. That dilemma is also what we find in Marjolein Rothman's way of working.

The great power of her paintings and collages is that they are perfectly poised on the boundary line between freedom and control. The scenes she paints usually appear straightforward: a portrait in a somewhat classical vein, a parent and child, two children playing on a deck, a flower, or a woman in profile. Yet there is also an immediate sense of distance: Rothman fills her paintings with so much light and space, makes them so open, so transparent, that she seems to deliberately distance herself from familiar reality. That always leads the viewer to hesitate for an instant. What am I really looking at? What does the artist wish me to see? In what reality, and at what point in time, is this event taking place? That uncertainty and the probing questions it raises are at the heart of Rothman's work.

Let's return to the Zeno series. No matter which painting in the series you have before you, you can easily assume that the action is taking place on the beach. But you might ask yourself, why? Rothman does a bare minimum to set the scene: the 'tide mark' is no more than an unsteady line in one corner, and the loose objects in the left foreground can be identified as shells or stones only with difficulty – so why not call this a pavement, or a river, or a parking lot? Or take the relationship between the woman and the child: why do we think of her as a mother, and not as a neighbour, an aunt, or a schoolteacher? And just when is this scene supposed to be taking place, anyway? By 'opening up' the picture, by reducing the information on the canvas so drastically that it creates distance, Rothman spurs the viewer to ask how we interpret images. How much information does the viewer need? Is there such a thing as the pure essence of a picture? What factors are at play in interpretation?

This sense that Rothman, in her work, is always searching for some kind of essence is reinforced by the fact that, in her paintings, the tension between the shown and the unshown is always significant. Her work displays a special fascination with the way light contributes to an image's meaning – although you might easily overlook that fact, since all her recent paintings are of summer scenes. For Rothman, light – ubiquitous, life-giving light – acts as a symbol of the inescapable complexity of perception. In paintings like *Z. Drawing* (2015), *J. III* (2014), and *And so it stays* (2015), the light-that-becomes-emptiness serves, first of all, simply to represent a sunny summer day. But the associations it evokes may be more significant: the feeling of time slipping away, and the awareness of how hard it is to hold images in your memory.

At the same time, Rothman points to another intriguing phenomenon: as images become more distant in time and memory, they do not just grow 'fuzzier' – they can also change in meaning. So sometimes, digging through your own memory, you're startled – is my recollection of that really accurate? Or was it different, after all, from the way I've always thought it was? Rothman's

# Wetterling Gallery

primary method for capturing the changing meanings of persistent forms is an ingenious game she plays with negative spaces, the seemingly empty spaces in a picture, created by a combination of the 'bleaching' power of light and her graphic working method. In daily life, we rarely pay much attention to negative spaces, because they dissolve into the noise of reality – and when they catch our eye as recognizable forms, we usually consider it mere happenstance. In Rothman's work, however, they form a subtle yet important factor in the meaning of an image. Consider *Zeno XVII* (2016), in which Rothman's woman and child are so highly abstracted that they've almost been reduced to large, flat forms. This gives the woman a friendly, animal quality – her hair resembles a fox's head and her shadow a tail – and you might even think she's pushing the child away from her. But the dark negative space between them restores their connection: suddenly, we see a flattened face there, oriented towards the woman and blowing her a kiss – as if fate were unwilling to ignore the bond between them.

Precisely because Marjolein Rothman builds up her images out of bare, highly abstracted forms, combining them like puzzle pieces into her own 'in-between world', she stands in a long tradition of artists whose work is intended to touch on a supreme, Platonic reality – a reality separate from mundane life, which may in some way represent a 'higher' or 'more fundamental' truth. At the same time, she remains fully aware that reality will always remain subjective. So it's telling that Rothman often works in series, using the same image over and over again, exploring one fresh possibility after another, as if on a quest for the essence of that single photograph – while remaining conscious that seeking is more important than finding.

Yet this endeavor may also clarify why, in recent years, Rothman's work has come to exude an intimacy that can seem almost painfully confrontational to its viewers. By choosing to base her paintings on photos that show Rothman herself and her own children, she seems to raise the question of what gives value to even the most personal, most intimate events in our lives. Does each of the parties involved experience intimacy the same way? Can you hold on to such moments? Are they *true*? Rothman's courage in exposing the most personal moments in human life to doubt, and the engaging manner in which she does so, make these new paintings and collages intense and gripping. They speak to the universal fear that even the most personal, intimate events in your life go unshared, unrecognized, slipping through your fingers – the fear that you'll realize only afterwards, when it's all over, that your life held just a few brief moments of perfection

By Hans den Hartog Jager