

Robert van de Graaf *

When I was a child, I was firmly convinced that there were gnomes living in a certain corner of our garden, behind some bushes. How long I stared at them I don't know. Perhaps it was no more than a single moment. Was this my first mystical experience? I don't know. This early memory suddenly resurfaced when encountering Robert van de Graaf's paintings. His works refer to specific places, or perhaps better: specific moments. What we see are inner images: visions that he has captured on canvas.

Robert van de Graaf lives on the edge of the North Sea, where the rhythm of ebb and flow and the gently bending horizon make you aware of your own breath and the insignificance of human existence. The landscape character of by far most of the paintings could be explained by this.

A trip to Patmos is equally a source of inspiration. Wikipedia says: According to tradition, the evangelist John was exiled to this island around 95 AD. In the *Cave of the Apocalypse*, he wrote the Bible book of Revelation or Apocalypse. This makes Patmos a 'Holy Island' for many.

More important than the island itself, let alone Christian tradition, is the fact of the vision revealed to one person living in isolation. John's cave echoes, as it were, in the isolation of the painter's studio. It is the spiritual state, the moment of complete openness that leads to revelation, that defines the character of the paintings.

Likewise, he feels permanently drawn to the bustling city that, as the song puts it, never sleeps. Certainly a metropolis like New York, where Robert worked for a year as an architect (at Steven Learner Studio*) and as an artist, has places of extreme silence and spiritual enlightenment. A series of small paintings in the exhibition are inspired by these specific locations, where the intimate focus on details of the structures suggest the grandeur of the whole. Like an immense neo-Gothic church in Harlem, incidentally still under construction: Cathedral Saint-John the Divine. Coincidentally or not, the same saint turns up here.

His paintings reveal that Robert van de Graaf seeks the divine experience within himself. Without pressure from any religion, which by definition represents a community. Everything in him seems to point to a yearning for inner liberation. In this, I suspect a certain kinship with spiritual movements from the turn of the century, around 1900, which in turn were important for modern art.

Here I am thinking in particular of Theosophy, which seeks a better understanding of reality and truth behind external phenomena. This is based on the assumption that consciousness precedes manifestation. Robert van de Graaf is not an adept of this, but a certain kinship is undeniably present, if only because of the underlying quest for inner freedom.

With him, the aforementioned consciousness translates into a fundamental openness, which makes it possible for yourself to open up new spaces.

The paintings in this exhibition appeal to our capacity for openness. But first of all, look for the child within yourself.

Ad Himmelreich

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*) Robert van de Graaf (born 1983) lives and works in Scheveningen. He was trained as an architect. Besides being a visual artist, he is above all a poet. At a young age he took private lessons in drawing and painting with Dutch artist Erica Meyster (1949 - 2006).
For further information: www.robertvandegraaf.com

**) At Steven Learner Studio, he worked on art-related projects such as the 'Haunch of Venison' gallery (Rockefeller Center) and 'The Granary' (private gallery of collectors M. Bucksbaum and R. Learsy), Litchfield County, Connecticut, USA. After many years of running his design firm, Steven Learner established his creative consulting practice (www.stevenlearner.com).