

Interiors Revisited

On the Doppelgänger Motif in the Work of Sarah Smolders

I first saw the work of Sarah Smolders in 2010, more than ten years ago. I was invited by KASK Ghent to be part of the jury judging the students' final projects. What I especially remember of her project is the extremely straight, smooth, white wall on which her paintings were hung. She had not only filled, sanded and painted the holes in "her wall" with her own hands but also plastered the entire surface with 'Onetime' spackling in order to turn it into one large, even wall. Afterwards I'm sure it got a couple layers of extra-white opaque paint on top. I don't know if she was already aware at the time that her future work would incorporate the walls, the space, the environment, in short the architecture. With the location already a determining factor FOR the work from the outset, it would later become an aspect IN the work, eventually becoming part OF her oeuvre.

It was already clear ten years ago that Sarah Smolders did not want to leave anything to chance presentation-wise. She did not show her WORK, she SHOWED her work. Today, the following description would be more accurate: "That which her work comes into contact with becomes part of her work." In this sense, every exhibition of her paintings also has a site-specific character.

According to some, a good painting will come out well anywhere: in a warehouse, a garage, a stable without a single straight or even wall; provocateurs claim that a good work will even come out well in a toilet. (Those who say this are usually not artists.) And yet, for Sarah Smolders's works, I wouldn't object to this without reservations. Not the space itself, but the physical condition in which it finds itself plays an important role in her oeuvre. She can work with any wall, she will react to any architectural peculiarity, she adds artificial light herself if the space is too dark, etc. Thinking about her work in the space and physically putting the space in order are both for her part of the same process. Many of us would call this the preparation of the exhibition, but for Sarah Smolders it is the start of the artistic intervention. That is why she cannot leave this aspect to others. And while I am writing this, I realise how much of what Sarah Smolders was struggling with back in 2010 escaped me. She emphasised her attention to this aspect and the importance of it as early as her "first presentation" at the academy.

In 2011, Sarah Smolders shows the work *Studio Floor*, the first of what will develop into a series of painted studio floors. Once a year, the traces, stains and other characteristics of her studio's floor are reproduced quasi-photographically in a painting – in the case of *Studio Floor, 2011* it's a grey concrete surface on which a geometric shape has been applied with varnish. The shape refers to the light that comes in and reaches the floor, on which we see small, pebble-sized stains in different colours. It's a kind of diary of the floor, the summary of one year of artistic activity, concentrated into one image.

What makes the *Studio Floor* paintings so fascinating is twofold. First, there is no "waste" in Sarah Smolders's kitchen. The stains on the floor – reminders of previous

artistic activity – form the basis for a next portrait. The painting is like a registration of a part of the space with an SLR camera. Contrary to what is often said about painting, i.e. that it is “a window on the world”, Smolders’s work has been about reflection from the very beginning (when she was 23), both in the literal and the figurative sense of the word. Second, she also incorporates elements into her paintings that traditionally belong to the domain of archiving. The – ever new – floors are “kept” in a painted version. The documenting will gain significance in later works, because her artistic dealing with traces in a space, their reconstruction or even restoration, will all take place at the level of art.

Déjà Vu? Curtains – Wallpaper – Tiles

Both in the 2011 exhibition *Framing the Light* in Tilburg and in *Flowers and Pigments* two years later, the canvas detaches itself, as it were, from its frame or from the wall, placing itself in the space in a sculptural-installational manner and dividing up the space. As the title suggests, light plays a central role in Tilburg. The attentive spectator’s gaze sees small spots of light paint sparkling on the large canvas and is then directed towards several painted spots of light on the wall and floor. Although the familiarly rectangular floor of *Leo XIII* is quite large, walking around becomes uncomfortable for fear of stepping on something. The few works that subtly show what used to be there mainly “bring to light” the hundreds of unpainted elements that are still present in the space. In this sense, the bold title refers to no more than 5% of the exhibition, the remaining 95% for (both) the visitor (and the light) to complete.

Here, too, the notion of silent cinematic documentation, and thus of photography, is lurking around the corner. The paintings could be called snapshots. Above all, they nourish the feeling of a before and after.

In September 2013, I attend the opening of the solo exhibition *Flowers and Pigments* at Salon 2060. The first thing I notice from the street in this ground-floor shop-windowed commercial space is the giant curtain. I cannot yet see (or believe) it is a large canvas. It is sturdy, heavy, and painted from top to bottom with ecoline, spray, gouache, enamel and oil paint, on top of which I notice lush red flowers. The minimalism and subtle spots of light on the curtain in Tilburg were the delicate prelude to a bourgeois, decorative and baroque canvas that – covered in oil and pigment, like a flower bush in full bloom – positions itself diagonally across the room. True to nature, the work takes up most of the (day)light.

