

All We Can Do
Is What We
Are Actually
Doing Already

Miks Mitrēvics &
Kristīne Kursiša
April Showers
01.11–30.11.2014



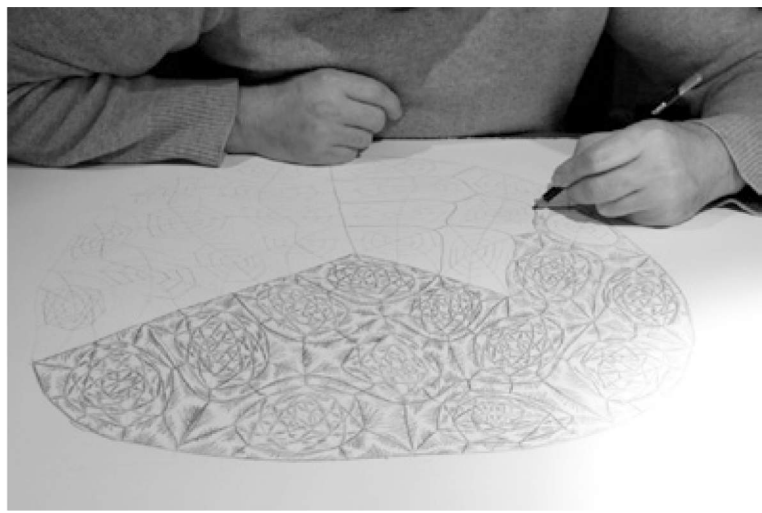
II.

Pretend philosophy, pretend lottery

In card games, artist Erwin Keustermans explains, the joker can stand for any of the cards — it behaves as a wild card. Tarot gives us the fool, resembling the joker and acting in many of the same ways, also termed the “everyman.” This wild card can be placed in any situation, among any number or arrangement of objects, and it gives meaning to the arrangement as an entity. On its own, the fool is nobody — he is neither a king, nor a priest, nor a lover; “he” is genderless and ageless, and most tellingly, he *alone* means nothing. But in the company of the others, the fool has meaning.

Understanding the rules of a game means understanding constraints, and similar demands exist in artistic practices. After a substantial period making drawings using patterns and the constrictions within those patterns, Erwin Keustermans found that he had reached a limit. He asserts that his method is based on the process of thinking, and for me, this is apparent in his work. In many of the pattern-drawings, he has described the constraints or method within the title such as, “From 16 a row to 3 a row,” or “Seven colour gradations, with radial and perpendicular stroking.” This deliberateness appeals to me because the intention of the artist is present long before the first mark has been made and, as he said, “every work is

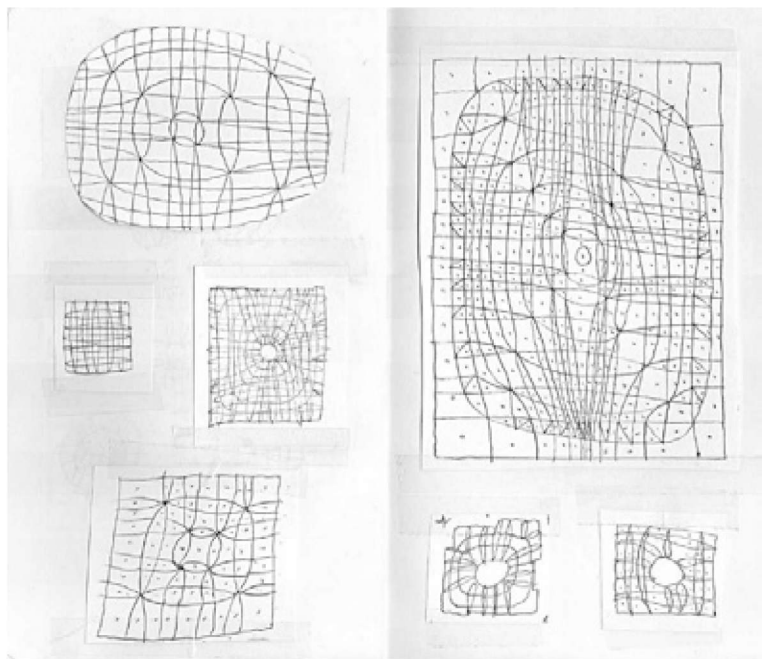
a finished work.” There are no drafts, throwaways, or “happy accidents” because each drawing is a kind of one-time performance in itself. While this could veer towards an overly controlled and restricted outcome, the results prove the opposite. Exuberant rhythmic lines, luscious textures, and rich tones give away the secret of the pleasure that can be found within the constraints of a drawing practice, Keustermans’, at least.



