

Tinus Vermeersch - 'De Atavisten'

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Atavism: the phenomenon whereby a living organism displays forms or characteristics that do not correspond to those of the immediately preceding generation, but rather to those of an earlier one. In a cultural sense, the term refers to the unexpected re-emergence of primitive customs, modes of thought or patterns of behaviour from the past.

Tinus Vermeersch's work has its roots in anthropology and in the animistic and folkloric traditions of indigenous societies. His technique, too, reveals a fascination with the past: drawing on an in-depth knowledge of historical materials and traditional craft techniques, he deliberately returns to methods that have fallen out of use.

In this series of oil paintings on panel, Vermeersch continues to develop the surreal universe that previously took shape in drawings, tempera paintings, sculptures and installations. Certain archetypes, such as the bird-man and the haystack, which had established a recurring presence in this mythical world, seem to recede into the background as this exploration continues.

In the small landscape with a blue sky and a dog, the bird-man is quite literally escorted away by a procession of people. His characteristic *Tegumen* – an enclosed, pod- or shell-like form – is also undergoing a transformation. The form – which, in a state of constant transformation and assuming countless guises, served as a kind of template for hybrid structures and creatures – is now broken open.

The floral and plant motifs that claim the foreground are new. As they grow, they take on one another's characteristics, as well as those of their surroundings. They form clusters in which individual elements merge into a new whole, caught in a continuous cycle of growth and decay.

Uniting opposites within a single image is fundamental to Tinus Vermeersch's oeuvre. What at first appears recognisable and familiar becomes unsettling. The image invites the viewer in, yet at the same time remains closed; it is narrative without explaining a story, detailed yet inscrutable.

The same contradiction is present in his working method. Vermeersch returns to old, time-consuming techniques that seem scarcely suited to the pace of our times. His method consequently takes on an anachronistic quality: classical and idiosyncratic, yet at the same time distinctly contemporary.

The title *De Atavisten*, derived from *atavism*, lends itself to several interpretations. Alongside the other life forms, it may refer to the people who inhabit these anthropomorphic landscapes. We see them in small boats in the background, insignificant in scale, on their way somewhere or nowhere. They lose themselves in the trance of a ritual, or appear as individuals in portraits with partially veiled faces.

Are they survivors of a collapsed culture, or ancestors from a distant past? Their name calls to mind that of a tribe, like the Eburones or the Iroquois, and evokes associations with history, anthropology and the adventure stories of Vermeersch's youth.

Perhaps, unconsciously, the title also refers to the artist himself. In his painterly exploration, he repeatedly returns to a kind of primal source, from which he creates new images. *De Atavisten* thus becomes not only a reference to the past, but also to an artistic method: not reconstructing the past, but reactivating and transforming it. Out of a sense of unease in his relationship with modernity, Vermeersch searches for a visual language that is at once archaic and new, familiar and unsettling.