Although not in a significant place within the landscape of visual art, I do regard this as an important exhibition within the development of Sarah Smolders’s oeuvre. A new type of work appears: consisting of two parts, at first sight illustrating something rather banal, it touches on a central theme in her work, which is later given its own status in *Notes on places* as the addition of an “extra” element to her art in the form of art. The doppelgänger motif appears.

Flowers and Pigments are paintings that show an abstract flower on the one hand, created by applying “loose” colour pigment on canvas and hung on the wall (approx.

100 x 80 cm), and the same flower painted in a realistic manner on the other hand, placed on the ground in a remarkably smaller format.

Even if you want to look at both parts with equal attention, the smaller one on the ground inevitably attracts the most attention, and not just because of the fluorescent edge on the slat it stands on (so actually it is not on the ground but on a tiny plinth). Its meaning is unclear: at first sight, it seems to be the starting point, but it could also be a commentary on the other part. Numerous questions arise: is it a pictorial index card, a footnote that explains the larger work? Is it the first- or last-born of these twins? Or is this the first decoupling? And what are the implications of this question? Size-wise it comes close to what we will later call a non-linguistic visitor's text; is it perhaps a precursor? And, as far as this small painting seems to explain the larger work, is it the seed of what will become *Notes on places* six years later, but could here be called (paraphrasing) "Notes on pigments" or "Notes on colours" or even "Notes on painting"?

Nearly every exhibition by Sarah Smolders seems to arrive at a dichotomy. The visitor contemplates the relationship between the two elements and thinks about how they relate to each other, while the artist withdraws by not communicating any chronology or order to it. It seems as if Sarah Smolders aims to incorporate the information about her work into the work itself as much as possible, so that no external description would be necessary. This results in a series of works consisting of parts related to each other like plurals: twins, mirror images, doppelgängers, all referring to each other. Its most explicitly elaborated version so far was shown in the exhibition *Doppelgänger* in Lovenjoel.

An unknown painter takes a flower as a starting point to create a repetitive pattern of curls, leaves and hearts. This pattern becomes the motif of a wallpaper that for decades adorns the corridor of the former military hospital's gatehouse where HISK was located from 1996 until 2007. Years later, in the context of the group exhibition *Little HISK*, Ulrike Lindmayr invites Sarah Smolders, who transforms her room under the title *Reconstructed wallpaper*. Visitors who leave the room a bit too quickly, concluding "there's nothing here", have failed to notice that the room has been overhauled by Sarah Smolders from top to bottom. Everything is still the way it was, including the walls, apparently, because she has painted them completely by hand with the recurring pattern of the wallpaper (scraps of which can still be seen in the corridor). This seemingly professional restoration of the room has become a three-dimensional painting that we can "step into". The experience of the painted space, with its eye-dazzling repetition of the (flower) motif, elicits admiration from many visitors. Not only for the artist's dedication to this space or the labour-intensive process and technical-painterly skills (mastery) that Sarah Smolders possesses, but for this most explicit example of what art is capable of: the blurring of the line between reality and fiction. The place is more-than-restored, reinstated; the space has become the work of art. It does not (temporarily) contain art like a regular exhibition space, it no longer holds or carries art, but it has itself become art. If you like, you can see irregularities, unravel how certain architectural disturbances interrupt the motif and how and when the rhythm picks up again as if nothing had happened. Compared to the original wallpaper, there are many differences, but few

want to look at it that way. Who would want to break the illusion, which is such a nice place to stay? This in-situ work does not represent old and worn wallpaper through painting, but rather its “reconstruction”, as indicated by the title (*Reconstructed wallpaper*). We are indeed inside the painting all the time, looking at a painting, not at a decorated wall.

The exhibition *concrete/concrete*, one year later at Netwerk Aalst, also consists of a site-specific installation. More than 10,000 self-made tiles – concrete and hand-painted – form a floor on top of the floor. They are loose; visitors can walk on them. Only a narrow strip of old tiles at the bottom of a wall in the building is still visible. Unlike her intervention in *Little HISK* – which was still an interpretation of a motif (an abstraction, a suggestion of it) – the tile now becomes concrete. The present tiles form the basis for the much more detailed concrete floor covering (made by Sarah Smolders) that is finished with a patina of acrylic and varnish. In preparation for this work, she produces an edition of 250 of these tiles. Each tile has a different finish, which is then repeated in the larger production of 10,000 pieces. Once again, the *Notes on places* arise (also an edition of 250). The relationship between the edition of tiles and the large in-situ sculpture seems to form the transition between the fixed “caption” of *Flowers and Pigments* and the *Notes on places* for the exhibition *Notes of a Housepainter* (Marion De Cannière, 2019).

