

# THE HUMANITY IN MARK MAKING



ALTAIR ROELANTS finds the playful and subliminal elements which infuse the canvases of Dutch-born artist Marise Maas.

Melbourne-based artist Marise Maas's energetic and colourful paintings are instantly appealing. They are beautiful yet imperfect and scattered, at times loud, at times uncertain, they take pleasure in the minute and spontaneous of the everyday, or play out the theatre of our thoughts — they're irrevocably human.

Born in the Netherlands, Marise Maas moved to Australia as a young teenager in 1982, when she settled with her family in Tasmania. As a child, Maas had a love of horse riding and music; and while she enjoyed drawing and school art lessons, she had not yet "found" herself "within" the subject. As an adult, Maas went on to study a Bachelor of Fine Art, majoring in printmaking, at the Tasmanian School of Art, where she became "fascinated with untraining laborious methods" in search of a more intuitive approach to mark making — hence her later move into working in oils. After completing her studies in 1991, Maas returned to the Netherlands where she lived in Amsterdam between 1992–1996. It was during this period that Maas's painting career gained momentum — aided by the insight of her partner (an Australian musician to secretly photograph her work. The pair used the portfolio of images to proposition artist spaces and cafes about hosting nights of live music and art. This successful venture was followed by weeks of screen-printing posters and handbills, distribution across the city on bicycles and hunting for second-hand picture frames. These efforts, and word of mouth, resulted in raucous, live music-infused art shows, the beginning of a following, and later a gallery exhibition in the Haarlem precinct.

After travelling in South-East Asia, Maas returned to Australia in 1997 to settle in Melbourne. Starting out in the city's artist-run spaces, Maas later gravitated towards the commercial gallery circuit, where she has been exhibiting regularly (both in Melbourne and nationally) since the late nineties and has works in various public and private collections. Maas now lives with her partner and their two sons in the Melbourne suburb of Altona, where she paints full-time from her carport studio conversion.

Maas's approach to painting itself is about the encounter she has, on that day, with the canvas — just as one would engage with the world. Rather than a predetermined subject, the artist takes guidance when she starts mixing the paints — a





Previous pages:

Left: Marise Maas, *New Friend New Palette*, 2011, oil on canvas, 80 cm x 80cm.

Right top: Marise Maas, *Fishing Behind the Net*, oil on canvas, 160 x 160cm.

Right bottom: Marise Maas, *How To*, 2011, oil on canvas, 75 x 100cm.

This page:

Above: Marise Maas, *Altona-Berlin*, 2011, oil on canvas, 75 cm x 100cm.

Left: Marise Maas, *Intimate Immensity*, 2011, oil on canvas, 160 cm x 160cm.

Opposite: Marise Maas, *Where We Met Again*, oil on canvas, 75 x 100cm.

relaxing process Maas aligns with the promises and rhythms of cooking (food being another great passion) as she explains, "Even an oppressive shade starts to look full of possibilities."

It is during this ritual that Maas will begin to see a pattern emerging — apparent in the recurrent colour schemes of her work such as the bright yellows, sea greens, stark whites and tank engine red. Maas applies bold swathes of these



colours directly onto the canvas — “whacking on paint” — without too much conscious thought. Later, she will structure the picture by applying images from memory and notes from her numerous sketchbooks. The images are developed through layering, scratching the painting’s surface and applying oil sticks. Maas works on up to ten canvases at once — enabling the artist to turn her back on individual pieces, to give her creative distance. This approach is also reflected in Maas’s depictions of space and a wariness of overworking, which again shows her impulse to take something — as it first presents itself to her — to the world.

As well as Maas’s engagement with her materials, the other aspect of her work that is so likeable is her subject matter — the everyday. The objects that fill Maas’s large canvases — shoes, roofs, belts, instruments, clothes, household items — are forms that have caught the artist’s eye, or represent a place, within the physical and emotional spaces she inhabits. These observations are collected as doodles, mental notes, drawings in the artist’s sketchbooks or snippets of conversations overheard during one of Maas’s city commutes where she will sometimes wear earphones, without any sound, making eavesdropping deliciously easy, “like a happy spy”. The subjects that Maas paints are both figurative

and at times purely anecdotal, but always rendered in a loose style that echoes her intuitive approach to creativity. And while she is inspired by a spectrum of great artists, she is also largely influenced by the urgency of children’s art or those who are mentally ill — images that express a raw, untrained and immediate perception of the world. Maas’s own paintings articulate how as individuals we invest sentiment in small things, often without even noticing, only to be reminded years later when an object is unearthed from a box or a chip on an old mug brings back a place, a person, a feeling. The arrows and erratic lines are suggestive of the movement of the artist’s thoughts and mood. Evoking sentiment through the placement of objects within painting has been done for centuries by, for example, the Dutch masters, who saw the allegorical potential and importance we invest in the items and spaces of the everyday. Similarly, the little things in Maas’s pictures often relate to a larger story. The tent-type structures are drawn from a fascination with New York shop awnings; the lamp in the work *Sleepless* (2011) expresses her frustration at bouts of insomnia; *Happy To Strike The Flag* (2011) is about “feeling stable enough to surrender first in an argument”; and the manic red scribbles and buildings in *Raise A Roof* (2012) visualise conflicts with neighbours over noise.

Interestingly, despite these human stories, there are never any people in Maas’s work — only horses. These are a recurring motif representing both animal and personal encounters. Their long-limbed, silhouetted forms are a tactic to keep those faces and moments anonymous.

Maybe it’s this relationship with her materials and subject that has enabled Maas’s paintings to connect so well with Australian audiences. They effortlessly convey this spontaneity along with something very human, appearing like chatter alongside moments of deep contemplation — like the artist herself, who is an introvert but loves socialising. Despite the fact that Maas’s subject matter has remained largely unchanged, there is still freshness to her work stemming from a willingness to allow chance and thought to drift onto the canvas. And while Maas does enjoy conceptualism and believes art can be very socially instrumental, she doesn’t imbue her work with any political or theoretical readings, preferring to leave the narrative open to interpretation. And it is also this respect for the audience’s experiences that gives Maas’s paintings their richness — allowing a space for the viewer’s own instinctive response in front of the canvas. □

*Marise Maas is represented by Anthea Polson Gallery, Gold Coast; MiCK Gallery, Sydney; and Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne.*