

Searle, Adrian, 'Ambiguity abounds - Raoul De Keyser used to be a sports commentator. Now he makes abstract paintings about Kansas gunslingers', *The Guardian*, 10 April (2004), p.16.

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**Raoul De Keyser used to be a sports commentator. Now he makes abstract paintings about Kansas gunslingers. Adrian Searle reports**

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# Ambiguity abounds

**N**ow in his 70s, Raoul De Keyser has lived and worked all his life in the small Belgian town where he was born. Until he was approaching 60, he had little reputation outside his native region. Now a large survey of his paintings is at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, as part of a major European tour.

He has been described as "a painter's painter". This feels right, but what does it tell us? Perhaps that there is some secret encoded in his canvases, something only other painters can fully appreciate and read — the very things out of which their own paintings are made and unmade.

This is a question of shared circumstances, of what goes on in the painter's mind between the paint-table and the canvas, with a brush or a rag in hand, in order to make the next move, or to erase the last one. If other painters are the first to understand and admire De Keyser's art, it might be because they are the only ones to have been there themselves. By which I mean making the kinds

of decisions painters make, going through that open-ended and often mysterious process of beginning in one place and finding themselves in another; giving way to sudden impulses and going back on forced conclusions; seizing unforeseen opportunities and — following changes of direction, just to see where things might lead. The painter's predicament often entails reversals and indecisions. There are changes of heart and long delays. And all this before a small piece of prepared cloth stretched over a wooden frame.

De Keyser's paintings often appear anything but difficult, as abstract paintings go. This is part of his art's deception. His work makes frequent and undisguised reference to the local landscape and to the view from the window; the ornamental monkey-puzzle tree visible in a neighbour's garden, foliage, bushes, the bark of a birch tree, birds in flight, roofs, fences, backyard laundry carousels, children's swings, the markings on the local football pitch. There are references, too, to cycling and the flight of racing pigeons, to aeroplane vapour

trails and the idea of speed; and to the river that skirts the town on which De Keyser used to canoe. The vessel itself was named Tornado, which also became the title of a group of paintings. He paints the world beyond the window, and the window itself, and what is reflected in it, as well as the Venetian blind that obscures it. Sometimes he turns inward, to the walls and rooms of his house, which he occupies alone, to doorways opening on to darkened corridors, stairs, corners and afternoons.

The local, the concrete and the near-at-hand have all left their traces in his paintings, which have a clarity and painterly frankness that one might take as a kind of ease — leading one to suspect that his paintings are the sort of thing one could do oneself. Technically, there is nothing very mysterious about De Keyser's touch. There are delicate and apparently tentative passages, blunt and almost crudely assertive interruptions; mark-making disassociated from any formal pretence, and skeletal, linear arrangements that seem to show the painter moving around an object almost as though he were drawing a diagram. The forms he paints, which range from rectilinear and architectural forms to arrangements of ovoids and discs, from simple brushstrokes to compound shapes, present us with few apparent difficulties. His paintings are very approachable, as is their intimate human scale, their lack of what one might call heroism. They invite us to get up close.

Sometimes his paintings appear to be "pictures" of things and places, and sometimes they have the appearance of being objects of some sort in their own right. In *Dalton*, from 1990, the painted surface is ineluctably flat, a grim beige covering. It appears to be punctured, or at least punctuated, by four small, near-identical hand-painted circular dots of bluish-purple paint, which form the corners of a rectangle, square on to the picture plane. We could look at this painting as a dour and slightly unnerving abstraction (those blue dots seem to look back at you like dumb unblinking eyes, as though to psych you out); perhaps we could take the title to refer, in some obscure way, to Sir John Dalton (1766-1844), the English scientist who developed

atomic theory. It turns out, though, that De Keyser was actually referring to the Dalton Gang, the notorious Kansas gun-slingers, four of whom died in a shootout in 1892. "Those dots, then . . . ?" I asked the artist, who smiled mischievously and made revolvers with his fists.

We can take *Dalton* as a torso, then, shot. But the feeling is much more that the painting is the shootist, appraising us. Such ambiguity abounds. De Keyser is wary of explaining many of his titles and references, not least because they close the interpretation of his works down. A small group painted in 1992, *Front*, *Flank (Face)* and *Dal (Valley)*, are as much as anything like skin: flat, light-toned skins of paint inflected with small flecks or drips, stray touches of red and of a dark glutinous paint, which have arrived on the surface without obvious human interference. We might think of the surface as having been whipped, flayed or scourged. One might equally think of something much more ordinary, like shaving nicks, or something spilled on a tablecloth.

