



**HANNELINE VISNES**  
**The pointilist sculpture park**

## Bliss and the apprehension of things

Hanneline Visnes' new body of work marks a shift into new territory for the artist. That is not to say that older forms of work have been abandoned, rather that the various explorations of the past have been drawn together in a fresh context and interrogated. One of the main tools Visnes is employing in this examination is colour. It has always been present in her work but now it assumes a new force. These new paintings signal a modest, personal, repetition of a key art historical moment. In the 1880s, the pointillist George Seurat demonstrates the possibilities of placing colours beside each other, allowing them their true unruly power, rather than blending them in harmonious and muted combinations. Visnes has adopted a similar practice and within the dimensions of her work created a parallel revolution. Utilising a small infinitely repeated stroke across her paintings, the colours are allowed their own space. It is not exactly pointillism with all of its science and rules intact – colours sit on top of each other, washes of colour are superimposed over complete images – but the respect given to the discrete force of each colour and the dotted intensity of the paintings owe much to the 'chromoluminarism' of the late nineteenth century.

The unruliness Visnes has unleashed verges dangerously close to the beautiful, a term in persistent disgrace within contemporary art theory. Allied to that, there are constant references to the world of craft, décor, fashion and ornament. The works are at times defiant in their acknowledgement of so many marginalised forms and subversive in the pleasure they allow us to access. The curator Tami Katz-Frieberg points to the subliminal impact of such works:

Research shows that the visual examination of a richly coloured and textured ornament provokes a pleasurable stimulus in the brain; the beauty embedded in a crowded weave of different colours causes the viewer sensual excitement that cannot be verbally described.

Scientists have identified a mathematical classification they termed ‘a wallpaper group’ based on the symmetries in any given two-dimensional pattern. While they have also found that there are only 17 possible distinct groups they, like craftsmen before them, have also acknowledged that these patterns draw in the viewer in an almost obsessive way, generating a sense of the infinite. The subsequent experience of sensory overload is heightened by the use of colour that bypasses rational filters to stimulate the viewer immediately.

In *Chromophobia*, a brief history of colour’s disreputable reputation in art, David Batchelor explains

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It is this unruly dispensary of pleasure that leads to the distrust of colour. Batchelor chronicles the pervasive suspicion that greets the appearance of pure colour and points to the dark and brownish blending of tones that attempted to constraint it before the pointillists, 20th century painting revolutions and the more recent spatial explorations of colour by artists such as Donald Judd and Batchelor himself.

Visnes has allied her new exploration of colour with another formal shift — the re-emergence of the off-cut mdf fragment as canvas for these paintings. Having succumbed to the tradition of the orthodox rectilinear canvas for several years, the return to this more random surface seems to indicate a new sense of freedom. The off-cuts have always implied notions of the fragment — a partial survival of something larger or an inventiveness that adapts to the constraints of available materials. Now the mdf fragments are being used to present museum like pieces — Egyptian sculptures of cats and dogs, a bust, intricate lace patterns, botanical illustrations, geological specimens. The figurative subject matter itself seems fragmentary, the accidents of historical survival. And it is in the presentation of these figures that the differences from the original pointillist enterprise are most obvious. While a painter like Seurat gave each coloured stroke a distinct respect, the overall attempt was to combine these individual colours to create a picture that more closely imitated the way in which colour and light was received by the human eye. Visnes, though, uses the accumulation of strokes to highlight the various figurative elements, separating them out from their backgrounds or veiling them in colour. As a result, we become aware of the unassimilated nature of the thing presented. The object retains an alien aspect, underscoring its separation from human understanding, the ultimate resistance of its materiality to our efforts to ‘know’ it.

Given the objects often chosen to be depicted in this body of work, it becomes apparent that each is a fragmentary example from a rich tradition of art and craft across centuries and cultures in which artists and artisans have meditated on the nature of representation itself. Despite the varying degrees of cultural difference and artistic intent implicated in the history of each element, they all share this basic impulse to grapple with the ways in which we can represent reality to one another.