Language and Titles – Doppelgänger

The titles of Sarah Smolders’s works are often very concrete. They refer to what has been painted (*Studio Floor, Nature Morte*), the material (*Flowers and Pigments, concrete/concrete*), the action (*Reconstructed wallpaper, Notes of a Housepainter*), or the things she does (*Framing the Light*). In comparison, the current title *Doppelgänger* (both singular and plural) guides the interpretation of the works in the exhibition. *Doppelgänger* refers to a second person, a dark side... It summarises, as it were, Sarah Smolders’s perception of the space(s) in Lovenjoel. She adds a layer to the space at each visit, patiently building up her work. Conversely, her exhibition consists of scraping away a layer that is present in the space in order to show what it’s about: making visible (anew) what was already there.

This ambiguity is continued in the title: in many contexts, a doppelgänger is a part of a decoupling. The German uses *Entzweiung* (literally: turning one element into two by splitting) or the synonym *das (Sich)entzweien*, which sounds like cutting in half rather than doubling. Sarah Smolders, however, doubles the space by dividing it into two.

Besides, many things were already present in duplicate long before these sports-hall changing rooms were converted into an exhibition space. The two water drains, two groups of neon tubes and mirrored arrangement of sockets revealed the character of the original site. The renovation of this space into a “white cube” did not prevent Sarah Smolders from noticing on her first visit that hardly any daylight entered the space and that half of it was under the ground. It is a unique and un(re)makeable place: presumably the title presented itself as the space revealed itself. She decided

to add duplications and divisions, to mirror the space and to make paintings one could interpret as doppelgängers (of the exhibition?).

Who can still see what Sarah Smolders took away or added?

How professional can the disguise be? There is a multitude of figures, and therefore of interpretations. Presumably, that is what it's all about for her.

Could one say that Sarah Smolders's oeuvre – of her paintings she herself says they “ideally reflect the space” – is imitative in nature? Her paintings mirror (interior) space. But to mirror is to distort. This distortion interests her and acquires its independence in the shape of a doppelgänger. Many of her actions start from a form of copying that results in duplication. Already in the exhibition *Notes of a Housepainter* (Marion De Cannière, 2019), the doppelgänger element enters “through the chimney”, as it were. Next to an existing black-marble mantelpiece hangs a faithfully painted reproduction of the same marble. This imitation or recreation leads to several minimally different unique versions. Both a mirrored and a decoupled space display duplication. She strives to give the visitor a feeling of déjà vu. How well do you remember what you have seen, at what moment does an image settle in memory...?

Sarah Smolders adds a lot of material so as to distil a concentrate afterwards. Perhaps that is why duplication is important to her: without multiplication she cannot achieve the essence she seeks for.

Free Ambassadors

In 2018, Sarah Smolders resolves to provide her (solo) exhibition with a non-linguistic visitor's text. Every visitor is invited to take the A4 page *Notes on places*, which is both a fragment and a synopsis of the exhibition. The recto shows traces of (the preparation of) the exhibition. The verso has a label stuck on it that indicates the title, year and technique. The *Notes on places* are unique, an edition of 250 numbered and signed copies. In this way, everyone can take home a material keepsake that is both part of a work of art and a work of art in itself. She repeats this in her 2021 exhibition at CC Merksem, and for *Doppelgänger*, too, there are *Notes on places*.

With this concept, Sarah Smolders integrates pictorial, photographic and documentary elements; preparatory studies, thoughts, exercises, a visual record of thought processes... As free ambassadors, they represent the exhibition. One could interpret them as Sarah Smolders's visitor's guide, which is sometimes inside, at other times outside the exhibition space. The generic title in the plural allows the artist not to restrict herself to a certain location. The content is related to a specific project, without coinciding with it completely. The document retains a certain moment and place. Thus, a visual keepsake remains of what is doomed to disappear: the site-specific intervention.

Sarah Smolders pays homage to space. Her method is to keep on visiting and searching for the interior, both physically and mentally. Her material is attention and patience. Her art is the reflection of this.

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July 2021

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