De Keyser's paintings have what I would call an edgy sense of rightness. "Edgy" because there are times when their indeterminacy seems entirely calculated. The little blobs and flecks that animate the fields of certain works might appear random or fanciful in their placement, but it is just as likely that they have been carefully transposed from a traced drawing. The randomness, in other words, is orchestrated. Which is perhaps why they never lose their fixity and strangeness. De Keyser is not an expressionist.

Elsewhere, it is as though the painter has paused in what he has been doing and asked of himself: "Is this a painting?" Not a good painting, a bad painting, a completed painting or an unfinished painting, but more whether what he has been doing is a painting at all, whether it is nothing more than the residue of abandoned work. This is not a bad place either for the artist or the viewer to find themselves.

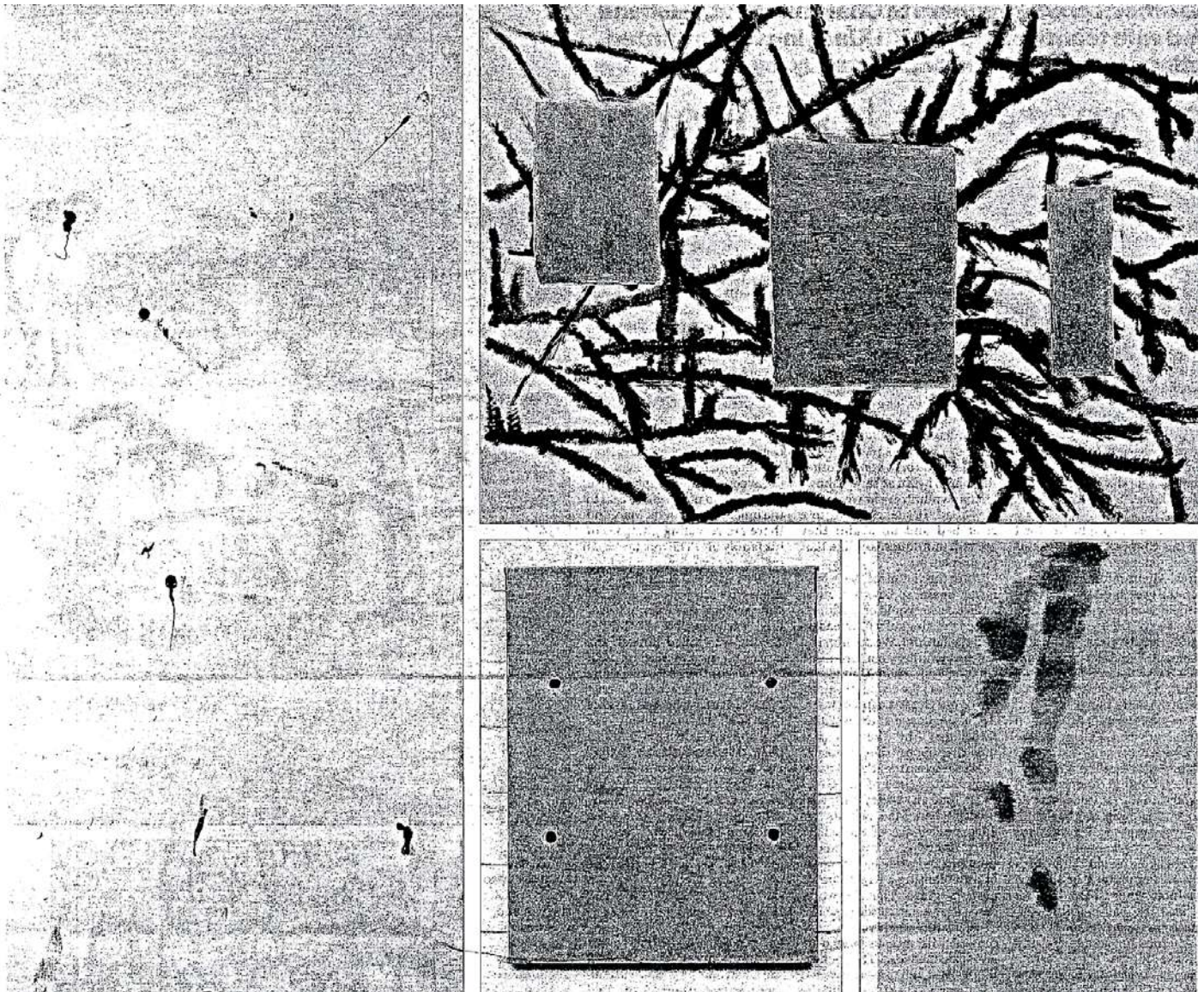
In De Keyser's work one suddenly finds paintings that appear to come out of nowhere or to break or reverse a sequence: a gently painted monochrome may provide a ground for further activity, or it can be left alone. One finds scribbly, near formless brushy paintings among hard-