The very fragmentary nature of the paintings prevents this from becoming a humanistic programme unifying the entire history of arts and crafts in one vast project. But each fragment does offer a glimpse of diverse possibilities within representation and the breadth of material displayed suggests that the ornamental and the crafts have as much to offer in this realm as the so-called finer arts.

In an essay entitled 'House-trained Objects', the craft historian Tanya Harrod suggests that many of the craft interests of key artists and architects in the 20th century have been sidelined in the writing of modernist histories. It ruins the line of argument to touch on Corbusier's interest in gardening, dress design or ceramics, Joseph Albers' jewellery making, Alan Davie's silversmithing or Eduardo Paolozzi's wallpapers.

If we look over the past century and a half, it is possible to discern an alternative history of the visual arts, which is inclusive rather than exclusive and which honours the variousness of artists' approaches and which includes crafts and applied arts in the story

Harrod goes on to acknowledge the presence in contemporary theory of Marx, Freud, Mary Douglas and others, raising awareness of the object within a commodity system. Visnes' though veers away from the more economic reading of the object towards a psychological and at times scientific meditation on the nature of objecthood. Her painting of an agate slice and botanical drawings dwells on the way objects can shift across categories from scientific classification to arts and crafts design, new age ornament and fractal geometry. At the same time, her pointillistic technique brings the viewer back to the role of painting within representation. Van Gogh's ability to create an equivalence between a single paint stroke and a

single leaf is echoed in Visnes' experiments in this body of paintings. At times that equivalence is apparent, in other instances the paint sits on the surface of the image denying any fiction of depth, or of the transformation of line into representation (the large yellow and white circles, for instance, that dominate a background of floral patterns).

In the light of these experiments it is interesting to re-examine the earlier work of Hanneline Visnes. It quickly becomes apparent how many of the themes of earlier paintings and drawings have been abstracted and reconsidered in the new project. The darkness of many earlier works – the skulls or twilight tree-lined landscapes – reveal their underlying order, appearing in symmetrical lines or balanced quantities. String of skulls remind us of jewellery and strings of pearls, the ubiquitous birds reveal their origins in scientific illustration while the trees and leaves suggest origins in botanical gazeteers as much as in reality. They are things at one remove, placed in paintings that themselves are at another remove from reality.

The trees too evoke neurological fantasies, dendritic trees in the human brain propagating synaptic responses that ultimately process the images we receive from our eyes. An infinite pattern of neuron pathways that responds with delight to colour and searches for patterns in the world of things beyond the limits of our body.

