

My work deals with raising the imagination. The paintings I make consist of a multitude of separate color areas. I pay a lot of attention to balancing the colors and forms in order to achieve a sense of complete unity. This way, the viewer's eyes are given space to wander about freely. The structure of the image is crystal clear; nevertheless a sense of indeterminateness prevails. What each form exactly represents is not fixed. The viewer is invited to enrich the image with his or her personal associations.

From 2013 onward, I have used the three versions Vincent van Gogh made of *Fifteen Sunflowers in a Vase*, now in museums in London, Amsterdam and Tokyo, as a starting point for my paintings. In these works every flower has an almost human expression: some appear to be astonished, exhausted, or in a child-like state of ecstasy. All sorts of associations arise. When I started drawing, clocks, lamps, beaks and cranes appeared just like that. One moment I saw a bat in the guise of a flower. In the act of painting the image developed itself. The form that eventually came out represents both bat and flower. The series of twenty variations I have created so far only reveal a glimpse of the huge amount of wonderful images hidden inside Van Gogh's sunflower paintings.

Pinocchio, a favorite protagonist in my work, is an excellent tool to think about the imagination. He is a puppet, but laughs and sings, dances and cries nonetheless. The instant the blue fairy turns him into a real boy the story is over. He is particularly interesting as a puppet; that is where he comes to life in our minds. A human ability to raise life in inanimate objects allows us to see strange faces staring at us out of stems of trees, marble tiles and electric plugs. I believe this is a manifestation of a much more profound phenomenon. The inanimate world reveals itself to us solely in a humanified capacity. Lifeless things can be seen with living eyes exclusively. In the story of Collodi, Pinocchio hangs from a gallows. He is desperate, but his fear is unfounded. How on earth could a puppet die?

The late paintings of Fernand Léger are important to me. Clouds, rocks, people and butterflies are all painted in a similar monumental vein. There is no distinction between how a hand or a bicycle wheel is handled. At first sight the human characters appear to be just weird puppets. But then something happens. All figures are fully immersed in their surroundings and the life force of people and animals flows out over the landscape and the objects. The division between inanimate objects and living things is not as sharp as it may seem. Life started out of lifelessness and will revert to it.

I approach these themes not only in painting, but also in photography. I make masks made on the base of an imprint of my own face. They fit me like a glove. The minute I put them on, my face turns into a self-portrait and an imaginative identity is established. These personae become part of myself without effort, extending the sense of who I am. When taking photographs I search for a painterly stillness. The closed up skin of the masks highlights the sparkle in my eyes and as a result gives way to the viewer to raise the image to life.

Wouter van Riessen
Amsterdam, 2016