edged, linear paintings; paintings of arrangements of mute blocks and blank blobs next to paintings that appear to be aerial views or diagrammatic plans of football pitches. If De Keyser's art is marked by a perplexing variety, one must seek continuity over its

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entire range. Here, if you like, is precisely where his abstraction lies – if one can say that anything in painting is ever entirely abstract, even in the most scrupulously non-referential work. We might also ask whether his early football pitch paintings are





abstractions or diagrams, complete paintings or details of white lines painted in the grass, sections of the pitch. Are these field paintings, or representations of a field? The question we can read as a kind of pun, or as a semantic game. That painting might be seen as a game is important; in an earlier career, De Keyser was a sports commentator. In 1995 he took the 1971 painting *Ground*—a flatly painted, diagrammatic ariel view of the pitch's baseline inside the goalkeeper's area—and rubbed away at a spot inside the goal, just as the grass on the pitch itself gets eroded and rubbed away by the goalie's boots. The goalkeeper, like the painter, goes through long periods of watchful inactivity, interspersed with sudden bursts of extremely energetic, fast-thinking action.

He leaves his mark on the field. In *Ground*, De Keyser was marking his own place among paintings whose formal, tonal and compositional variety led him in many different directions at once.

If we see him as an artist who moves back and forth in his own painted world, one also has to take account of where we place his art in wider terms. Various, his works could be regarded as oddball variants on the larger themes of postwar painting, related at different times to tachisme, pop, colour-field painting, lyrical abstraction, post-painterly abstraction, monochrome and stripe and grid painting, "surface-support", "fundamental painting", "process painting"... and so on, through all those ungainly formulations that seek to categorise and

package painting into types, orthodoxies, projects.

One could even categorise De Keyser's work, at one level, as vernacular and domesticated rehearsals of radical formal innovations and propositions that for the most part took place elsewhere. One finds many echoes, but it all depends what you are looking for, and where you choose to look. One artist that De Keyser does return to and regard highly is Gustav Courbet; and one might perhaps find traces of the 19th-century French Realist in certain notes of colour or touches of a brush in De Keyser's works. The fall of grain in *Les cribieuses de blé* (*The Grain Sifters*) of 1855 might make us think of De Keyser's *Flank* (*Face*) of 1992, and of *Untitled* (*Bern-Berlin*) *Sst.*, 1993.

**A question of perplexity ... clockwise from far left, *Dal* (*Valley*), *Born-Berlinhangend*, *Untitled* (*suggestion*), and *Dalton***

Instances of formal similarity would be better regarded much in the manner of stray memories and recollections, to be set beside memories of things seen and experienced—the monkey-puzzle tree, the birch wood beside the river where a canoe once drifted, the dangling Venetian blind swaying before the open window.

Looking at those De Keyser's in which nothing seems to remain except residue, or a ground disfigured with brush-wipings, or a suggestion of something held on the brink of coalescence, one also remembers their opposites, those works in which everything is very concrete, ordered and constructed. Each of his paintings has what one can call a character of its own, a pitch or timbre that is emotional as much as it is tonal, a gravity or apparent

lightness that reflects a cast of mind as much as a physical condition. Each painting has its presence and its state.

It is not a case of being identified by one kind of painting or another, but of making one sort of painting and another. This, I think, is where De Keyser's artistic identity finds itself, and what is unsettling and gratifying about what he does. What I find so moving about his art is as much what is left out, what is left to the pauses, the shifts, the back-trackings, the changes of tempo within it, over the cumulative entirety of what Raoul De Keyser has, and continues to, achieve.

© Adrian Searle 2004. Raoul De Keyser is at the Whitechapel Gallery, London E1, until May 23. Details: 020-7522 7888. A longer version of this article appears in the catalogue to the exhibition.

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