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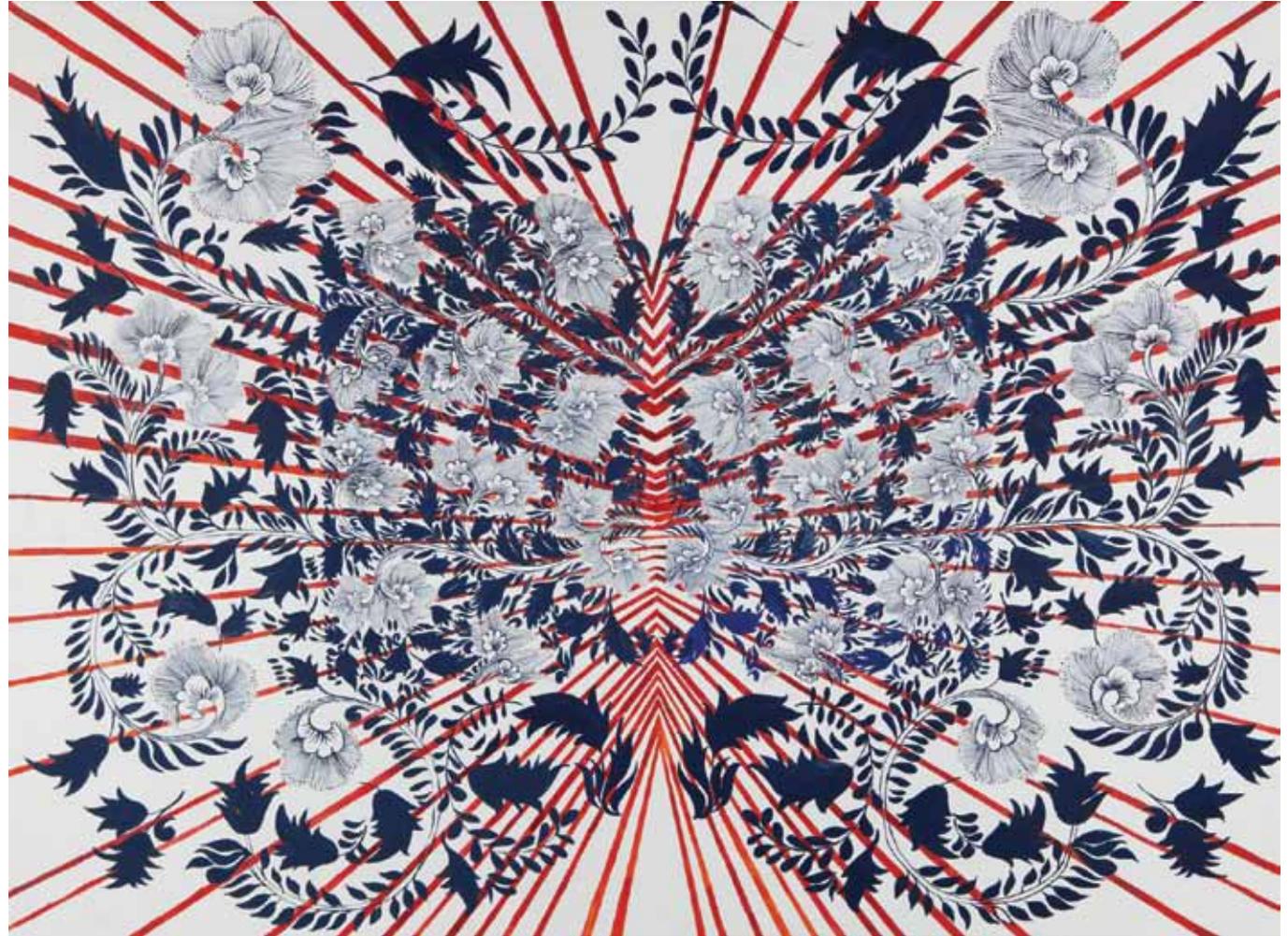
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**Ming Ming Ming**  
Watercolour on paper, 72x85cm, 2011



