

## Iconoclast

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There is the *thing*, and there is the *painting of the thing*.

Over the span of 40 years, Raoul De Keyser has forged a quiet yet revolutionary path in nonrepresentational painting, thwarting Modernist paradigms in an effort to satisfy his curiosity – specifically, to freely explore the transformation of idea into paint. Having matured quite late, De Keyser began to paint at age 33 and did not exhibit frequently until the mid-1980s. Unlike many of his American contemporaries, and despite the fact that some of his early works investigated, albeit peripherally, the dichotomy of object and image, De Keyser never truly shared in the quest for “purity” in abstraction. His paintings, as a result, are non-linear and quintessentially European; lack of restraint and an evident confidence coexists with unobtrusive subject matter, subtle palette, modest scale, and stylistic consistency.

Accessible yet wholly ambiguous, De Keyser’s paintings are not the casually imperfect abstractions they are often mistaken for. In fact, the term *abstract* is, in De Keyser’s case, a misnomer, as the paintings are as much the result of an intuitively additive process as they are a “paring down” of forms and ideas. They are not entirely without recognizable subject matter, nor are they essentialized *versions* of real-world objects or things – instead, each painting is an independent experiment; a direct result of De Keyser’s reluctance to superficially align himself with any one painting methodology.

Though it is true that De Keyser draws from the entire range of post-war painting styles – there are elements of color-field painting, abstract expressionism, and pop art, as well as lyrical and geometric abstraction in many of his works – each painting is autonomous. Challenging the limitations of figure versus ground, at times he willfully contaminates his compositions by erasing, outlining, enhancing, or nearly obliterating the forms, always embracing the incontinuity of true experimentation. De Keyser’s paintings are, as the title of his 2001 exhibition alluded to, “remnants” – residuals of the process of discovering and deciding *what to do with* forms (or pieces of forms), rather than attempts to arrive at predetermined “images” or “things.”

To this end, De Keyser has never adhered to strict formal principles either; his paintings exist on their own, and largely unspecified, terms. Likewise, his sources are indeterminable and barely associative. In some, floating shapes may reference aerial views of continents, or perhaps mountains or stains. In others, vaguely geometric forms interact with rough, brushy, semi-flat color fields. More often than not, De Keyser appears to shirk tried-and-true compositional devices – asymmetrical balance, focal points, harmonious palettes – in favor of the seemingly “wrong” or abject. Considering his lexicon of forms and gestures, none of which are ostentatious, this could be described as an attempt to bring attention to what might otherwise

be cast aside as uninteresting. In fact, it is almost as if De Keyser is indifferent to images that are inherently too descriptive; instead he champions the under-recognized or difficult to depict, all the while allowing the editing and revising to happen directly on the canvas, in full view. In this way, the paintings are essentially *events* rather than depictions.

At times, De Keyser's paintings are unassuming to the point of appearing nonchalant. Conversely, at key moments, he reveals himself as a master formalist. A shape that at first seemed awkward is suddenly the result of patient consideration and keen arrangement. There is the sense, in many of the works, that the forms could not be repositioned without the entire composition falling apart, or perhaps being falsely "activated." Somehow, within this delicate non-system, De Keyser underscores the importance of the temporal or ephemeral; perhaps as it relates to our memory of places and things. At no place in his paintings does art historical trope or pseudo-conceptual framework trump intuition.

In addition to vaguely familiar yet inexplicable forms, De Keyser uses color to push back, slow down, interrupt, and ultimately corrupt the spatial logic of his compositions. Pallid and atmospheric washes are challenged by saturated, high contrast blocks and smudges. Sometimes, using pools of grey, blue, or pale green, De Keyser intentionally drowns and revitalizes his forms, consistently renegotiating the positive and negative space. There is almost the sense that he is struggling to locate an image that is stubborn or unwilling to emerge, or to tap into an unworldly or ethereal realm.

This exhibition, consisting of 30 paintings, is De Keyser's largest in New York to date and represents his wide vocabulary of motifs. Several works, including four that are exercises in "mapping out" a painting, continue a chalk line motif that De Keyser began in the 1970s, which was originally inspired by the corner of a soccer field. In another, more radical move, De Keyser cut the canvas of a painting from 1987 entitled *Steek*, isolating the compositions for *Steek 1* and *Steek 2* (both dated 1987/2005), in which a group of hard-edged, tubular shapes are forcibly altered by a ragged stripe dragging from one side of the canvas to the other. His interest in the limitations of pictorial space is nearly always at play – *Red Diamond* and an untitled work in blue (both 2006) have carefully delineated corners, perhaps suggesting that the paint is continually forced to comply with the confines of the structure that supports it.

De Keyser, inarguably a painter's painter, is in dialog with several major European artists – among them the Dutch artist Rene Daniëls, South African painter Marlene Dumas, and, perhaps most notably, fellow Belgian Luc Tuymans. Though he is studied and emulated, in essence De Keyser is an iconoclast, for his work operates outside of academic dialog or institutional critique. He refrains from coyness and intentional irony. His paintings do not have a specified place in art history, nor are they in pursuit of one; rather, they are examples of the ultimate indeterminacy of painting itself.

