

Piet Augustijn :: *Kate Beck and the Potential of Line*

At first glance, Kate Beck's (b.1956, United States) work appears to be severe and geometrical, the surfaces dominated by horizontal and vertical straight lines drawn in a controlled fashion. Viewed from a distance, these works appear to be collections of straight lines that have been drawn in a fixed pattern, but every line has been put onto paper or aluminum by hand, so that any slight differences are only visible on closer inspection: differences in the lines' thickness and intensity caused by varying pressure of the hand, and differences in their tone and separation. The lines are not hard, but in fact soft, imperfect and sometimes jagged and unsteady. This makes every one of her works lively and fascinating, the structure of light and dark lines on a dark surface allowing the eye to constantly discover new subtleties.

*Structure (2011)* is a series of large paintings using poured oil paint and graphite on aluminum. These works are built up of vertical panels of color graduating from dark grey to anthracite to deep black, and a delightfully 'tactile' skin. This skin most resembles dark human skin with imperfections such as pockmarks, scratches and blemishes; it practically calls out to be stroked and cherished and gives the observer a feeling of faith and calm, a meditative moment. The black hole, the elongated vanishing point, is not ominous but is in fact reassuring.

A similar experience is provided by *Anxieties + Alienations (2010)*, a large work of poured oil paint and powdered graphite on aluminum, comprising (multiple) sections. The painting is reminiscent of the pigment sculptures by Anish Kapoor (b.1954), subtle poetic works with fragile skin and infinite depth of color.

*Descent into Limbo (1992)*, an unfathomable deep chasm of dark blue pigment, is part of the Kapoor collection at the De Pont Museum in Tilburg.

"Monochrome planes of color somehow affect time; they bring about a dreamlike mood that seems to slow down time..." Kapoor said about his work, "The wonderful thing about abstract art is that it does not impose any meaning on us. As an artist I have nothing to say, it is the observer who creates his own interpretation." The same thing could be said about Beck's work. It is abstract but stems ultimately and to a large extent from reality whilst remaining open to myriad interpretations and levels of meaning.

This is apparent also in *Modulation (2011)*, a series of graphite drawings on paper fixed to aluminum. They comprise horizontal panels and lines that progress from dark grey to light grey to almost white; a kind of bocage landscape of horizontal panels furnished with a velvety skin. The works make the viewer wonder whether it is day or night, although the answer is clear when you look at early black and white photographs of landscapes in which time is

determined by mood and atmosphere. In some of her works, the horizon is depicted by a white stripe, with the sky above and the land or water below. The associations with landscape are no surprise since Beck lives on the coast of Maine, where the sea largely determines the color of the sky above it and the land adjacent to it. Nothing in nature is ever the same: the skies, the waves, the land and the colors. Everything is dependent on weather conditions: sun, rain or mist. Beck records these often-subtle differences in her drawings, which could be described almost as a diary of her observations. She guides, but allows chance to take its course. Lines can widen and develop like the grain in wood; she draws them like sand ridges left by the tide. Beck's drawings appear black, but there are so many subtleties contained within that blackness that they nevertheless convey a sense of color. They are poetic impressions of colored perceptions, interpretations of a personal experience of nature created from within and resulting in oases of inner calm and contemplation, but also of mystery. Despite their dark appearance, the works are not somber but positive and optimistic. They are of encapsulations of intensity, intimacy and peacefulness in geometrical form.

The *Modulation* series of drawings is to me, also typically Dutch. Straight lines characterize the Dutch landscape with its ditches and canals and square-shaped patches of farmland or pasture. However, one can also find this type of landscape in other parts of the world and it inspires Beck to create numerous works in which simplicity, discipline and subtlety are key.

The black series is also highly reminiscent of work by American minimalist Ad Reinhardt (b.1913 – d.1967) who, from 1950, made series of monochromes in closely related shades of a single color, and which from 1954 onwards were all entirely black. He created images which bear no trace of hierarchical relationships between shapes or emphasis on a particular part of the painting and in which adjacent colors do not compete with each other. The same principles play a role in Beck's work. However, although she works within the grid and adheres to systematic principles, her compositions are created intuitively and based in emotion. She is interested in the pure aesthetics of line as an element of color and independence, and its potential to evoke a wide range of emotions and thoughts. "My paintings and drawings are created intuitively as a result of applying material to a predetermined space: graphite on paper or paint on aluminum...". The results are calm and well-considered, subtle collections of soft and muted tones that develop through the repetition of lines, which, within the rigid limits of the surface to be adorned, symbolize the essence of life. These drawings and paintings, which are created in greys and white as well as dark grey and black, express life and the passage of time, and, in the lines and the gaps between them, maintain the illusion of space.

*2011 Piet Augustijn, Curator emeritus of contemporary art, Gorcums Museum,  
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