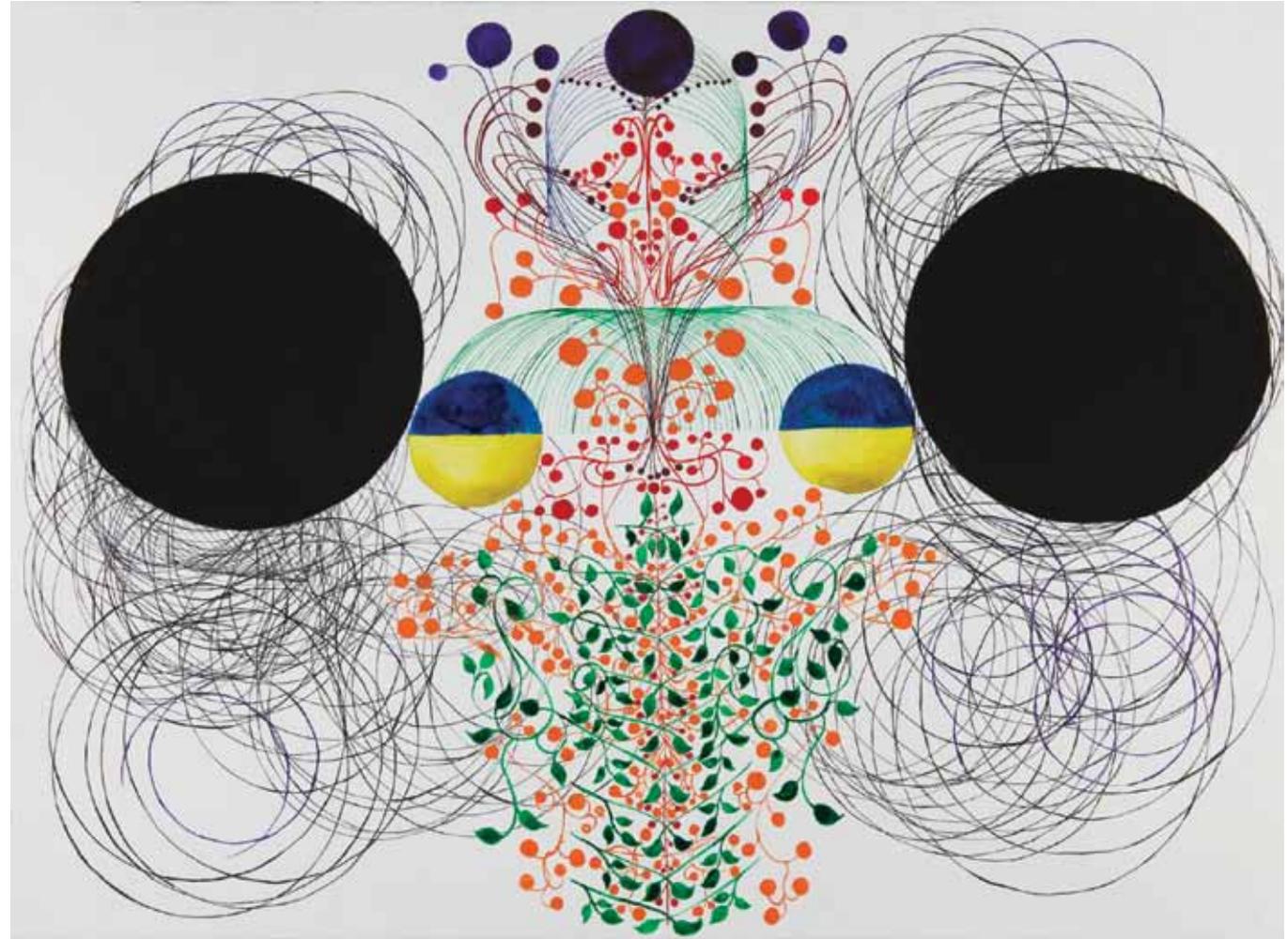
**Tiger**  
Gouache on paper, 72 x 85 cm 2011



**Arrangement with geometric elements**  
Gouache on paper, 85 x 72 cm, 2011



Arrangement with sci-fi elements  
Gouache on paper, 72 x 85cm, 2011



**Egyptian sculpture**  
Gouache on paper, 10 x 15 cm, 2012



**Terracotta head**  
Gouache on paper, 7 x 10 cm, 2012



**Public gardens**  
Oil on board ca 45 x50 cm 2012

Over leaf  
**Public gardens detail**





**Bronze head - Simon**

Oil on gesso on board, ca 35 x 45 cm 2012

**Bronze head - Simon detail**



«A house between the trees» oil on board , ca 45 x 50  
cm 2011



**The sun is closing its eye**  
Oil on gesso on board ca 30 x 45cm 2011

**The sun is closing its eye, detail**





**In late july**  
Oil on board ca 20 x 30 cm 2012



**Plant grown for its interesting foliage**  
Oil on gesso on board, ca 45 x 50 cm 2012

**Plant grown for its interesting foliage detail**





**Ardabil with stripes**  
Oil on board ca 25 x 35 cm 2012

**Ardabil with stripes detail**





This catalogue was published  
to accompany the exhibition  
*The pointilist sculpture park* by  
Hanneline Visnes in gallery  
Arte Gianin May/June 2012.

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Photography Stephen Jackson  
Design BAKKAL

Thanks to Benjamin Greenman