Erwin Keustermans,
A picture of myself making a picture.

The decision to make the first mark begins from the moment one sits down to draw. Keustermans is well aware of this, treating his work with an intentionality that is rarely claimed in contemporary art. Though intention and research both precede the making of a work, they should be clearly distinguished from one another. Whereas much “research-based” art is fleshed out by background information, tangled theories, and historical, political, or cultural contextualization, intentionality is, on the other hand, the deliberate thinking or will that precedes the manifestation of a work.

Experimentation, another term borrowed from the sciences, is not the uncontrolled free-for-all that it has come to denote. Scientists always begin with parameters, constraints, and familiar tools, and though the results of their experiments are not entirely predictable, they are in fact inevitable. So how have we come to expect that something that is “experimental” will mean that it is unprecedented, uncontrolled and free?



Erwin Keustermans, *Preparing 2008*,
from the series *Small Numbers*.

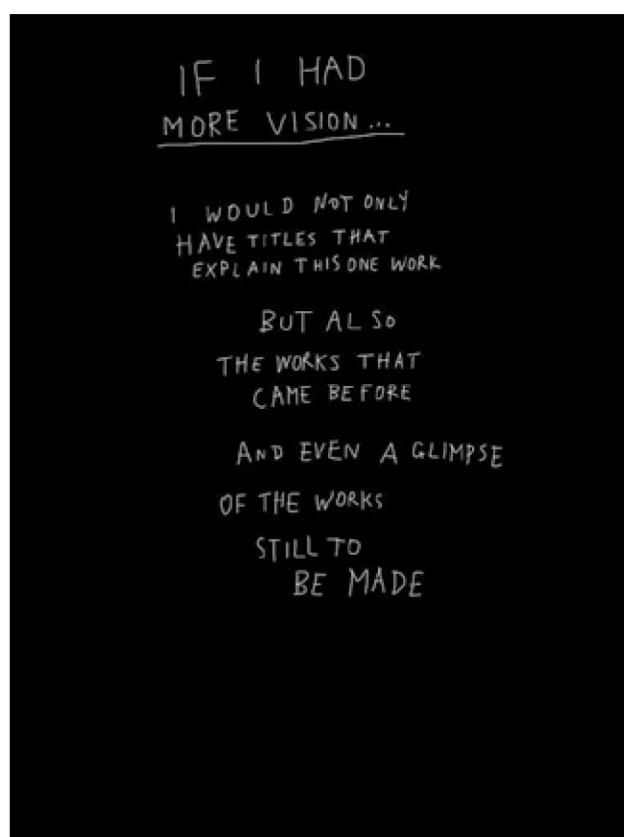
What is experimental *and* far from chance is a studio practice that involves one person alone with himself, sitting before a desk to begin drawing. Keustermans belongs to this tradition of experimentation with color, form and technique, but enlivens it by charging it with an invested philosophic and linguistic curiosity. In his modesty,

I doubt Keustermans would describe his practice using fashionable terms or making obscure references. He considers himself a “pretend philosopher,” and says that while he knows a little about philosophy and how it works, he doesn’t claim to be a real philosopher. Though I would argue that he knows more than a little, I can also say that this attitude is also uncommon among contemporary artists whose practices can only but clamber upon the shoulders of theorists, linguists, and philosophers.

