

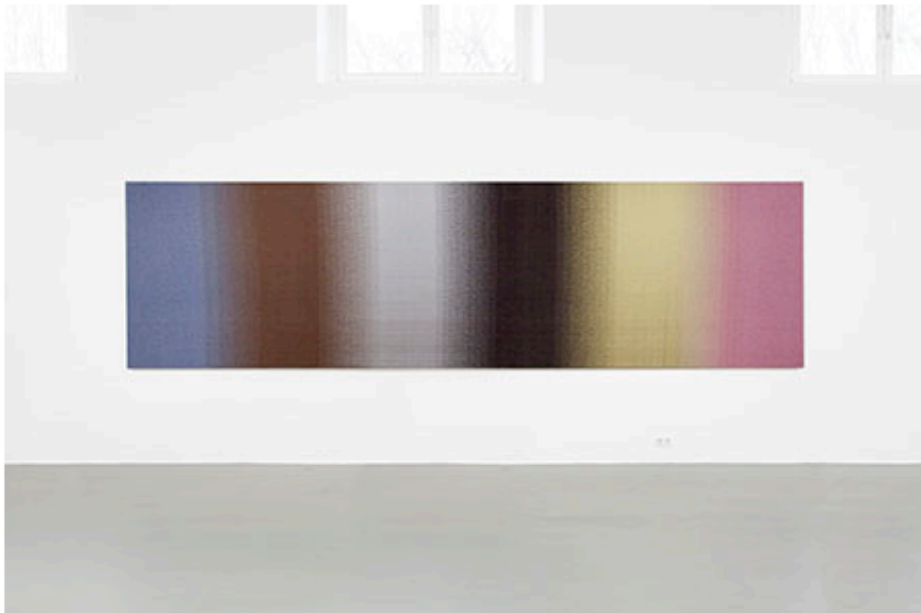
Eva Maria Stadler, "Willem de Rooij," *Frieze*, June-August 2012.

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Willem de Rooij

KUNSTVEREIN, MÜNCHEN, GERMANY



Taping Precognitive Tribes, 2012, needlework with thread

The light-flooded spaces of the newly renovated Kunstverein München – with their eight-metre-high ceilings and new grey-green floors – reopened to the public with an exhibition of large-format woven pictures produced by Willem de Rooij between 2009 and 2012, presented together for the first time. The show's title, 'Untilted', was not a misprint, but visitors were left to decide whether it was a playful allusion or a deliberate 'slip'. The spectrum of reference is a recurring theme for De Rooij. In the show's accompanying booklet, the artist chose to reprint Tom Holert's 2008 lecture "I Was Interested in ...": Interest and Intuition in Art Discourse', in which the art historian cites examples of interviews where artists proclaim their interest in a theme or subject. The lecture notes the subjective character of artistic referentiality, echoing psychologists of the 19th and early 20th centuries, who identified personal background and professional tendencies as the main motivations behind subjective influences.

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In his hand-woven tapestries, De Rooij counters the often seemingly arbitrary ‘I’m interested in ...’ of contemporary art – what he calls ‘referential terror’ – by attempting to block out references. Yet he does so as an artist whose last major exhibition, ‘Intolerance’ at Berlin’s Neue Nationalgalerie in 2010, was all about reference. In that show, De Rooij combined a selection of 17th-century works by the Dutch bird painter Melchior d’Hondecoeter, with feathered cult objects from 18th-century Hawaii. Although the woven pictures eschew this kind of subjective referential juxtaposition, it is clear that De Rooij can’t quite escape the frame of reference of the aesthetic field.

The ‘repetitive crossing of threads from two different directions’ that occurs in the woven works, as the museum’s introductory text puts it, remains a complex operation, however simple it may appear at first. Creating transitions from one colour tone of fabric to another, as De Rooij does in *Black to Black*, or between ten different shades of pink in *Mechanize her Jenny* (both 2011), evokes the classic topoi of abstract painting. Each work carries the self-referentiality of the picture as an aesthetic artefact, while the process of abstraction itself, as Theodor W. Adorno put it, requires a universal exchange of associations, links and ties within the framework of art’s referential system. The aesthetic charge of De Rooij’s woven works, therefore, depends substantially on the rich discourse of painting.

‘In fact, when men are fabricating thought, / It goes as when a weaver’s masterpiece is wrought. / One treadle sets a thousand threads a-going, / And to and fro the shuttle flies; / Quite unperceived the threads are flowing, / One stroke effects a thousand ties’, says Mephistopheles in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust: The First Part of the Tragedy* (1808). And which threads are being crossed here? De Rooij gleefully deploys anagrams, encryption and coding in titles or his works (*Vertigo’s Doll*, 2010, for example, is an anagram of ‘silver to gold’). But these puzzles are not intended to hide a particular meaning. The working viewer thus begins the task of weaving thoughts, crossing the threads and casting his eyes – for example in the show’s largest work, *Taping Precognitive Tribes* (2012), a horizontal panorama that combines the colours that occur in the other works in the exhibition – from blue to brown to silver to black to gold to pink. Or from the new colour of the gallery floor to the whitish green of the melted water flowing in Munich’s Isar river. The connections are not binding, but De Rooij’s show does raise fundamental questions concerning the institution’s role in image production and the system of relations and values governing aesthetic exchange.

Appearing monochrome at a distance, the colours of De Rooij’s tapestries shimmer and vibrate, shine and seduce. In this exhibition, the artist’s ‘no’ to reference becomes a clear ‘yes’ to impact. The question remains as to how emancipatory this inversion of the hierarchy of reference might be. One can enjoy the pictures on the basis of free association, embracing them and abandoning oneself to them. Yet their critical potential continues to benefit from the very references the artist sought to avoid.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

Eva Maria Stadler

<http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/willem-de-rooij/>