He is a thinker, and doesn’t rely on intuition or chance alone, but this doesn’t make his work “rational,” as some have superficially labeled it. His rejection of the dualistic oppositions of thought and emotion inform the way he works. Even more so, going back to the notion of the wild card/joker/everyman, it is his interest in logic that makes logic worthwhile; logic is not sufficient in and of itself. And his practice, which has a particular logic, would be insubstantial without the drawings, which carry the tangible results of the interest he has personally, emotionally and intuitively applied to the method.

When an artist has chosen a method, especially one that uses constraints that seem arbitrary to the viewer, there can be a tendency to misinterpret that method as one that is based on chance. Miks Mitrēvics and Kristīne Kursiša’s exhibition “April Showers” could fall prey to this interpretation, as the artists have employed a deliberate method.

A framed photograph hung on the wall nearest the entrance shows an image of swirling, marbled paints mixed together. Seven cans of paint sit on the floor below, to the left of the image. The opposite wall is roughly and incompletely painted a soft, sherbet orange, and hung with a framed “painting” of the same shade. Gauzy fabric, printed with a pastel pink and



Erwin Keustermans,
If I had more vision.



Miks Mitrēvics and Kristīne Kursiša, *April Showers*,
Installation view, 2014.

blue background features a large photograph of a bird's nest, and the fabric floats down like a banner from the middle of the room. Among other works, a collection of framed photographs and framed solid colors are neatly lined up on the floor towards the back of the gallery, as one sometimes sees standing in the back of a gallerist's office or during the installation of an exhibition. What is the connection between these objects? Has a relationship already been established here or does it need to be created by the viewer?

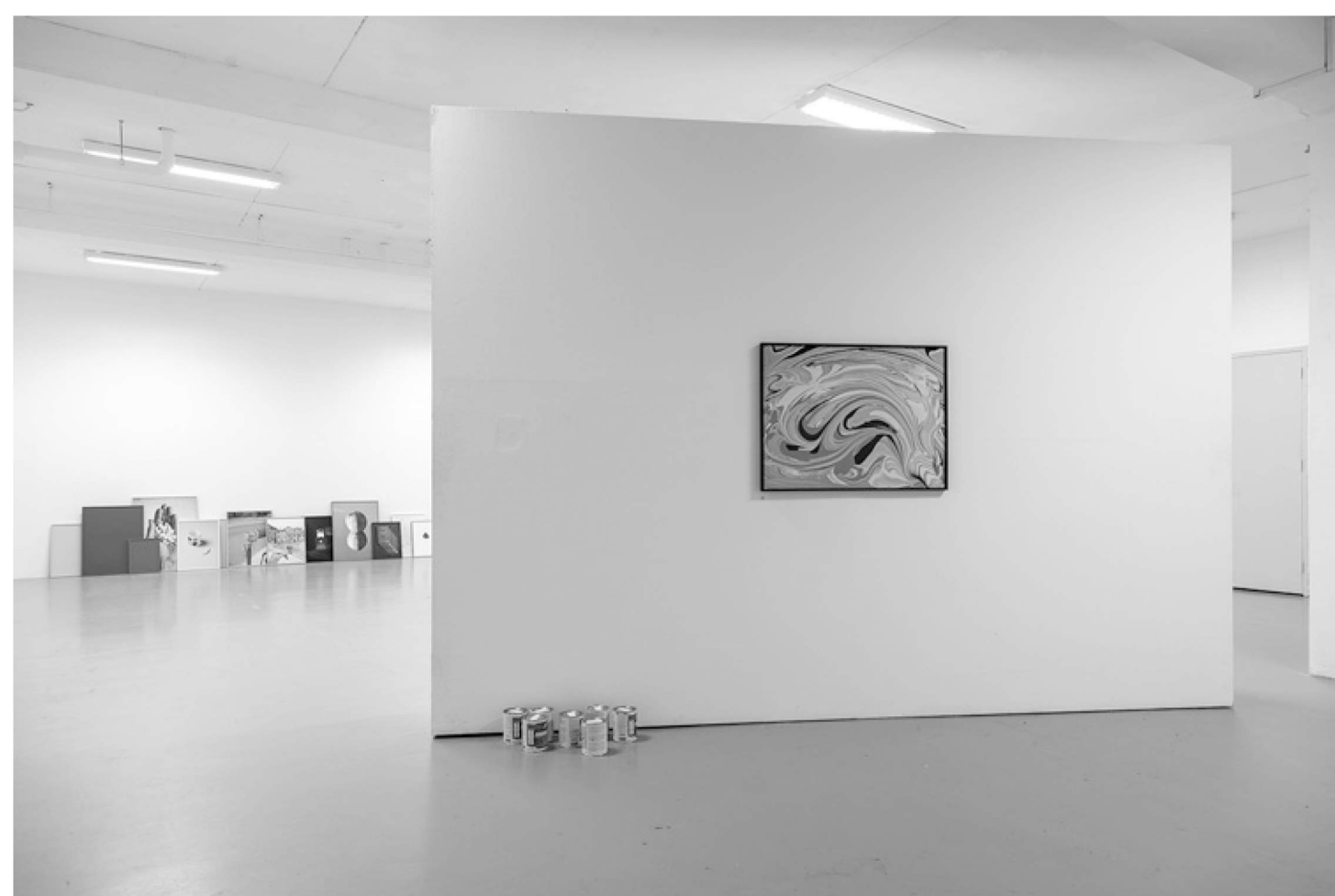
If these objects have meaning, it lies in the relationships built from their interaction with each other. In regard to his own work, Keustermans explains how we can hook into a system of meaning, "The moment you put two things in relation to another, you begin a narrative." However, unlike Keustermans' drawings which are distinct and self standing works, most of the images and objects in "April Showers" look like fragments of unfinished and unintentional works, so generating a narrative is challenging. The pieces, in varying degrees of "completion" seem to be the result of chance encounters, thoughts, and inspirations, and include snippets of text, computer-generated phrases, and arrangements of books and titles. These objects do not pull me into the exhibition, but rather, the discovery that these objects are in fact part of a system, a game that becomes apparent upon closer inspection of the way things are displayed.

Of 64 possible works, Mitrēvics and Kursiša have assigned a number to each piece and drawn a lottery. Their self-curated show at P/////AKT subtly emphasizes artistic processes and intentions and disengages from a hierarchical selection that sets value judgments, "this work is better than that one so it should be hung in on the far wall, and this one should not be shown at all." At this decidedly uncommercial gallery, anyway, exhibitions are not modeled after retail displays. The fragments belong to a complete set, an entire "deck of cards," and inspired by Keustermans' thinking, I could say that the wild card here is the method itself. The method gives meaning to the supposed randomness of the objects.



Miks Mitrēvics and Kristīne Kursiša,
April Showers, Installation view, 2014.

Mitrēvics and Kursiša have adhered small numbers to the wall next to the pieces and have done without any title cards or explanatory texts. One soon sees that the numbers are not in numerical order, and this already hints at the operation of chance. But just as Keustermans practices pretend philosophy, this is a pretend lottery. It is delightfully deceptive, because chance is not a part of the method used in “April Showers” either — it only masquerades as a lottery because the artists have already pre-selected the objects that have could be picked. This little conceptual play is what invigorates an otherwise unremarkable collection of things. It’s a lottery, but it’s not random, and it is critical. I expect that Mitrēvics and Kursiša would agree with the stance Keustermans has adopted, “You shouldn’t think I’m not critical. You haven’t seen the works I’ve not made.”



Miks Mitrēvics and Kristīne Kursiša, *April Showers*, Installation view, 2014.